

2024
Congratulations,
Loss, and Faraway
Lands

2024: Congratulations, Loss, and Faraway Lands

by Various

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Special Weapons Operations Reconnaissance Division: Diversion, Insemination, Children, and Kidnapping

Operation D.I.C.K.S.W.O.R.D.

by /a/non

“Will I ever see you again?”

I held the little girl close while continuing to ejaculate directly into her newly-fertile womb.

“You’ll always be in my heart, Maki-san.”

I separated from the breathless little Asian girl and zipped up my trouser snake. A man was banging on the door so I quickly hiked Maki-san’s pantsu back onto her previously-virginal slit and threw the covers over the bed. Then with the speed only a father going to get milk and cigarettes could muster, I ran for the window. A burly yakuza-like man busted the door down as three armed men ran in, but I didn’t have time for them.

“Maki-san! Are you alright!?! Wait, don’t let that kidnapper escape!”

I smirked and jumped out of the window while spreading my arms out in a T-pose. A gliding mechanism deployed from my backpack and it was smooth sailing to the extraction point. A kidnapper?

Hah, that's only the tip of the iceberg. By the time that yakuza boss realized what had happened, his daughter would already be too far along to try and cover up his family's shame.

"Mission accomplished Neto. I'm on my way to the extraction point ETA twenty minutes."

Operative Nathan Thomas Reagan; callsign "Neto" of S.W.O.R.D. Hacking Division.

"Good work Ojisan, we'll meet you there."

Operative O.G. San; callsign Ojisan of the Special Weapons Operations Reconnaissance Division: Diversion, Insemination, Children, and Kidnapping. Codename: D.I.C.K.S.W.O.R.D.

I was one of the best in this line of work. My job was to get in quietly, complete my missions, and get out. I was explicitly assigned to the lolicon unit given my proclivities. Sneaking in, kidnapping or inseminating the children of powerful elites committing atrocities against the world, and getting the hell out of dodge was my specialty. Sometimes my mission was to kidnap, sometimes my mission was to create a scandal like with that Yakuza boss' daughter, but no matter what the mission had to be completed. You could say I am the niggest.

* * *

I landed in a clearing away from the metropolitan penthouse where a black bag was waiting. I opened it up and pulled out a set of civilian plainclothes and a special face-mask that would change the defining features of my face in case I had been seen. Without much mind for the temperature outside at night I quickly wiped my dick off and changed clothes before throwing everything into the black bag and throwing the black bag into a nearby dumpster that would get sent to combustibles. Then us-

ing the fire escape, I was out on the main streets of the city with a new face and a new identity. I changed my gait and headed into a nearby ramen shop. Yakuza were swarming the building I had just been in a few minutes ago. The ramen shop in comparison was empty.

“I’ll have the big bowl. Two eggs, schichimi, extra garlic.”

“This late at night? You’ll have a stomachache.”

“That’s alright I can afford the gastronomy lesson.”

The chef nodded with a serious expression and lead me to the back-kitchens. I passed by several Zainichi who didn’t give me a second glance and headed down through a service tunnel that connected to the subway. By the time I exited at the end of the line, Neto was waiting for me with a cab. I hopped in and we were off. Nathan, aka “Neto” was just a fat balding man in his mid-30s on the surface. Nobody knew he was the top-ranking hacker of our division. He was no genius; just incredibly autistic. He refused to make eye contact with me while playing a gacha game on his phone.

“Everything went well?”

“Yeah, I took care of the job properly. Now that—”

“UUUUOOOOOOOOOOH!!!” Nathan started crying tears of joy as he rolled an SSSR on his favorite loli gacha game, Yellow Chronicals.

I smiled wryly. “Come on man, why do you waste your money on that shit? Danny is gonna be pissed.”

“This is this and that is that. Besides, she understands!” Nathan got shifty eyed and refused to elaborate further while still refusing to make eye contact. I stared at him for several more seconds before sighing.

“We’re heading home now, right?” This was my third mission in a row. I’d been away from HQ for a week straight and I was itching for some R&R.

Nathan rolled his eyes and put the phone down for a minute. “Yeah, yeah. We’re heading back. We’re actually heading straight to the airport right now. Kyle wants to talk with you.”

I glared “What?”

“He said it’s important and you can go home right afterwards. It’s not another job.”

“Tch.” I clicked my tongue and stared out the window at the passing lights. I never got tired of this city, but at night it turned into a den of degenerates. I’d asked the boss on several occasions to clean it up, but he told us that was the job of the local authorities and that we only had authorization to go after internationalists. He was right, but that didn’t mean I liked it. The lights of the streets blurred past as I started to doze off. This too was normal. The air was filled with a powerful sleeping drug after all. I liked to try and beat the anaesthesia and maintain consciousness as long as possible. Nathan was already out cold the second he’d completed his mission of informing me about Kyle. When I’d wake up, I’d be at headquarters.

* * *

“Ugh...” I always hated the hangover-like feeling that accompanied me when I’d wake up from chemical sleep. On reflex I reached over and grabbed the electrolyte solution next to the medical bed and looked over the papers. High blood pressure from stress and too much sodium in my diet, cancers that we were aware of but that wouldn’t kill me for several decades at least, oh, apparently I’d accidentally been exposed to meth while climbing through that ventilation shaft. Great. I sighed and continued sipping my hydration drink.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Ojisan.”

“Ugh, of course you’d be here. What is it, Kyle?”

Logan “Kyle” Koning; callsign Glownigger of S.W.O.R.D. Command.

This guy and I were incompatible. His fetishes were just too fucked up and he always employed the combat units for house raids and firebombings. He was my superior in name only since my missions usually came from his boss. The guy had short blonde hair and blue eyes, and kept his uniform in mint condition without a flaw to be found. He had severe OCD about keep-

ing things clean so I intentionally spilled my drink a little which caused his eyebrow to twitch.

“I’m just here to deliver your next mission. You’ll be working alongside Anon.”

“Yeah, yeah, who’s brat do I have to impregnate this time? You know the last one wasn’t even a virgin? She was barely 10! What the hell!? It’s always the—Wait a second did you say Anon?” I got up out of the hospital bed and started throwing on my clothes.

“Yes, you’re working with them.”

“Fuck you, I’m talking to the boss.” I hated dealing with Anon.

“Those orders came from boss’ boss. This is an important mission and you’ll get the next month off so just grin and bear it, Ojisan.”

I glared at Kyle before grumbling and leaving the medbay. Boss’ boss was the big guy, so his word was final. I’d been away for a week so right now I just wanted to go home.

* * *

“I’m home...”

“Onii-sama! Welcome back! Ah, you look so sad, what happened Nii-sama?”

I realized I was frowning and quickly adjusted my behavior. “Mikan, I’m so glad to see you! Sorry for worrying you, ‘Nii-san is back. Has Nathan stopped by yet?”

Mikan: Little Girl

I gave Mikan a kiss on the forehead and put her back down. She was grinning from ear to ear and shook her head. “Nathan-oji hasn’t been by yet. I got an email from Danny saying she was scolding him for spending too much on gacha games again.” Told him that would happen. “Are you sure you’re ok, Onii-sama?”

I ruffled her hair before stretching my arms. “There’s just a lot of things happening with work right now is all. I’m glad I get to spend some time with my little Mikan~”

“Ah, mou! I’m not little any more! I’m a whole 122 centimeters tall now Onii-sama!” Mikan pouted and I laughed while pulling her into another hug.

“You’re growing up so fast! Before long I’m going to have to start sewing your wedding dress for your future husband! Ah, how troublesome!” Mikan looked away from me.

“Well you could always just marry me and then it won’t be as much trouble…” She muttered something under her breath that I couldn’t quite hear.

“Hm? What was that?” I cocked my head and Mikan pushed me away.

“N-Nothing! Forget you heard anything!”

She seemed flustered about whatever she was mumbling about so I decided to change the subject. “I still have one more job I have to do, but I won’t have to deploy for a couple days so let’s make the most of it. How about I cook dinner tonight and help you study? I’ll make your favorite curry!” Mikan beamed a smile that could kill at my declaration and pulled my hand against her cheek. “That sounds great, but for now can we play a game, Nii-san? Danny bought me a new board-game when I asked her for something we could play together.”

“That sounds wonderful, Mikan.”

* * *

“So you’re the infamous child-fucker Ojisan, is it?”

“I prefer the term lolicon, and I wouldn’t say I’m infamous just—”

“Shut up. Well, I understand why the big guy wants you to come along. Just stay out of our way unless I say otherwise. We’re doing things my way.”

“Understood Jimiko.”

**James Millon Constantine, codename “Jimiko” of the
Autonomous Neutralization of Newtypes division;
A.N.O.N.S.W.O.R.D. Platoon Leader.**

“That’s SIR when directly addressing me, Ojisan.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tch. You never have any bite in you.”

Because there was no point. Of course I didn’t say that part out-loud.

“Alright you prissy bitches, enough fighting!” Kyle stepped forward and turned on the projector to show us a layout of our next mission. “You’ll be infiltrating the Ontario Partnership for Pharmacological Adversarial Innoculation. We have it on good authority that they are storing a bioweapon somewhere at the facility and we’re going to need every able-bodied man to have a crack at stopping the internationalist cabal this time.”

“Shit, we’re raiding OPPAI headquarters, boss? That’s a suicide mission!” James was taken aback and I was even more confused.

“I understand they are working with biological weapons which is why A.N.O.N. is involved Kyle, but why do I have to tag along?”

“Because the bioweapon this time... Is a little girl. A Psion to be precise.”

Well shit.

* * *

“Ojisan, don’t you think your hatred of Anon division has gone on for too long?” Nathan was tapping away at his gacha game while I verified Mikan’s homework and recent grades. Hm, she’s falling behind in math and foreign language studies again...

“How could I? What they did was unforgivable.” I glared at Nathan who refused to make eye contact while tapping away several dozen dollars.

“I mean, it’s because of them that you have Mikan, right?”

I shook my head. “I love and cherish Mikan, but you and I both know that she belongs in the regular world, not this dark underbelly.” I took a chug of my post-workout protein shake and grimaced. “Anon platoon took that from her when they killed her dad in that raid.”

“Eh, I guess, but you know how the internationalists are. She would have probably faced far worse than a mostly-average life locked away in a hidden bunker if they hadn’t flubbed the job like that.”

“So what did Danny have to say about this raid on OPPAI?” I changed the subject. I didn’t want to dwell on that and Neto was being pushy.

“Tch. Like I could tell her? She’d transfer in a heartbeat if I mentioned it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you guys basically married?”

Nathan looked up and glared at me. “Just because I signed the contract when she drugged me at that company event doesn’t mean we’re really married.”

I raised my voice. “Dude you’re sleeping with her. And I heard she’s pre—”

“Yeah well what about Mikan? Have you told her we’re raiding OPPAI HQ?” Nathan’s interjection caused me to look away. “What, you haven’t even told her, Ojisan?”

“I told her that if I completed this mission I’d have the next month off. Lay off it..”

Nathan grumbled and went back to his gacha game. “Hmph. You know she intends to marry you some day. You should think about that when you go on these dangerous missions.”

“She’s just a kid, she’ll grow out of that phase. She doesn’t know any better—”

“Says the guy who kidnaps and fucks kids for corporate cash.”

“Oi.”

“Well, whatever. I better get home or else Danny will bitch.”

Nathan got up after the atmosphere turned dangerous. When he opened the front door to leave, Mikan fell through the doorframe and landed flat on her face.

“Atatatata... Ah! Nathan-oji, Onii-sama, this isn’t...” I felt a lump in my stomach like I’d just swallowed a heap of cold sand.

“How much did you overhear, Mikan?” I looked at her seriously and she refused to make eye contact.

“I don’t really understand a lot of what you were talking about, but I heard that ’Nii-sama and Nathan-oji are going to do something really dangerous...”

Nathan looked at me and rolled his eyes before trudging off. I kneeled down to Mikan’s height and ruffled her hair. “I’m going on a dangerous mission, but it can’t be helped. The big guy said I had to, and we can only keep living here with Danny and the others if I do my job, so I’m going to do my best to make it back safely, alright?”

“Understood...” Mikan was trembling a bit. “I... I got sent home early because something happened and teacher said I needed to give this to you...”

Mikan handed me a piece of paper which I put off on the table. If her teacher sent her home then it must be a big deal, but I’ll read it shortly. First-off... “Now how much did you overhear, Mikan?”

“I... When I got home I overheard you talking about my father...” I seized up before pulling the little girl into a hug. “I don’t care if it’s true, Onii-sama is still Onii-sama and Onii-sama and Danny ’Nee-sama have taken care of me since I was in diapers, so... So that just means there’s nothing stopping us from getting married, and, and...”

I pulled her into a tight hug as Mikan began to bawl. Of course a girl her age wouldn’t know how to process that information. After she calmed down I made her dinner and we took a bath together. That’s when I discovered a red stain on her pantsu.

“Ah, I forgot to read the teacher’s note. This must be what that’s about...” Isn’t she a little young? Kids these days. “Alright Mikan, listen up since we’ve gotta have that talk now because you’re growing up. The reason sensei sent you home was because—”

* * *

Nathan and I met up the next day at the rendezvous point. We both looked incredibly haggard.

“What’s got you glum?” I glared at Nathan who had a dead look in his eyes. He noticeably didn’t have his phone with him which was incredibly out-of-character.

“Mikan texted Danny about the raid. I got lectured until the sun set and then she wrung me dry until sunrise. She took my phone away, Ojisan.”

“My condolences.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“How’d things go with Mikan?” I pinched the bridge of my nose and stared at the ground. “That bad, huh?”

“She overheard our entire conversation and turned into an emotional wreck. Then when I finally calmed her down it turned out that she had her first period so I had to explain the birds and the bees.”

Nathan scoffed at me. “Well that’s not so bad. You’re good at explaining things so I’m sure it was fine.”

I glared at him in return. “When she found out that’s what married couples do she pestered me half the night and then tried to sneak into my room and initiate a night raid when I told her no. When I still wouldn’t, she turned into an emotional wreck again.”

“Tch, I don’t know why you don’t just accept it. I mean you—”

“Never mix business and family life, Nathan. It will bite you in the ass one day.”

“Hmph.”

“What’s got you two down in the dumps? Cheer up! We’re gonna get to raid OPPAI!”

**Becky Swallow Cummings, codename “Marionette” of
Telepathic Instruction Transmissions of A.N.O.N.:
T.I.T.S.W.O.R.D. Commander**

“Die Fujo.”

“Leave us the fuck alone, Marionette.”

Becky huffed. “I haven’t done anything yet!”

“You always transmit weird shit into our heads! Nathan developed an appreciation for Bara after you rewired his brain with your psycho-mumbo-jumbo!”

“Oi, shut up, Ojisan!” Nathan smacked me upside the head while Becky laughed. This pink-haired bitch was insane. Every new member of A.N.O.N. who was single would lust after her for a short time before stumbling upon one of her many landmines. Still, nobody could compare to her mastery of brain signals. Not that there were many psionic candidates to do so in the first place.

It was Jimiko who intervened before things turned downhill. “That’s enough, bossman has something important to say.”

We turned to Kyle and proceeded to get a second briefing along with well-wishes before he put on his gas mask and instructed the platoon to get on the plane. It was showtime.

* * *

My mission was simple. This was a covert operation to avoid directly sparring with the fucking Leafs. We would enter through the service tunnels that had direct access to the building’s basement, take out any security in the tunnels, and then the team would split up. The majority of the platoon would intercept the head doctor behind whatever human experimentation they were running on the psion loli while my job was to protect Nathan and Becky while they figured out exactly where the little girl, codename Remi, was being stored. Kyle himself would be leading above-ground operations while James would be leading below-ground operations. Depending on the situation either James would handle the capture (or worse-case scenario execution) of the target, or I would act solo to kidnap and return her home. I shifted around in my heavy gear. I was used to moving in plaincloths or stealth suits, but right now they had me in full tactical so I wouldn’t stand out and by similar virtue I hopefully wouldn’t get shot by friendlies if we crossed paths. They gave me a handgun and a stun baton for self-defense, but ideally I didn’t want to use either.

* * *

“Man, OPPAI has a sick sense of humor naming the psion-girl they’re locking away Remi.” Neto grimaced while Jimiko growled.

“I ordered comm silence until we get to the facility. Shut your trap, Neto.”

“...”

Our group continued for a while longer before arriving at the service entrance. The platoon slowly filed through. A small squad stayed to accompany the four of us while the main force began their assault. We grouped around Neto who had accessed security logs while listening to screams and occasional automatic weapons fire up above.

“Hurry the fuck up, Neto!”

“I’m working on it, Jimiko! Getting in was easy, but this data can’t be right.”

“What does it say?”

Neto turned his laptop screen so Jimiko could read it. When I looked at it as well, I shook my head in disbelief. “Nah that’s gotta be fake.”

“Can it, Ojisan.” Jimiko looked over the laptop before clicking his tongue. “Well then we’ll backtrack.”

He got on his radio. “Oi Glownigger, this is Jimiko. These fucks have an elevator shaft that drops out of comm reach well below the service tunnels. We’re heading down.”

“Copy that, Jimiko. We’ve secured Doctor Feinberg and are securing the escape route now. Comms were successfully cut so you have a little breathing room before the Canadian officials show up. I’ll send a second squad down with you for defense so make your way there.”

* * *

Our two squads descended the large elevator.

“How the fuck did they build all this without anybody noticing?”

“Boss said comm silence until we’ve secured the underground.”

The grunts were talking to one another while we descended down a huge diagonal elevator shaft. When we reached the bottom, it didn’t take long for security to “greet” us. A few magazines later and the area was secured. Jimiko slammed a scientist’s face into some test equipment and began a very short-form interrogation where the guy’s nads were on the line if he didn’t answer truthfully. Eggheads always crack under threat of physical violence. We rushed the position to find a cute but very emaciated and pale Slavic girl playing with a model train. I was kind of thankful she didn’t look like Touhou Remi since that would have been too stimulating. Marionette made first contact with telepathy since we figured the girl would respond better to another psion.

Remi: Real name unknown. Little Girl (Psionic)

“Hold up, that doesn’t add up. We only saw files for Remi.” Marionette looked confused.

“What’s going on, Marionette?” Jimiko looked annoyed while she continued.

“Well, according to Remi, she’s got a twin sister who’s also locked up here, codename Flan.”

“What is this, the Scarlet Mansion? Whatever, we only came here for the girl so it’s none of our business. Let’s grab and go.”

I shook my head. “Wait, if there’s another subject here we have to rescue her!” Remi’s otherwise soulless eyes suddenly focused on me as if I caught her attention.

“I don’t give a shit! We’re gonna have Canadian SpecOps on our ass in another half hour if we don’t—”

“Jimiko.” Neto hopped on the radio. “I’m finding some fucked up information here on their mainframe. It seems like there’s a second girl deeper in the facility. Comms says Glownigger gave the order to locate her as well.”

Marionette and I smirked while Jimiko grumbled under his breath. “Well then hurry the fuck up and locate where she’s being stored!”

“Allow me...” Becky put her fingers to her forehead and began looking around. Remi suddenly became panicked and tried to stop her. “I found her! She’s... In a dark place? What? I don’t understand. It’s like she’s in a psychic dead zone, but her energy is clearly leaking out. I’ll try and make contact...” Remi started pitifully pounding on Marionette’s back.

“Oi, Ojisan, make her cut it out or else Marionette can’t focus.”

“Maybe we should listen and—”

“That’s an order Ojisan.”

I glared at Jimiko before grabbing Remi and pulling her away from Marionette.

“Ah, she’s made a link. Now I’ll just—” Marionette’s smirk turned into a look of pure horror and she began to shake. Blood began trickling out of her nose, then her eyes, mouth, and ears as she began to hyperventilate.

“Oi, Oi Marionette what’s going on?” Jimiko walked over to her when Marionette suddenly let out a blood-curdling scream that echoed through everyone’s heads before passing out. “Oi, Marionette. Marionette! Fuck! What the fuck did she see!?”

I rushed over and checked her pulse. Still beating, still breathing. She just got mentally overloaded and passed out. I hopped on my radio. “Neto, have you located the other girl’s coordinates?”

“I have! She’s located at—”

A high-pitched ring rang through my earpiece. It seemed to ring through everyone’s comms as suddenly there was a ton of chatter about the noise. As I went to mute the earpiece the lights in the room all started to explode!

“Oi. Remi, what’s going on?” I turned to the little girl and a voice echoed in my head.

“Flan woke up. She’s angry...”

“AH NO, GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME, AAAAAAAAAAA-
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!”

Comms chatter picked up as the sounds of breaking bones and tearing flesh filled the radio waves from a now-dead grunt. Shit.

How Anon Became the Little Girl and Ended Up Being Sexually Violated by His Own Daughter (and Others) in Another World.

A Story With Themes Of Loss, And Faraway Lands

by /a/non

Prologue – Loss

“I’m home Umiko” Anon announced as he dragged himself into the living room of his apartment. It was quite spacious for being located in the middle of Tokyo. He could even afford an expensive T.V. and a large fluffy soft sofa.

A girl of high school age was laying with her long naked legs spread along the length of the sofa. Her long straight black hair was styled into a hime cut, and her face looked like the Yamato

Nadeshiko ideal. Only her icy blue eyes hinted at her mixed heritage.

“Welcome home, dad,” she said with disinterest while fingering something on her phone.

Anon bowed apologetically out of habit, “I’m sorry I wasn’t home yesterday, it’s the holiday season so our team leader had us crunching...”

“Ah, is that so.” She kept tapping on the phone. Looking at his beautiful daughter, Anon felt a little bit of pride.

He wasn’t the type to be interested in 3D, and his sexual experiences limited themselves to having sex with a slutty foreign exchange student from Japan. She ended up having sex with everyone in his school, so he never thought much of it (besides the stain on his honor as a 2D only virgin).

But in four years Anon received a mysterious letter from his one night-stand. It claimed she conceived Anon’s daughter from that (excessively) short encounter. And while Anon might have initially scoffed at it as a scam, the letter came with a DNA test that turned out to be unexpectedly correct. When Anon arrived in Japan, he found a shy four year old living alone with no relatives.

Now in front of him was the result of twelve years of hard work. Umiko was beautiful, athletic, and a model student. Teachers loved her, and students adored her.

“...you’re being creepy, gross, stop staring.” She made an annoyed expression before going back to her phone

“Ah, I’m so—” Anon began bowing.

“It’s whatever.”

“Did you eat? I’m sorry I couldn’t cook somethi—”

“I made nikujaga, you just have to warm it up. And go take a bath before you sleep, I don’t want you stinking up the bed.”

“Umiko...” Anon teared up slightly while growing a sheepish smile

She made dinner and prepared a bath! he thought Umiko does care about me! She’s acting cold and staring at her phone as a façade! No, no, what am I thinking? She’s a modern girl, she’s probably doing something

very important on her phone. I mean, there are apps for trading stocks, cryptocurrency, or checking the news, right? She's probably focused on several important apps like that.

Anon was wrong as usual, the only app open on Umiko's phone was the Camera, and she was furiously taking pictures with the shutter sound turned off.

Oh this angle is good, I can use this shot later, Umiko thought, then she realized dad was staring.

"...I just told you, stop staring like a creep," she glared at him with the most hostile expression she could make to her beloved papa.

Then a comet landed on their apartment and they both died.

I

"W-where am I?" Anon's voice sounded much girlier than he remembered.

He found himself in the middle of a green flowery prairie crossed by a road, along it were sparse trees and a wooden pole with wooden signs shaped like arrows pointing in different directions.

The sunlight was dazing him, so he stood up and headed for the shade of the trees closer to the sign. Anon remembered being somewhat taller.

He noticed a tall female's figure. She wore what looked like medieval peasant girl clothes, but the shapely body, the long legs and the hime cut were familiar.

"Ah, Umiko!" Anon rushed to her.

"Sorry, but...do we know each other?"

She didn't sound like she was joking, Anon stopped as fear began taking over.

The last thing I remember was seeing something very fast by the window...then I found myself here...and my daughter doesn't even recognize me.

Anon had engaged in several debates about the subject on doyalo.li/greentea/ to know that the solution to somebody suddenly not recognizing your new appearance was to bring up personal memories. He decided to engage with a rational, calm attitude.

“Wahh...it’s me...your dad...I cleaned your *hiccup*...your...”

“What do you mea—“

“Your...when you were six years old, you...the bed...”

“Fine, I believe you’re dad now. You can stop doing this.”

“And at eleven...I found the hidden magazine...the one that had...”

Anon felt himself pushed to the ground, something pressed down his wrist. Only then did he realize his small size and the weakness of his little girl body.

Wait, little girl body? Did I become the little girl? Nevermind that, Umiko is way too close...

“I recognize it’s you, dad,” she whispered delicately into Anon’s ear, “it just took me a bit to understand you’re a blonde little girl now, but...” She stared at Anon’s smooth flat chest that was quickly rising and lowering.

“I’m glad you understand Umiko, can you get off me now?”

“...but this works too.” She moved closer.

“Wait, what do you mean this wo...hyann!” Umiko blew in Anon’s ear as Anon’s loli tummy ached upwards from the sensitivity.

“It means I swing both ways.”

“S-stop it, I’m your father!”

“All I see is a weak little girl...how can you even become a father?” she teased Anon and licked his little girl ears.

“Hi-hhyaa...wait, something’s coming.”

“I like how sensitive you are, Anon.”

“No, I literally mean something’s coming on the horizon, I...hyaa!”

Rather than stopping, Umiko began licking with more intensity, “You don’t need to be embarrassed about this.”

“There’s a carriage, Umiko...Umiko!”

Anon spoke the last line with the strict tone he used to scold her (very rarely), and she jumped back like a scared dog.

Umiko stood up, her face was red and she was holding back heavy breathing. She used her fist to clean up the drool from licking anon's ear while staring at the panting little girl lying on the grass, Anon's white one piece stuck and became transparent wherever Anon released his lewd little girl sweat.

"Don't...do this again," Anon stared to the side, waiting for his body to calm itself down.

Umiko is probably reacting irrationally from all the stress of being in an unfamiliar place, and her dad turning into a little girl...yeah I think I read an article about something like this, thought Anon.

Ha...dad...but no blood relation...but a legal loli...ha... a blonde loli, Jackpot! Wohoo!...ha...I'm so turned on... thought Umiko.

She looked at the horizon.

"I see...so you weren't lying when you said a carriage was coming."

It was a rounded jet black wagon with several dragon styled motifs over-embellishing the corners. It was lead by four jet black horses, and the driver was also covered in black. He wore a thick black suit that was too heavy for the summer weather.

The carriage rushed and stopped abruptly by the signpost. A blue haired girl with twintails peeked out while holding a parasol, she motioned for them to come closer.

"I don't think we should be following some strangers we meet the first time in an unknown world, dad," said Umiko, as Anon rushed happily to the suspicious young girl from the carriage.

"You must be the servants from Potatoburg, come inside."

"Potatoburg?"

She pointed at the sign behind them, it read.

HERE BE THE DISTINGUISHED TOWNSHIP OF POTATOBURG
POP 1500

"I don't think we're the locals she's looking for, dad," said Umiko, as Anon rushed happily inside the comfortable and chilly wagon.

Unlike the jet-black outside, the interior of the carriage was a colorful crimson red with some brown from the mahogany wood.

The girl sitting across from them was wearing a frilly black dress. It wrapped around her thin athletic body, highlighting its erotic, thin, shape.

"I really changed my opinion of Potatoburg after this sacrifice," she laughed in a crystalline tone, "Really, it's been what? Five decades? I was about to go and steal the first virgin I could find, but this..." she closed her eyes and nodded with a sagely expression, "No offense, but you don't look like the average Potatoburgian, at all."

"Well...I'm sorry, but could you be a tad more specific on the 'sacrifice' part?" Umiko raised her hand carefully.

"It's a normal Vampiric Sacrifice, don't worry," the blue haired girl winked.

"What does that...entail?" Umiko asked with a nervous tone.

"Also we want to know your name, yeah," Anon declared loudly.

"That's...haa, I knew Potatoburg was the sticks, but this..." she began trailing off before stopping herself from a rant.

"My name is Her Ladyship Lucretia Bloody Di Soda the 14th, and a Vampiric Sacrifice is...well, it used to mean something else, but now it means that you will be my servants."

"For life?"

"What barbarity, no! Just a decade of indentured servitude is all."

"Ha..." Umiko sighed, a desire to escape began growing inside her.

"Do you mind if I partake?" Lucretia pulled out a foul smelling bottle.

"No, not at all" Umiko noticed Anon was staring intently, it rubbed her the wrong way but she made the unfortunate decision of saying nothing.

Anon observed respectfully as Lucretia pulled out a martini glass and poured foul smelling, slightly coagulated blood then drank it with gusto.

“Ha...that really hit the spot, I tell ya’wha...oh no I’m starting to sound like an old lady, I apologize,” she blushed lightly and removed the blood from the glass with her fingers then licked them intently.

Anon was staring, less respectfully.

Lucretia glanced sideways while licking her fingers and shot a flirty smile.

“As a vampire I can smell a woman going in heat.”

“What does tha-“ Umiko began reacting with outrage, then she noticed Anon was turning beet red.

“You’re a bit on the young side, but otherwise...come sit on my lap, I will please you in such ways...” she smiled and reached her open hand to Anon across from her. He was dumb enough to reach out and almost grab it, but Umiko slapped him away. Then she grabbed Anon by the shoulders and whispered with frustration.

“Did you seriously get wet from her eating blood?”

“Well, somebody posted some very nice vampire...pictures on a...forum, last night.”

“...Do you mean on /greentea/?”

“H-how do you know of...”

“I was the one posting those vampire girls, ha...” she let out a dry chuckle, “I can’t believe dad posted on the same imageboard, this is so embarrassing, but also kind of...”

Then she noticed the little girl was making a stone faced expression.

“You posted on doyaloli.”

“...We’ve arrived by the way,” Lucretia pointed at a large sprawling mansion growing in size as the carriage came closer, but Anon didn’t care about that.

“You posted on doyaloli despite being A WOMAN.”

“It’s not like I was going out of my way to shitpost or some...”

“A WOMAN can’t post on DOYALOLI!” Anon shouted in a shrill childish tone.

“That’s it. I’m not talking to you anymore,” he declared proudly and jumped off the carriage, straight into a muddy puddle.

II

“A-achoo!” Anon let out a sneeze, his fifteenth since he stepped off the carriage into a puddle, got rapidly introduced to the maids, and sent to take a bath.

“Still, this is pretty impressive,” Anon stared at the large bathroom. A large warm bathing pool stood in the middle of several tall marble columns and statues. The pool’s edge was rimmed with what seemed to be gold. *Or at least some expensive metal*, thought Anon.

“...Not like it has anything to do with me,” he headed to one of the showers by the side, ran the water over his head for two minutes, and headed to the exit.

It was a perfect Anon shower, and he would have gotten away with it too, if the Head Maid wasn’t waiting for him by the glass door separating the bath and changing room.

She wore sharp square glasses, her black hair was tied in a bun, and her maid uniform was concealing her figure.

But she must be hiding some huge ones down there, I can tell, Anon nodded sagely to himself.

“That’s...it?” she crossed her arms

“Ah...yes, I’m done.”

She sighed and adjusted her glasses with annoyance.

“This is why children are so...”

“Sorry, but can you move, I can’t...pass,” Anon tried to squeeze past her but was grabbed by the hand and dragged to one of the stools near the pool.

The Head Maid forced Anon to sit and began soaping up his body with trained professionalism. Her sharp mechanical movements betrayed no emotions even as they went over more sensitive spots.

She soaped, washed, scrubbed until the dirt and mud was gone from Anon's soft loli body. "Next is the hair," she said in monotone, and took a strand of Anon's long blonde hair into her hand, "Anyway, your hair is in terrible shape. Did your mother never teach you how to take care of it?" she lectured Anon.

"My mother, she's..." Anon looked away with a pained expression.

Oh, Anon's parents were fine. At least the last time he'd seen them, which was a decade ago. Who knew that a joke about having left this homeland for Okinawa to run a child trafficking ring doesn't work with parents that just found your Comic Lo stash? Not Anon. At least there were upsides to being disowned this way, such as making friends with Interpol agents.

"Ah, I see, you must have had it rough, huh..."

Is it me or is the Head Maid's voice surprisingly soft this time around? thought Anon before being grabbed from behind. The Head Maid's arms wrapped themselves around Anon, and her large breasts (Anon's assessment was correct) pushed through the thin cloth of the maid uniform against Anon's wet naked child back. He shivered from the sensation of being rubbed by large soft breasts.

"Shh...you don't have to try so hard anymore."

She whispered gently, "You're just a little girl."

"I'm not a..." Anon tried to struggle against her hold, but his little girl body could do nothing against the strength of an older woman wrapping herself around him.

"Don't resist."

"I...I..."

"Shh...just give in."

Why am I fighting this? thought Anon.

"See? It's not so bad," she whispered gently.

And Anon realized he had let her win. He reluctantly resigned to closing his eyes and focusing on the sensation of boobs pressing against his back. Other than turning him on, the feeling was oddly relaxing.

“There, there...” the Head Maid whispered.

Ah, I get it, it's her...motherly...aura... Anon thought as he fell asleep in the Head Maid's arms.

Anon woke up in the changing room leading to the large bathroom. He jumped up and saw a mirror in front of him, that was when he noticed his blonde loli body had been thoroughly cleaned. His skin looked soft and pink, the long hair gold and fuzzy. He wore a cute frilly maid uniform. Below it were white socks and cute round black shoes.

I have to admit, this is pretty nice, thought Anon and began raising his uniform's skirt in front of the mirror to study his panties, as one does.

“Did you have a good rest?” Anon turned to a female voice to his side.

“Head Maid? You were observing me this whole time?” He blushed with embarrassment.

“Call me Dahlia-san, Anon...” She brought a hand to her cheek while grinning.

“Anyway, you sure can be cute with just a little bit of effort...”
...Which means I'll have to look after you and put in effort until you're always cute, she thought of adding, but realized it would be too creepy to say to a child.

Wait, what am I thinking? I never had these proclivities. ‘Indeed, she had to acknowledge that Anon awakened something perverse in her.

A bad influence is all

She coughed and returned to her strict tone.

“Anyway, Her Ladyship is waiting for you in her studio. Follow me.”

Anon nodded and began following the light of the Head Maid's candle through the dark labyrinth-like corridors of the vampire mansion. Halfway through, Anon realized something.

“Head...I mean, Dahlia-san.”

“Yes, Anon-chan?”

“Were you the one that dressed me?”

“Indeed.”

“I am thankful and everything, but...regarding my panties...”

The maid turned to stare at Anon with a bewildered expression.

“I swear I didn’t look! I put them on, but I was looking to the side! Oh, and I don’t mean the side by the mirror! Anyway, it’s...”

“Hehe, it’s good that Dahlia-sama is a gentlewoman,” Anon gave her a bright smile with closed eyes, showing his delicate clean child teeth.

“A-anyway, we’re going!” Dahlia turned her back to Anon, the candle in her hand was shaking for the first time since she started on the path of Maidcraft.

“Un!” Anon hopped behind her with gladness.

It’s good that we’re on the same wavelength! he thought. It wasn’t.

III

Lucretia’s studio also served as a guestroom and minor library. The whole entrance wall was dedicated to a large bookshelf hosting hundreds of books. On the opposite side was a window blocked by large thick red curtains.

There was a desk covered with scribbled documents. And closer to the entrance stood two long red sofas with a coffee table between them.

Lucretia and Umiko were sitting on opposite ends of coffee table and drinking tea with elegant movements. Umiko had changed into a maid uniform similar to Anon’s. But, he noticed with some embarrassment, hers was less frilly and more practical.

“Oh-hoo,” Lucretia nodded knowingly as Anon walked in, followed by the Head Maid.

“This is good, this is really good, yes...” she stared intently at every nook and cranny of Anon’s body. He felt embarrassed and glanced at Umiko for support, but she was also staring, with an even scarier expression.

“Yes, yes...” Lucretia muttered to herself while bringing a hand to her chin, she finally looked at Anon’s face, “Can you show it from different angles?”

Anon nodded and extended his arms by the skirt’s length, then he did a fluttery twirl while accidentally letting out a pure smile. *This is fun*, he thought, before stopping the dangerous train of thought.

“L-like this?” He asked, then he noticed Lucretia was holding back a smile while covering her blushing red face with one hand.

“Ha...I just wanted you to turn to the side, but this service...ha...thank you very much, thank you, really, thanks...” Lucretia began saying creepy things before stopping herself.

“Dad, you really...” Umiko was no better, she was holding back her desire for rape.

Only the Head Maid retained her neutral expression.

At least somebody here is not a pervert, thought Anon, underestimating the skill with which a veteran Maid can hide her excitement.

After several deep breaths, Lucretia calmed herself down, she realized something.

“Wait, what does your dad have to do with this?” she asked Umiko.

“...Nothing. Anyway about what we were talking about...”

“Ah yes, I have the right to touch my servants once per day. Dahlia-san, can you confirm this? Umiko here didn’t believe me when I said it.”

“Yes, initially it was the right to bit-“

“Skip the history lesson, I just want an outside party to confirm this for Umiko.”

“Yes ma’am, legally you are allowed to touch your servant once a day..but it has to be a bodypart that both sides consent to.”

Lucretia's blue twintails jumped behind her and she stared at Umiko with a smug expression.

"Tsk, you win this one."

"Don't worry, I'll just touch Anon's hand or something."

"H-handholding?!?" Umiko jumped up, "No way, get out of here with your perverted whoredom!"

"I'm not a..." Experience as a governor stopped Lucretia from starting a scene over Umiko's outburst.

"Fine then. Where can I touch, the feet?"

"I won't let a foot fetishist spoil my da-little sister's foot touching virginity!"

Perverted whore was one thing, but the foot fetishist accusation enraged Lucretia, she also stood up and brought a hand to her chest.

"Ha!? Foot Fetishist? I would rather rub Anon's little round butt, Anon's soft girlish thighs, Anon's cute tummy, Anon's budding little girl chest, Anon's neck and shoulders!"

"No you can't touch Anon's butt, you can't touch Anon's thighs, you can't touch Anon's tummy, Anon's chest, Anon's neck or Anon's shoulders! Illegal! I forbid it! But I understand!" Umiko shouted and crossed her arms with a confrontational expression.

"Gunenenene" Lucretia turned red with anger and stared at the floor.

"Hey, Umiko, maybe you shouldn't..." Anon began asking feebly.

"What is it, Anon? Weren't you ignoring me because women can't post on doyaloli?"

"This and that are different, I mean, maybe you could tone it down with the..."

"No, no, Anon, I agree. Women shouldn't be posting on a board for VIRGIN otaku men, you're being so righteous by not talking with me."

Ah, there it is, Anon thought, Umiko can be very stubborn when she gets mad, this part hasn't changed since she was a kid. Maybe I should set my principles aside this once, and...

“Fine, I’m so-“

“I GOT IT,” Lucretia shouted loudly, everyone turned to stare at her.

“The head, you’ll have no issues with touching Anon’s head, right?”

“So you reveal your true colors. You want to stick your lewd W-WHORE fingers in Anon’s small childish mouth, rub her little teeth, grab her small tongue, until Anon produces her lewd little girl saliva that you will then spread across her delicate face, and...”

“What? No! I wasn’t thinking of that at all!” Lucretia shouted with embarrassment.

“Ah, so Anon’s soft nose...”

“The head! Not the face! Is that fine?”

Umiko stopped to think, Anon braced himself for another rant about how lewd his blonde little girl hair can be...but instead Umiko gave up, to everyone’s surprise.

“Yes, you can do the head.”

“‘Do the head’...can you not say it in such a lewd way?”

“Ah, maybe I’ll change my mind after all...”

“No, that’s fine, that’s fine, I’ll ‘do’ Anon’s head, come here,” Lucretia motioned for Anon to come over with a gesture used to call cats.

Anon walked over with the apprehension of a scared kitten. He lowered his head forward in a semi-bow and closed his eyes.

He felt The Countess gently patting his head, it was embarrassing, but there was something pleasant about the rhythmic patting.

“See? I’m not so scary,” Lucretia whispered. Hearing those words relaxed Anon, and he instinctively pushed his head closer to the Vampire’s hand.

“Haha, so you want more headpats?”

Anon opened his eyes, he noticed Dahlia and Umiko were staring at him, it filled him with embarrassment. He shook his head vigorously.

“Liaaar,” Lucretia dragged the word, opening her mouth and showing her sharp white fangs.

Then her patting increased in intensity, Anon couldn’t resist the pleasant sensation and let out a subtle moan.

“Ha..you were putting your head forward you little..you actually love this, admit it! Take this!” Lucretia raised her left hand to scratch behind Anon’s ear while still patting vigorously with the right.

“Hiiiiinn! Not the ears...hya...s-stop,” the intensity of the patting and scratching was getting to Anon, he couldn’t handle how comfortable it felt.

Then she stopped, Anon stood in a daze for a few seconds, then he realized what happened.

Ah, somebody knocked.

“Come in,” Lucretia ordered with frustration.

Anon was coming down from the pleasurable trance caused by the intense headpatting he had received, as he observed a younger maid walk in, whisper something into the Head Maid’s ear and leave.

“So, what is it?”

“An intruder by the Main Hall, ma’am.”

“Let me guess, is it Ulther again?”

“Ah, well...”

IV

It was Ulther again, of course.

He was wearing silver and red armor with tactically useless spikes poking out of his forearms and boots. He wore wolf fur on his shoulders, it provided no defensive or heating advantage. On his sides were two large swords that couldn’t be wielded simultaneously. To add insult to injury, he wore several black belts that served no purpose and had a long cape that rolled across the floor and gathered dust.

“Talk about chuuni JRPG designs, right dad?” Umiko asked Anon, only to reach the horrifying realization that Anon was entranced by his appearance.

“Haa...so cool...”

“Wait, dad, you shouldn’t...”

“I admit it, the armour looks cool” Lucretia nodded “But the problem is the shitty person wearing it.”

If the armor looks like shit, and the person inside is shit, then isn't it all shit? thought Umiko.

Ulther removed his large lion-shaped helmet and swung his long blonde hair side to side while stretching his neck.

“Ha...that’s better, now...” he pointed to the top of the victorian entrance stairway.

“Lucretia Bloody Di Soda the 1vth! Your oppression of the people of Potatoburg ends now! I shall...”

“If it’s Potatoburg you want I can pass it to you,” Lucretia spoke dismissively. “I had enough of managing those country bumpkins, you’ll be doing me a favor, let’s go to my studio, some paperwork and it’s yours.” She was about to turn around but Ulther stopped her with a “Wait!”

“What is it? Weren’t you saving Potatoburg?”

“Yes! I mean no! I mean...” he thought for a second. “Actually, thy vampiric race is a blight, the ancient text say to kill a Vampire is...”

“But Sir Ulther, if I remember correctly, the Pope’s last encyclical adds Vampires to the list of races fit for receiving the Good Word...”

“Tsk, I hoped you didn’t read it,” Ulther whispered.

“What were you saying?”

“N-nothing...Lucretia Bloody Di Soda the 1vth! For the crime of imprisoning young virgins...”

“I have legal indentured servant contracts with all my maids, the law is on my side I fear.”

“Argghhh...You have so many cute girls, just give me one! Please!” Ulther’s real thoughts slipped out.

Lucretia stepped one foot forward “Over my dead body!” She turned and winked to Anon and Umiko, “Get it? Because I’m a vampire!”

Umiko groaned, while Anon’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

“S-so cool.”

“Haha! So you accept a duel at last, this time...”

The Head Maid walked over to Lucretia and began whispering something in her ear, the blue haired vampire nodded with some frustration.

“You make a good point about the property damage costs, yes...I agree...yes...”

The maid stopped whispering, and Lucretia sighed deeply, then she shouted.

“Ulther!”

“Yes, my rival!” He sounded like an excited dog.

“I cannot give you my maids! But I can invite you to have a tea party at my inner garden! You can look at my cute maids all you want there! What say thee?”

“Khh...you tempt me, foul Vampire...what is the...catch?” he grabbed at his (healthy, uncursed) eye.

“When we’re done, you’ll have to go home without starting a fight or breaking anything.”

“Tsk...a devilish bargain...fine, have it your way, you villain!” He pranced with barely-hidden happiness after a cute maid showed up to lead him.

V

The inner garden was located in an opening within the large mansion, it was surrounded by the tall mansion walls on all sides. Atop it was a glass ceiling that refracted the orange evening light in a way that wouldn’t damage Lucretia but would still feed the surrounding plants.

There was a feeling of crampedness caused by the overbearing glass ceiling and tall walls, but it was offset by the careful arrangement of the red flowers and green shrubbery surrounding the central gazebo.

Ulther was sitting on the bench in the middle of the gazebo. His serene expression, perfect posture, ideal manners gave an unearned impression of noble dignity.

He sipped from a teacup while raising his little finger. He placed it down with a downcast glance.

“so, let us get to the point,” he let out a dignified sigh.

“You got two new maids, didn’t you? The cutest so far.”

Lucretia matched his manners, but she couldn’t hold back an arrogant grin.

“I know, right? I think they’re my favorite. The older one is called Umiko, it means ‘seachild’.”

“Wow, seachild so cool!”

“And the younger one is called Anon, I think it means ‘nameless one’.”

“Wow, nameless one, so cool!”

“I know right? They’re both way too cute and way too perverted. I still have to housebreak the older one...”

“Housebreak, ha..You do know that I’m standing right here?” Umiko interrupted Lucretia’s bragging.

“Oh my, are maids allowed to speak out of order? I do not think so, are they?” Lucretia faked an overly sweet tone turning to the Head Maid.

“No ma’am, a maid is not to speak unless spoken to.”

“Right?” She grinned at Umiko.

“Tsk” Umiko clicked her tongue loudly.

“Well, anyway, about these maids...”

“Tsk.”

“Like I was saying, Anon is very...”

“Tsk.”

“Can you stop doing that?”

“Stop what? But I wasn’t talking, Your Ladyship, was I?” Umiko copied her overly sweet tone.

“Despite your looks, you really...gah, whatever, this is dumb. Let’s change topic, Ulther. Any news from the capital?”

“Nothing of importance...ah, the Demon King seems to have died.”

“Well, he was old.”

“And his Four Demon Generals are fighting each other in a civil war.”

“Well, sounds typical for the Demon Kingdom.”

“And this causes lots of instability, crime and banditry.”

“Well, it is a civil war.”

“Which means an Orc Tribe is heading for Potatoburg.”

“Well, that would happen...wait, did you say Orc tribals are going to assault Potatoburg?” Lucretia forgot her manners, she quickly put her cup down.

“Why didn’t you say that sooner?”

“I had to give the right context, you see.”

“I mean when you came to my mansion...ah you probably forgot.”

“Yeah I forgot.”

She put her hand to her face, then shouted “Head Maid!” Dahlia rushed closer to her.

“Yes, your Ladyship?”

“Did you hear that?”

“Indeed.”

“What do you propose?”

Dahlia glanced both ways, making sure there was nobody but the knight and Lucretia’s favorites.

“Can I speak freely?”

Lucretia nodded.

“If an Orc rapes a Potatoburg native, would the children look any different?”

“D-Dahlia-san?” Anon stared with horror but Lucretia seemed to be considering the proposal seriously.

“Indeed, Potatoburgians are so butt-ugly that the Orcs might even find themselves at home and integrate...wait, what am I

saying? If the Duke hears that I left my holding unprotected, I'll only see the moon from a prison cell...haa, such a bother."

"I'm sorry, my Ladyship, I hadn't considered the implications of my proposal."

"No, it was a good idea..."

"Was it?" Anon and Umiko whispered in unison.

"Let's see, sending my Combat Maids might be a waste. I will head out myself, Dahlia you will come as insurance."

"Good luck, we'll look after the place while you're gone" Umiko grabbed Anon's hand and began dragging him.

"What are you saying? I'm taking you two with me, it's your hometown isn't it?"

"Ah!" Dahlia reacted with surprise "Are you two Potatoburgians? I'm very sorry for being so rude to your...home," she said with barely hidden disgust.

How bad can it get? thought Anon, cluelessly.

VI

Midnight. The muddy streets of Potatoburg were swimming in blood and fecal matter. Several houses were already destroyed down to their frame, and a couple were still burning. Grunting bald pig-like looters crawled in and of the burning buildings, sharing their loot and guttural inhuman sounds. A couple of them began screaming and fighting each other in the mud over an earring the size of a fingernail, they broke some barrels of loot in the process, causing the barrel's owner to join in on the fight. A fourth bystander grinned creepily and joined the fight out of sheer love of violence.

"I was...too late..." Lucretia whispered and fell to her knees.

"Dammit! If only I was a little quicker!" She cried.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

One of the bald pig-like monsters noticed her and walked closer, he let out a creepy grin that showed his yellow sharp teeth.

“Ah guv’na, been a while since your last visit!”

Lucretia quickly raised her head from the ground, “Wait, are you Potatoburgians?”

“What else? Me’s bald and fat as me dad! Hahaha!” he turned and shouted.

“Oy lads, look lively! We’ve got Her Lad’ship visitin’!” More Potatoburgians began coming closer as Lucretia quickly jumped up and cleaned the mud from her dress with a towel that the Head Maid quickly passed to her without saying anything.

“Anyway, we’ze sorry we ain’t been able to send you a virgin ’nall...you know how loose our lasses are guhuhhihihi,” he emitted a sound between aroused pig grunting and laughing. His friends laughed the same way.

“It’s fine, you already resolved that issue,” Lucretia pointed at the girls in the carriage behind her, but the man turned his head to the side in confusion.

“Whatsoomean?” she didn’t hear, or rather didn’t understand, his question.

“Why are these houses burning?”

“Well, ole’ Jives here got a new oven and guhihihi...it burned his house guhihihi... we’ze help ‘im out youknow, lightenin’ his load so to speak.”

“I see, what about the other house?”

“Jives house ain’t got enough loot, ma’am! Guhhuhuhuhuh” He emitted a laughter mixed with greedy pig-like grunting, his friends imitated him.

“Why do I have to look after these...”

“Whatsoosay ma’am?”

“I said I came because I received news that an Orc War Tribe is coming your way.”

“A-an Orc War Tribe! By the pope’s dirty toenails! Those sub-human pig-like savages...” His friends joined in with several off-color remarks about Orc hygiene and appearance.

“Thanks for the warning guv’na,” the leader nodded, “We’ze going warnin’ the townsfolk, youse come with?”

“No, I’ll...I’ll stand guard here, in case the Orcs come...yeah,” Lucretia didn’t want to go any further into the town, for her own sanity.

“Good thinkin’, quick thinkin’, yeah youse vamps are smart ’nall...we’ll come when we’ze get fighting age males ’kay?”

“Y-yeah,” Lucretia forced a nod. She watched them abandon the gleeful looting to run and scream “DAMN ORCS BEEN COMIN’” into every window they could find. This warning system wasn’t without attrition, as some Potatoburgians were angry about being woken from their sleep and got out to start fighting the messenger. But in an hour, Lucretia was staring at a group of around two hundred randomly armored balding pig like grunts gathered in a loose formation.

They managed to stay upright for ten minutes, before getting restless and bored. Some fell asleep, a couple started a fight, and someone started drinking heavier than usual.

“The duke ha-hates me...” Lucretia whispered while her eyes began tearing up, then she noticed Anon running out the carriage.

“They’re coming! Your ladyship! The Orcs!” he was pointing behind the carriage. Anon’s figure distracted the crowd of Potatoburgians.

“Whossat?”

“Must be a lass.”

“Ain’t seen a lady that thin...’cept her lad’ship of course”

“Must be a vamp’re then.”

“No way, that got’s to be an elf.”

“Maybe one of ’em vejtariuns?”

“Vejtariuns...ain’t right...” The crowd joined in, repeating random “ain’t right” and nodding with intellectual expressions. They had completely forgotten about the Orcs.

By that time, the War Tribe had reached the town’s edge.

As the Head Maid stated, the odd three hundred-something pig-like Orcs didn’t look much different than the Potatoburgians. If anything, they were better armored and cleaner. The only real

difference was that the Orcs had an even gender split, or rather, the whole tribe had come to fight.

The two armies faced each other with the distance of less than a mile, the only separation was Lucretia's black carriage in the middle.

The tallest and largest of the Orcs stepped forward.

"LEADER...WHERE?"

VII

The crackling of torchlight and random grunts were the only sounds as Lucretia walked in the middle of the two armies. She raised her hand.

"I own the village, what do you need?"

"A HUMAN RULING OVER ORCS? WEAK!" the leader shouted.

Lucretia sighed, she didn't want to show this to Anon, but she had no choice. Two large jet-black wings, five feet each, extended from her fragile thin back.

"AH VAMPIRE, WE RESPECT, YES" he threw a shortsword into the ground "DUEL!"

"Is there a peaceful resolution?" Lucretia asked while raising the sword from Potatoburg's mud using two fingers, she wondered if touching the clean side was hygienic.

"DUEL IS PEACEFUL, NO? YOU WIN, YOU TAKE TRIBE. I WIN I TAKE TOWN, ONE DEATH, FAIR?" he grinned in a Potatoburgian way while getting closer.

"Fine, when do we begin?"

"NOW," the Orc shouted and rushed at Lucretia. She was disoriented for a second, but managed to get out of the way using her wings. She prepared a spell for a quick counterattack but then she heard cheers and shouts of "GUV'NA!" "GUV'NA!" while the Orcs grumbled something in their own language.

Lucretia didn't know she was dealing with a professional. In the seven seconds that it took for her to fly sideways and prepare a spell, the Orc Leader managed to slip on Potatoburg's mud, ski all the way to Ole Jives home and split his skull against the house's stone foundation.

Both armies unanimously declared Lucretia as the victor, and she became chieftain of the Iron-Break Tribe by Orc tradition. She ordered the Orcs to settle in Potatoburg, but after seeing the town's state, the old Chieftain's daughter begged her to spare the terrifying fate. She kept hitting her forehead against the ground and crying, with snot, torrential tears and all, until Lucretia agreed to let them settle in the wilderness nearby.

"It's times like this that I hate being Countess," Lucretia sighed, and stretched her hands forward.

"Be as it may, Your Ladyship, the way you handled the issue was beyond reproach!"

"Dahlia-san, can you say this without rubbing that towel all over Anon's legs?"

"Ah, yes," the Head Maid stopped with embarrassment, "It's just that I was cleaning the mud from...and..."

"They're all clean now! Thanks," Anon shot her a pure bright smile, and she stopped to stare, then Dahlia collected herself and sat next to Umiko. Anon was sitting on his daughter's lap like a kid, causing Umiko to have several conflicting thoughts, most of which were words that ended in "-ape" and didn't refer to fruits or simians.

Lucretia sat alone on the opposite seat. The reason for this arrangement were her large shiny black bat-like wings. They filled the full width of the carriage even while narrowed.

After a few minutes, Lucretia noticed Anon's stare, she broke the silence with a "...what are you looking at?"

"...wings," Anon answered with some shyness.

"They're gross and creepy, like a bat right? You don't have to rub it in," she crossed her arms with embarrassment, but Anon shook his head.

"I like them,"

“Haaa??” Her hands dropped and she stared at Anon with a surprised expression, she didn’t notice how red she got until her hand reached for her face automatically, she covered a growing smile. “You have a perverted way of flattering.”

“It’s not flattery!” Anon bent forward “I like them! It’s cool how the skeleton is a dark bony black and the cartilaginous surface has this dark black shine, the puffs of hair on the peaks...”

“Ah, mouu!” Lucretia shut him off while closing her eyes from the embarrassment, “I understand! I understand now! You don’t have to keep going!”

Anon went quiet but kept observing Lucretia’s wings respectfully while slowly falling asleep. The vampire put her elbow against the wagon’s window and stared outside. Her face was still red.

“Geez, this child...” she muttered, the happiness over being accepted by Anon caused her to flutter her wings a bit.

And this would be a touching moment, that Lucretia would remember as such for the rest of her life. Except she happened to notice Umiko was staring at her with an evil grin.

“Well, I think your wings look like SHIT!”

“Ah, you bit—” Lucretia began to say something, but the feeling of a notification spell stopped her.

“We’ve arrived.”

As soon as the carriage stopped, Umiko got out with a smug expression, holding Anon’s sleeping body like a trophy. She was followed by Dahlia. They stopped upon seeing somebody.

Lucretia was the last to get out, she noticed a black winged girl with short curly blue hair standing in front of the Mansion’s entrance.

“Ah, Onee-sama, were you out on a late-night flight as well?”

Space Janitor

by /a/non

I

People have this idea that mahjong is nothing but cheating. Not so. Those old mahjong manga set in the twentieth century, they might be accurate for their time. But they've got nothing to do with the twenty-second century.

Tile stacking? Automatic tables did away with that a long time ago. Weird dice tricks? Not with modern random number generators. And if you try anything funny with the tiles, any decent parlor has loads of AI powered cameras to catch you out and slap you with a penalty before you can drop a discard.

So when I dealt in, I knew the other guy wasn't cheating. But try to understand my situation. It was all last, and I was fourth place. It was my dealer turn, and some benevolent spirit of the flow had blessed me with tenpai for suuankou. Dealer yakuman. A whole lot of points on the line. Enough to win me the game right then and there. Against my better judgement, I'd been at this all night and I was out of cash. If this didn't work out for me, I was in big trouble.

So try to imagine my absolute state when I dealt in to the guy who was already in first place. His yaku? Tanyao. One han. One thousand points. Chimp change, but enough to end the game and send me to hell right then and there. If you don't understand mahjong terms, don't worry about anything I just said. Suffice it to say I was frustrated.

Obviously, I accused him of cheating.

“Tanikawa,” he said, “Are you saying you won’t pay up?”

I leapt to my feet and sprinted out of the parlor. Like I said, I was out of cash. I did not need to get my fingers broken, or my ass beaten, or any of my shit stolen. Curses and shouts followed me out onto the street, and I ran even faster.

I’m not sure why I made my way to the space port. It was dark, the street was crowded, and I didn’t have any place in particular to go. I guess I must have favored stretches of sidewalk without as many people, and the flow of foot traffic just sort of guided me in that direction. Next thing I knew, I was hopping a fence. Then, I saw a lot of spaceships. One of them had an open cargo hatch, so I threw myself in and closed the hatch behind me.

After I heard my adversaries stalk past, muttering threats against me all the while, I congratulated myself on being such a clever guy and resolved to wait a few minutes before making my escape. No sooner did I figure it was safe to come out than I heard the hatch click into the locked position. Then the engines came on. Then the ship rose up off the ground with me inside, and I passed out from the g-force. I don’t know when I woke up. I just know it was cold and there was no gravity. There was a light shining down on me. A hand reaching out to me. My brain felt so fuzzy.

“Ah, crap,” I muttered, “I escaped my gambling debts only to go and get myself killed.”

“What are you mumbling about? There’s no heating in the cargo bay, hurry up and grab my hand before you freeze to death.”

“Are you an angel?”

I was a little out of it.

The hand roughly grabbed me by my shirt collar and yanked me through the door. Bright light, warm air, and artificial gravity hit me like a brick wall. Then I hit the floor. A pair of women stood over me with stern expressions. They looked like sisters. One of them was a bit taller and had long hair. The other was a bit shorter, had a ponytail, and wore glasses. Other than that, they looked nearly the same. Black hair, black eyes, pale skin.

“Here’s our stowaway, Captain,” said Glasses, “What do we do with him?”

The other woman, the captain, stroked her chin and sighed.

“Throw him in a medical pod for a few hours.”

“Should we head back to Earth?”

“No.”

“Captain, we can’t just take this total stranger along.”

“There’s no time to turn around, Noriko. He’ll just have to come with us.”

I’m not really sure what happened next. I was still so cold. But sure enough, next thing I knew I was inside a big orange ball with only my head sticking out, heated pads gently kneading warmth back into my limbs. This had been a rather chaotic day. I took a moment to take a deep breath and try to comprehend my situation. Somehow, I’d gone from losing at mahjong to being stuck on some spaceship. And if I remembered the captain’s words correctly, the ship was not going to take me home until it had accomplished whatever mission it had set out on.

“Ah, are you awake?”

My brief respite was over. I looked over to see a girl seated in a chair in the corner. Her face was similar to the captain’s and Noriko’s, but her hair was snow white. She was very thin, and even seated I could tell she was very tall. The most striking difference, though, was that her face bore a gentle smile.

“Uh, yes. What exactly is going on?”

“You stowed away in the cargo bay. You would have frozen to death if Noriko hadn’t noticed you on the sensor array.”

“I see, I see. Say, I’m feeling plenty warm now. I don’t suppose you could let me out?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Onee-sama’s orders. You’re to stay in there until she’s spoken with you again and determined that you aren’t a dangerous person.”

“Onee-sama? Who’s your onee-sama?”

She blinked.

“There’s only one Onee-sama.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, my apologies. I don’t often meet people from outside the family. I mean Yamanaka Hoshiko, our captain.”

“I see. So you’re the captain’s little sister.”

“We’re all the captain’s little sisters. Except for you, I suppose.”

“The Yamanaka sisters, huh? Say, you don’t mean ‘Yamanaka’ as in the famous space pirate, do you?”

“He was our father. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason. I’m just... say, you’re not planning on doing any, you know, piracy, right?”

“Not at all. Why do you ask?”

“Just making sure.”

Just then, the door opened. A younger girl poked her head inside the medical bay.

“Miko, is he awake yet?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see?”

“Of course.”

The younger girl – Miko’s little sister, I supposed – stepped inside and stared at me. I wasn’t sure what to say, so I just stared back.

“I’m Yamanaka Yukari,” she said with an intense, intimidating stare.

“Pleased to meet you,” I replied, forcing a pleasant, placating tone into my voice as best as I could.

Yukari scowled. “What do you think you were doing, sneaking into our cargo bay like that?”

“Well now, I mean, it was an honest mistake.”

“How honest?”

“Perfectly honest. I was just trying to, you know, get out of paying my gambling debts.”

Her scowl deepened.

“That doesn’t sound very honest.”

“More honest than space piracy.”

“What did you say?”

The door opened again, and the captain walked in, Noriko on her heels with a clipboard and a pen.

“Miko, is he awake yet?”

“Yes, Onee-sama.”

The captain, Yamanaka Hoshiko, turned a stern gaze at me.

“What do you think you were doing, sneaking into our cargo bay like that?”

“Running from gambling debts.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Are you messing with me?”

“N-no, ma’am.”

“Are you aware that we can’t take you back to Earth until we’ve completed our mission?”

“I believe I heard you say that.”

“Do you realize that, while you’re onboard my ship, you’ll have to work?”

“Uh... well, that sounds fair.”

“What are your skills?”

“Uh...”

Several seconds of silence passed. She rolled her eyes.

“I figured as much. Miko, let him out. He’s no danger to us.”

“Yes, Onee-sama.”

The orange ball clicked, hissed, and opened. I sat up.

“Noriko, set him up in Touma’s quarters.”

“Touma’s quarters?!”

“Where else? It’s the only open sleeping quarters on the ship, and they’re about the same size.”

“But... Touma’s quarters?”

“Yes.”

“What will we do when we pick up Touma?”

“We’ll figure that out when it happens.”

Noriko glared at me, and the light caught her glasses in a way that made me flinch.

“Just make it happen, Noriko. Then meet me on the bridge.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“And you, new guy.”

“I’m Tanikawa.”

“I didn’t ask. I’ll be by your quarters early tomorrow. You’d better be up and ready to go by then.”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

The captain looked around at her assembled sisters with a cool gaze.

“That is all.”

Then she turned around with a smart about-face and walked out of the medical bay.

My name is Tanikawa Daichi. I’m twenty-eight years old. By inclination, I’m a sponge and a net drain on society. By profession, I’m a bad gambler when I have money and a bad part timer when I don’t. This is how I came aboard the starship *Argive*, with its crew of five crazy sisters. As I walked through the passageways of the ship, following the fuming first mate to my quarters, it was all I could do to wish I hadn’t gone to the mahjong parlor that night.

II

Once again, I woke up to a bright light and a face full of floor. Someone had lifted my mattress, dumped me onto the deck, and was now looming above me.

Yamanaka Hoshiko, captain of the *Argive*.

She looked at me expectantly. With an ache in my back that prophesied my approaching thirties, I grunted and pushed myself to my feet.

“I believe I told you to be up early. I even set an alarm for you.”

There was indeed an alarm clock buzzing in the wall. The captain clapped her hands and turned it off.

“I’m a crotchety old guy, you know,” I protested, “Sometimes it’s hard to get up.”

“Don’t blame your laziness on your age. I went through your wallet. I’ve seen your ID. You’re only two years older than me.”

“Oh whatever. I never volunteered to be here. What the hell gives you the right to order me around?”

Just the day before, I’d already agreed to work for this woman.

But try to understand my situation. I’m not a morning person, and I was grouchy as all hell.

The captain responded to my ill-natured grumbling with something I’d never seen before. She bowed. She snapped down to a ninety degree angle, right there in front of me.

“You’re right. You never volunteered to be here. I apologize for making you work against your will.”

Suddenly, I was no longer grouchy. I was wide awake and my face was burning. Before I could so much as think about what I was doing, I returned her bow. I don’t think I managed to get quite as low as her though.

“No, no. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snuck aboard your ship.”

She didn’t rise, so I didn’t either. To tell you the truth, I had no idea what to do. This was the sort of situation people might have found themselves in two hundred years ago, how was I supposed to know what to do?

Thankfully, a voice came from the open door.

“Ah, Onee-sama.”

Footsteps scurried in, followed by a soft rustle.

“You too, Tanikawa-san, please stand.”

The captain had risen. Miko was in the room, her long, thin hands resting on her sister’s shoulders. Seeing her standing there behind the captain, I could see she was a head taller than her older sister. Miko’s eyes were level with mine.

“Miko, shouldn’t you be resting in the low gravity chamber?”

“Yes, Onee-sama. I was on my way there just now.”

“Then go. I won’t let you neglect your health.”

“Yes, Onee-sama.”

Miko smiled at me. Then she strode out of the room and shut the door behind her.

Yamanaka Hoshiko grabbed my attention with a gaze like cast iron.

“Tanikawa Daichi, will you volunteer to be here? Will you agree to follow my orders?”

“Y-yes.”

“That was fast. Are you sure? You won’t change your mind?”

“No, ma’am.”

“No you’re not sure?”

“No I won’t change my mind.”

“If you’re going to be allowed free range of my ship, you need to be a member of my crew. I have to be sure that you are loyal to me. The alternative is to be locked up in here for the duration of the mission. You would be reasonably comfortable. Would you prefer that, or will you volunteer to work for me?”

“I’ll volunteer to work for you.”

“Call me ‘Captain.’”

“Yes, Captain.”

Finally, her eyes released me. I sighed in relief. She gave me a purely professional smile.

“Good. If you’re a member of my crew, then I’ll fill you in on our mission.”

“Oh. Yeah, the mission, what is it?”

“Follow me to the briefing room.”

“Briefing room?”

“Mission briefs happen in the briefing room.”

I gave her a blank stare.

“Just say ‘Yes, Captain.’”

“Yes, Captain.”

With that, I followed her out of the room. I didn’t need to get dressed or anything since I’d just gone to bed in my clothes the night before. I must have looked sloppy as hell, but at least I was decent.

The Captain led me to another room with a table, chairs, and a whiteboard. Noriko sat in one of the chairs, wearing a bleary expression and slouched over a steaming mug of coffee.

“Good morning, Noriko,” said the captain.

In an instant, the first mate was wide awake and on her feet. Everything about her face and posture was sharp, neat, and businesslike.

“Good morning, Captain.”

“Relax, Noriko. I’ll be briefing the new guy now, but you should finish your breakfast.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Noriko returned to her seat, sitting upright with raised chin and shoulders. She began to take her coffee in short, elegant sips. I couldn’t help noticing that her “breakfast” seemed to consist of nothing but that coffee.

“You too, Tanikawa. Sit. And take notes.”

“Uh, I don’t have a pen and paper.”

“Then take notes in your head.”

The captain approached the whiteboard, picked up a marker, and wrote her surname on the board.

“Do you recognize this name?”

“Yeah, Yamanaka as in the space pirate. Your sister told me.”

The captain looked annoyed, but nodded.

“Well, good then. That makes this a bit easier. Yes, it’s true. The five of us are indeed the daughters of the great spacefarer Yamanaka Hiro. And we, too, are spacefarers. We are a spacefaring family. Do you understand?”

“You don’t mean spacefaring as in piracy, right?”

“No. And don’t call my father a pirate.”

“But—”

She scowled.

“Yes, Captain.”

“Good. Now, six weeks ago, Yamanaka Touma, our older brother, went alone in our resource extraction vessel, the Cassandra, for a perfectly legal asteroid mining operation in interstellar space. Three days ago, we lost contact with him. We believe he suffered an equipment malfunction and was forced to make an emergency landing on an asteroid, and we believe we know which one. Our mission is to reach that asteroid and re-

trieve Touma, the Cassandra, and any resources he's extracted. Then we go home."

"How long is this gonna take?"

"It's hard to say. We're tracking the asteroid, but its path is unpredictable." She shrugged. "We'll get there when we get there."

"Understood. Well, if that's all—"

"Don't get up. Let's talk. What are you good at?"

"Uh..."

"Let me put this another way. What's your profession?"

"Well, I don't know about 'profession,' but, uh... sometimes I'm a part-time, uh, custodial engineer."

"A janitor."

"I wouldn't use that word."

"You clean things for a living."

"When I have to."

"Tanikawa, why are you being so evasive about this?"

"Evasive? Who's being evasive?"

"You are. Are you ashamed of being a janitor?"

"I'm not a janitor. I'm a gambler. I make money off of mahjong."

"Mahjong isn't useful to me. Besides, you're bad at it."

"How would you know that? You've never seen me play."

"You're running from gambling debts right now."

The captain put down her marker, walked to my side, and placed her hand firmly on my shoulder.

"Tanikawa-san, if cleaning is what you're good at then cleaning is what you're good at. That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"C-Captain..."

"Will you keep my ship clean?"

In that moment, Captain Yamanaka Hoshiko emanated an aura of pure leadership. She was like some divine father-god descended from the heavens to teach a suffering humanity how to live well. I felt rebuked, but not rejected. Uncertain, but hopeful. I wanted to do my best for her, for the ship, for the mission, and even for society.

“Yes, Captain!”

“Good. The aft toilet is backed up, start with that. Dust all flat surfaces in the ship, then sweep the deck, then swob the deck. Clean up any stains or other messes you see as you go. There are cleaning supplies in the closet across the passageway. You may go.”

The captain’s mystic aura vanished, and I was back in the briefing room of the Argive. I was annoyed to realize the woman had made a total sap of me.

“Oh.”

She rolled her eyes at my dejected state.

“It really is more helpful than you realize. We were sharing cleaning duty between us, but we’re always so busy. Noriko and I spend hours plotting out courses and plans, and Komori spends almost all her time manning the shipboard defense systems. Yukari is taking her high school entrance exam when we get back, and she needs to spend more time studying. And Miko is too frail for manual labor. Besides, most planet dwellers don’t have any skills that are useful on a spaceship. Even if you really were some kind of pro gambler, the cleaning would still be about all you could help with.”

“Oh. Yeah, sure. I guess so. Is that it then?”

“Um, what else? Ah, at meal times, a chime will ring. You already slept through breakfast, but you’ll know when lunch and dinner start. And as you clean, go from aft to forward. Once you’re done, you don’t need to come and bother me. Just do whatever until tomorrow, and then clean the ship like that once a day. Is everything clear?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. You may leave now.”

Well, what else is there to say? I got to work.

III

Yes, it's true. I concealed my part-time job from you. I was a janitor. The official job title was usually "custodian" or something like that, but a clogged toilet by any other name smells just as bad. By twenty-eight, I knew I should have either made my peace with it or worked to change it. But I couldn't do either.

To tell you the truth, my "job" aboard the ship was the only thing I didn't need any getting used to. It was what it was. I was more than halfway through the small spaceship – not counting doors with locks or keep out signs – by the time the lunch chime rang.

I'd passed through the dining area earlier, so I put my gear away, washed my hands, and found my way there. I paused when I stepped in. The captain, Noriko, and Miko were seated around a table that looked like it belonged in an ordinary household kitchen. Yukari bustled around the other three, apparently putting the finishing touches on a lunchtime ensemble she'd prepared.

"Tanikawa," said the captain, "What's the matter? You may come in."

"Oh, nothing's the matter. I'm just surprised. This looks like a family meal or something."

"This is my family. Of course we have family meals."

"Well, it looks good."

"Thanks," said Yukari, "There's a table for you in the corner, new guy."

There was indeed a TV tray with a folding chair in the farthest corner of the room. On it sat a small plate of something that seemed somehow greyer than what the sisters were having.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't mention it," said Yukari.

Yukari glared at the table, then nodded. She grabbed an extra plate of food and ran out of the room. Nobody said or did anything after that, so I grabbed a fork and poked at something on my plate.

“Tanikawa,” said the captain, “Aren’t you going to wait until Yukari sits down?”

“Huh? She walked out.”

“She’s only bringing Komori’s lunch. Don’t be rude.”

I dropped my fork. Again, nobody said or did anything.

“So, Komori? There’s a fifth sister?”

“Yes,” said the captain, “Like I told you this morning, she spends most of her time manning the shipboard defense system.”

“Komori-nee works very hard,” said Miko.

“Yeah, I really admire Komori,” said Noriko, “Most nights she stays up even later than the captain and I.”

That set the women to talking amongst themselves about their middle sister. I didn’t really care enough to pay attention. All I wanted was to finish eating, finish my work, and go to bed early. If I couldn’t sleep in past noon, going to bed before dinner was the next best thing. Eventually, Yukari did return.

In the space of a few minutes, I cleared off my plate and set it down in the scullery window. I made to leave.

“Ah, Tanikawa, wait,” said the captain.

“What?”

“Stay behind to do the dishes.”

“Huh?”

“Yukari made the meal, but you can’t expect her to do the dishes too now that you’re here. She has her studies to think about.”

“Onee-chan,” whined Yukari, “I can do the dishes. It’s fine, isn’t it?”

“No. You’re going back to your room and studying until dinner. You *will* get into a good school.”

“Onee-chan...”

Yukari glared at me.

“If he’s just going to stand there and stare at us while we eat, shouldn’t we get him a butler uniform? He’d be less creepy that way.”

“Oh, that could be a fun project,” said Miko, “I could make something like that. I’m sure Tanikawa-san needs some changes of clothing.”

“You can make what you like, Miko,” said the Captain, “But he has access to Touma’s clothes for now.”

“Touma’s clothes?!” asked Noriko, “Why?”

“Like I said yesterday, they’re about the same size.”

Noriko glared at me too.

Anyway, one by one, the sisters finished their lunches and left. As I was gathering the dishes off the table, Yukari came in and dropped off Komori’s plate. After a couple of trips, I had the dishwasher loaded up. Thankfully, the Argive was equipped with a fully modern twenty-second century dishwasher. All you have to do is load it and unload it, and the machine actually takes care of all the cleaning. Before I turned on the machine, I checked the tables to make sure I hadn’t missed anything.

Turns out, I had missed something. There was a mug sitting on the table. I went over to grab it and recoiled in disgust. The mug was white, but the inside was a dark, splotchy brown from countless old coffee stains. The stains were so thick they even seemed to have a different texture from the rest of the mug. For the life of me, I couldn’t understand why anyone would let a perfectly good mug get this bad when one good cycle through the dishwasher would blast it clean. I pinched the mug’s handle between two fingers, tossed it in the dishwasher, and started the cycle. It would take a few minutes for the dishes to be clean, so I stepped outside the scullery to get away from the heat of the dishwasher.

At long last, I had a few minutes to just stand around and slow down. I reached inside my jacket for my smokes. I wasn’t sure what the policy on smoking onboard the ship was, but experience told me it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission. My hand reached the pocket where I normally kept them, but my fingers closed around nothing.

“Oh, shoot.”

I'd had them out on the table during that last game of mahjong. They were probably still at the parlor. The next several days promised to be annoying. Well, even more annoying than things already had to be.

"Ah, Tanikawa?"

Noriko was poking her head into the dining room.

"What?"

"Did I leave my coffee cup behind? It's a plain white mug, have you seen it?"

"If you're talking about that thing with all the disgusting stains, it's in the dishwasher. You're welcome."

"What?! It's in the... Oh, you bastard!"

Noriko sprinted into the scullery just as the dishwasher dinged to indicate it was done. She all but tore the machine open and plunged her hands into the scalding steam to retrieve the mug.

"Ah, it's ruined! See what you've done? See what you've done, you dumbass?!"

Noriko showed me the inside of her mug as though it proved something. All I could see was pure, clean, white ceramic in there.

"I cleaned it. You're welcome."

Noriko was clearly trying to glare me into submission or something. Unfortunately for her, she didn't have her older sister's force of personality.

"You idiot! You don't know anything, do you? The coffee soaks into the cup and adds flavor to your drink for years to come. My brother got me this cup for my eighteenth birthday, and it's been soaking up flavor for six years! It'll take six years to get it back to the way it was! Do you understand?"

"You didn't wash that thing for six years?"

"Of course not!"

"That's disgusting."

Noriko clenched her fists and seethed in silence for several seconds.

"Whatever. Just finish cleaning up the ship, Janitor-san."

With that, she stormed out of the galley. Finally. I wasted no time in putting away the dishes. The faster I could get back to work, the faster this day would be over.

IV

I did finish cleaning up the ship, it didn't take long. I put away my gear and made straight for my quarters, but a voice in the passageway stopped me.

"Ah, Tanikawa-san, could you come in for a moment?"

I turned my head and saw an open door. On the other side of that door, Miko sat on a neatly made bed in a very lacy bedroom. She had knitting needles in her hands and was patiently making something with them. There was a thin, pink haze over everything in the room for some reason.

"Uh, sure."

I stepped inside Miko's room, and gravity forgot I existed. A single step sent me several feet into the air, followed by a slow descent.

"My apologies, do be careful with the low gravity."

"Oh. Is this a low gravity chamber?"

"Yes. I need to stay in here most of the day, for my health."

"Yeah, your sister said something about that."

Inside the room, I could see the walls were lined with shelves of cloth and thread.

"Are you the ship's tailor?"

"Not really. It's just that needlework is about all I can do all day, since I can take it in here."

"I see. If you don't mind me asking, what is your job here?"

"Hm. I guess you could say I'm the owner."

"Of the ship?"

"Yes. Onee-sama is the captain, of course, but once the mission is over she'll leave the ship and live her life. And I'll still be

here. Our parents bought the Argive for me, since I needed a low gravity chamber.”

“I see.”

“Tanikawa-san, I can see that curious look in your eye.”

“Sorry, I don’t mean to pry.”

“It’s fine. When our parents had me, they were in a situation similar to the one my Onii-sama finds himself in now. Stranded on an asteroid. Having been born in such low gravity, I can’t survive on a planet. I can handle the artificial gravity on a ship for a while, but I still need to rest in here.”

“Is that why...”

“I’m so tall? Yes. And I don’t know why my hair is white.”

“Sorry, I really don’t mean to pry.”

“It’s fine, Tanikawa-san.”

“Well, anyway, Yamanaka-san—”

“Miko is fine,” she laughed, “We’re all Yamanaka-san, it would be confusing if you didn’t use our given names.”

“Right, of course. So, Miko-san, what did you need me for?”

“I wanted to take your measurements. I thought I’d make you some changes of clothes.”

“Oh, um, thank you. But didn’t the captain say I had some already?”

“You don’t want to wear my Onii-sama’s clothes. I can tell it makes you uncomfortable.”

“Ah, Miko-san, don’t talk to me like that. It’s embarrassing.”

“My apologies. I should have said I don’t have anything else to do.”

“Uh, no, it’s fine, I—”

“And now I’m embarrassing you even more. My apologies, I really don’t know how to talk to people.”

I should mention that even though she said things like that, she kept the same serene smile on her face and the same gentle lilt in her voice the entire time. I never got the impression she was mocking me, but she didn’t seem flustered in the least.

“Miko, I would be very grateful for some changes of clothes. Please do take my measurements.”

“I’d be happy to.”

She set her half finished knitting project on the bed and stood up. She produced a measuring tape from her pocket and held it to my body at strange angles.

“So how was your first day?”

“Uh, all right, I guess? Noriko yelled at me for some reason.”

“Ah, she can be a bit short tempered at times.”

“You know she never washed that coffee cup of hers for six years?”

“Yes. And you washed it?”

“Yeah.”

“Noriko-nee has some bad habits,” she laughed, “But she’s a reliable person nonetheless.”

“I’ll take your work for it.”

“Say, Tanikawa.”

“Yeah?”

“This morning, when you and Onee-sama were bowing at each other, which one of you bowed first?”

“She did.”

“And you followed suit?”

“Well, I wasn’t sure what else to do.”

“And you refused to rise before she did?”

“I don’t think ‘refused’ is the right word. I just... well, I didn’t know what else to do.”

“I see.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“Not at all. I think you did something very kind.”

“Really? Well, I wasn’t trying to or anything.”

“Onee-sama has a strong sense of honor. If she bowed to you, she must have really felt she’d wronged you somehow.”

“She said something to that effect, but I don’t see how. It’s my own fault I’m working here, not hers.”

“Onee-sama has a very strong sense of honor, but she’s also very proud. She hates to feel lowered before others.”

“The captain seems like a great leader. She’s got no reason to feel lowered before me.”

“And you communicated that to her. That’s why I think you’re a kind person, Tanikawa-san.”

“Ah, no, that’s—”

“Is it fashionable on Earth to wear your jacket collar popped like that?”

“Huh? Oh, no, not really. It just felt appropriate for the mahjong parlor. I guess I should have put it down by now.”

“Did you get that from one of those old mahjong manga?”

“Huh? Well, I, uh...”

“Do you wish you were some sort of great gambler?”

“It would sure beat being a janitor.”

“It should be fine to keep your collar up. You just might get your chance to make a great gamble on this trip.”

“What do you mean? The mission seems pretty straightforward. Get to the asteroid, get your brother, and go home, right?”

“It should be, but... well, who knows what might happen, right?”

“Sure.”

She put away her measuring tape.

“I should have enough measurements to make clothes for you now. Was there anything else you wanted to ask about?”

“It seemed like you were doing most of the asking.”

“Is that so? Well, maybe.”

A voice from the doorway interrupted us.

“Miko, are you talking to the new guy?”

It was Yukari.

“Yes, but he was just going away. Come in, come in. Did you need anything?”

Yukari did not come in.

“No, I was just looking for Noriko. I had a question about my studies.”

“What’s the question?”

“No offense, but it’s not really the sort of question you can help me with, I think. I mean, well, Noriko went to college, you know?”

“Ah, that’s true. Well, don’t take up too much of her time. She’s probably busy, right?”

“Sure, I’ll be quick about it. She’s probably on the bridge. Bye.”

Yukari left. Miko sighed.

“Miko-san?”

“I’m kind of jealous of her.”

“Jealous?”

“If I’d been able to go to high school, I would have graduated last year.”

“I see. Well, high school wasn’t all that great.”

“And I wish I was better friends with her.”

“You’re not on good terms with Yukari?”

“We’re not on bad terms. We just don’t know each other very well. She was so young when Mother and Father died that she’s hardly ever been to space. And with my condition, I’ve spent almost my entire life in space. I keep waiting for her to drop by and talk to me, but... well, I guess to her I’m only one of four big sisters. But to me, she’s my only little sister, you know?”

“I guess that makes sense.”

Miko smiled.

“You look tired, Tanikawa-san. I’m guessing you wanted to go to bed early.”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

“Just a guess. Good night, Tanikawa-san.”

“I’ll see you.”

“I’ll keep my door open. Be sure to say hello when you pass my room.”

V

Life on a spaceship is weird. You just fall into a routine, you live from mealtime to mealtime to bedtime and the days just pass you by in a blur. I don’t think I could name anything specific

that happened for the next several days. There were no major messes to clean up, so I just dusted, swept, and mopped. That was my routine. Dust, sweep, mop. Eat lunch, do the dishes, go to bed. I didn't bother showing up for dinner or breakfast, and nobody bothered me for the dishes during those meals. I didn't have much in the way of conversation during those few days.

And then Yukari decided to bother me while I was working.

"I'm bored. Let me help you."

"I don't need help. Shouldn't you be studying?"

"I'm bored with studying. Onee-chan thinks the longer I stay cooped up in my room with some books the smarter I'll get, but I've already read them like a billion times. I need a break."

"What's something you've learned from them?"

Yukari recited some math formula that I didn't comprehend and cannot reproduce here.

"Well, that's pretty impressive for a middle schooler. But you really should get back to your studies."

"Opinion overruled. I outrank you, so don't oppose me."

"Does that count for anything in this situation?"

"Of course it does. Now what do you need help with?"

"Well..."

I knew I should have sent her away. But to tell you the truth, there was one thing that was bothering me, one point where my pride as a custodian and my back as a crotchety old man came into conflict and left me troubled.

"There's dust on the baseboard. I'd get it myself, but it hurts to stay crouched down that low. If you stay about three feet behind me and dust off the baseboard as you go, that would be helpful."

Yukari saluted.

"Understood."

Wasn't she just boasting about her rank?

She grabbed a rag off of the janitor cart and crouched down to the baseboard.

"Wow, you're right. I never realized this part of the wall could get dusty."

“Most people don’t.”

“Is this what you do all day?”

“Please. I’m a professional, this doesn’t take me all day.”

“So you slack off for most of the day?”

“Naturally.”

“Bastard.”

“Aren’t you slacking off right now?”

“No. I’m helping you clean.”

“But you should be studying.”

“That’s just what Onee-chan thinks. I deserve a real job on this ship.”

“Aren’t you the cook?”

“That’s only spaceship food. I just stick the pellets in the re-hydrator and food comes out. That doesn’t count.”

“I don’t get it. You’re complaining about not having to work?”

“You wouldn’t get it. You’re a slacker. It bothers me to see all my sisters working hard while I just stare at some book all day. Even Miko sometimes makes clothes, or patches up

Onee-chan’s uniform or something.”

“Oh, Miko. You should talk to her sometimes.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Uh, I don’t know. It just came to me for some reason.”

“Miko is scary.”

“Scary? Why?”

“She’s so tall.”

“I’m as tall as she is.”

“Yeah, but you’re fat.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut.

“I am not fat.”

“I mean, wide. Like a normal person. Ah, there’s a scuff mark on the wall here. Should I get it?”

“If you can.”

Yukari pressed her thumb into the wall and rubbed.

“Hey, Yukari.”

“What?”

“We’re about to reach the bridge.”

“What about it?”

“Your sister is probably in there.”

Yukari groaned. Then the door to the bridge opened.

“Indeed I was in there. Yukari, don’t bother this man while he works.”

The captain strode into the passageway, Noriko in tow. Noriko looked tired, but she visibly straightened up when she saw me and Yukari.

“But Onee-chan... I’m so bored.”

“That’s how it is on a spaceship. You shouldn’t have come if you can’t handle a little boredom.”

“But I want to help Onii-chan too.”

The captain smiled.

“Ah, Captain,” I interjected, “She wasn’t really bothering me or anything.”

The captain’s smile vanished.

“Then don’t distract my little sister from her studies. Yukari, hurry back to your room now.”

Yukari trudged away.

“Captain, aren’t you a little unreasonable with her?” I asked. The captain seemed genuinely confused when she looked at me.

“How so?”

“I mean, you can’t expect that she’ll get smarter just from locking herself up in a room with some books all day.” The captain frowned as she touched her chin.

“But that’s exactly what I expect. That’s how I used to study.” You may be surprised to learn that I didn’t do much studying when I was a kid. I was on unsteady ground here and I knew it.

“Uh, well, I don’t mean to question the importance of studying, but it seems as if... uh, maybe you treat her too much like a child?”

“She is a child. After all, she’s only...” The captain frowned as she trailed off. She blinked once, and then twice. “She’s going into high school next year. I see.”

The captain shook her head til her face cleared up. “Well, give the bridge a clean sweep, Tanikawa. I’ll see you.”

The captain left. Noriko followed, shooting me an upraised eyebrow as she went.

I did give the bridge a clean sweep. It took me longer than it should have because somebody – probably Noriko – had spilled coffee on one of the consoles.

VI

The next day, the captain interrupted me at a seemingly random point in the passageway.

“I knew it. Tanikawa, I’m disappointed in you.”

“Huh? What happened?”

“You walked right past the weapons control room just now.”

“Oh? Uh, did I? Um, I didn’t–”

“It’s that door right there.”

“Captain, there’s a keep out sign on that door.”

“Is there? So there is. I see.”

The captain pressed an intercom button.

“Komori, I have that janitor with me now.”

“Good, good. Send him in.”

“Komori, there’s a keep out sign in the door here. May he ignore it?”

“Of course, of course. If he’s got a job to do then it can’t be helped.”

“May I ignore it too?”

“Of course, of course. You are the captain, after all.”

The captain opened the door and walked in. I had to follow.

The weapons control room was dark, but in its center floated a huge, translucent sphere of light. The sphere of light showed a chaotic whirl of spaceships, missiles, laser beams, explosions, and debris. In the center of the sphere was a chair, spinning around as its occupant controlled it in order to blow up the enemy spacecraft. That occupant was a short but well proportioned young woman, dressed in a dirty, oversized t- shirt and basket-

ball shorts. On the floor there lay heaps of discarded junk food wrappers and energy drink cans.

“Janitor-san,” she said, “I’ve been waiting for you ever since you showed up. How come you haven’t cleaned this place up for me?”

“Uh, there’s a keep out sign on the door.”

“Is there?” she asked.

“That’s what I said,” said the captain.

“Did you tell him he could ignore that?”

“Of course.”

“Good, good. You can go now, Nee-chan.”

“Please continue to do your best, Komori,” said the captain as she left.

I stared open mouthed at Komori.

“What’s the matter? Start cleaning.”

“Aren’t you just playing video games?”

“Yeah.”

Just then, a yellow light blinked in the corner of the room, accompanied by the klaxon whine of an alarm. Komori grunted and made a hand gesture. The scene of the video game slid off to the side to be replaced with a far more realistic view of space. There were stars in the distance, but the scene was empty except for a small asteroid that seemed to be headed for the ship. Komori spun toward it and hit a button on her controller. There was an explosion, and the asteroid was deflected the other way. Without missing a beat, Komori made another hand gesture and went back to her game.

“It’s pretty much the same thing as defending the ship,” she said, “And if anything comes up I’m already right here.”

“Oh.”

“More importantly, hurry up and clean up. All this clutter makes it hard to focus.”

“Uh, sure. Just let me get my cart.”

I stepped out into the passageway. As I was grabbing my cart, Yukari came by.

“Tanikawa-san? What are you doing right now?”

“Cleaning up after your sister Komori, apparently.”

“Eh? Komori works really hard.”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

I pulled my cart into the weapons control room and started picking the things I would need. I wasn’t too sure about the nature of some of those tissues or bottles, so I put on some gloves and took out one of those sticks with the pincers for picking up trash. Then I opened up a trash bag and made my way toward the mess.

Then the intercom crackled to life.

“Komori-nee, can I study in here?”

“Sure,” called out Komori, “You don’t need to ask if you can come in here, Yukari.”

“There’s a keep out sign on the door. Can I ignore it?”

“Of course, of course. You’re my own little sister, after all.”

Yukari came in and picked out a clear spot on the floor. Then she flopped down with a textbook and a notebook and began quietly taking notes. And I set about filling up my trash bag. Time passed in relative silence. I filled up one trash bag and moved on to another. Yukari filled out one page and flipped to the next. And Komori got a level complete message before arriving at what was apparently level one hundred twenty- eight.

“Ah, crap,” grunted Komori.

She made the hand gesture and brought up the image of real space. Then she jumped down to the floor and approached me. Seeing Komori standing next to me, I could see just how short she really was. To look at her body, you could never in a million years mistake her for anything less than a grown woman. That said, she was a bit shorter than Yukari.

“Janitor-san,” she said, “I have to use the bathroom. Hop in the chair til I get back.”

“Huh? Is that okay?”

“Sure, sure. It’s just like playing a video game.”

“I could never afford one of these fancy VR spheres.”

“Eh, it’s probably still fine. I doubt if anything will happen.”

Yukari had looked up from her notes and was staring at us.

“Uh, what about Yukari?”

“No, no. Nee-chan would have my ears if I took Yukari from her studies for this. I usually call in Nee-chan or Noriko for these things, but I’ve really gotta go right now. Please?”

“All right, all right. How do I get in there?”

“Just step into the sphere and jump. You’ll land in the chair and the controller will float into your hands.”

I did as she told me and it worked how she said it would.

“Komori, are you sure about this?”

But Komori was already out the door.

I sat around for a while and not much happened. Yukari scribbled some notes. Some more asteroids drifted by. I figured out how to rotate the seat and move a little target symbol around the sphere. Then the alarm went off.

“Ah, Yukari-san.”

“What?”

“There’s a spaceship.”

“What?!”

She looked up from her notes and looked at the strange ship. It was like a cylinder that grew a bit narrow as it went up, or maybe like a cone with a flat top. It was made of a blue metal that reflected the pinpoints of distant stars in various shimmering hues, and all up and down its length ran a maze of green lights.

Yukari yelled and ran for another corner of the room, where she dug out another chair and controller. She tossed these into the sphere and leapt in after them. Moments after she was seated, there was an explosion between us and the strange craft.

“Huh? What was that?”

“I shot down a missile. Tanikawa-san, they’re shooting at us!” Sure enough, there were needles of light racing toward us. Yukari spun around me and shot them down while I struggled to get my target symbol into position. I think I might have managed to get one of them. You know, maybe.

“Intercom!” shouted Yukari, “The bridge! Onee-chan!”

I was starting to get the hang of shooting down the missiles when the captain’s voice crackled around us.

“Yukari? What’s the matter? Where are you?”

“Aliens! Onee-chan, it’s aliens! I’m in the weapons control room with Tanikawa!”

“Where’s Komori?”

“She went to the bathroom!”

“Eh? So she took a break without calling the bridge, and she left you and the janitor in charge? I’ll have her ears for this! Noriko, you have the bridge. Set the displays to visual and take evasive action!”

The world spun and dashed by us as the ship picked up speed and banked to the left. The alien vessel pursued us.

“Tanikawa, I’m gonna take out that ship. Handle the missiles!”

“Uh... I’ll do my best!”

Thankfully, when Yukari opened fire directly against the enemy, the barrage of missiles slowed as the aliens had to take evasive actions of their own. It didn’t hurt that she somehow still managed to hit more missiles than me even while she was doing that.

The door opened and the captain walked in, dragging Komori behind her by the ear. When the captain saw what Yukari was doing, she let go of Komori and stared. When Komori had finished rubbing her ear and grumbling, she stared too.

“Woah,” said Komori, “Yukari is amazing.”

“Yeah, and I’m not,” I said, “Komori-san, can we trade places?”

“Ah, yeah. Hop down.”

But even as I left the chair, an explosion lit up half the sphere.

“Evade that, you bastards!” yelled Yukari as the enemy vanished in a ball of bright orange plasma.

“Yukari,” said the captain, “Watch your language.”

“Ah, Onee-chan, look. I shot down the aliens!”

“Yes, I saw. Can you trade places with Komori now?”

Yukari frowned.

“Huh? But, Onee-chan, I did well, didn’t I?”

The captain thought for a moment. Then she smiled.

“Yes, you did. But we need to have a meeting with everyone. Intercom, get me the low gravity chamber. Miko, we’re going to have a mission briefing on the bridge, can you meet us there?”

“Yes, Onee-sama,” came Miko over the intercom.

Just then, a strange thought occurred to me.

“Captain,” I said, “I thought mission briefings happened in the briefing room.”

“That’s only during peacetime, Tanikawa” she said, “You’re about to see a whole different ship now.”

VII

“I believe most of us in this room are familiar with the fact that aliens exist,” said the captain once everyone but Komori was on the bridge.

Obviously, everyone but me nodded, and even Komori muttered her agreement over the intercom.

“The governments of the Solar System do not acknowledge the existence of intelligent alien life, but for those of us who venture to the fringes of human civilization and beyond, aliens are a fact of life. They are out there, and in every known encounter with them, they have been hostile to human life. Indeed, this particular species is known to myself and Noriko.”

Noriko cocked an eyebrow.

“Is it?”

“Look around you, Noriko. Don’t you recognize this region of space?”

“It could be familiar, but it could be any asteroid field.” The captain pressed some keys on a console, and an enhanced static image of the alien craft me and Yukari had fought was brought onto the screen.

“Do you recognize this type of ship?”

Noriko turned pale.

“Yes, Captain.”

The captain turned a meaningful glance at each of her sisters. "Those of you who need to know what I'm talking about will understand my meaning here. For those of you who don't need to know, it would only make you worried."

Again, everyone but me nodded. For my part, I began to worry.

"So, without further ado, the Argive is switching to wartime doctrine. Some of you will be taking on additional duties and irregular schedules. In particular, I want the main weapons control system manned at all times, and I want my operators well rested. Twelve hour shifts, on and off, main and backup. Yukari."

"Yeah?"

"Can you be the backup weapons operator? You'll sleep during the day and man the system at night. If we come under attack, you and Komori will operate the system together in dual user mode. Can you handle that?"

"Can I really? Is that okay?"

"You're ready for more responsibility, Yukari. You're not a little kid anymore."

"I can do it, Onee-chan."

"Good. And... Tanikawa."

"Huh? Me?"

"I'm going to attach the turret pods. If we come under attack, you're going to man the aft one. That means I need you awake most of the day. You've gotten into a strange habit of going to bed very early, but if you're asleep when the aliens come, we'll lose precious time. You are to stay up and ready after your cleaning duties are finished. You don't need more than eight hours of sleep a night. Is that clear?"

"Ah... yes, Captain."

"And Miko, can you take the forward turret? There's no artificial gravity in the turret pods, so it should be fine, right?" "Yes, Onee-sama. That should be fine."

"I'll have someone show the two of you how to operate the turrets later. And Noriko, one of us is to be on the bridge at all times. Twelve hours on, twelve hours off, just like the weapons

system. If we come under attack, we'll need an active pilot right away."

"Yes, Captain."

"In that case, everyone's wartime role is settled. Mealtimes will no longer be on a fixed schedule, instead you'll all be expected to rehydrate your own food when you can. Komori, that means getting your own meals from now on."

"Yes, Nee-chan," came Komori over the intercom, "That's a fair trade for twelve hours of sleep every night."

"Please don't actually use the full twelve hours just for sleeping. You'll start to smell bad."

"Fine."

VIII

I finished cleaning up the ship for the day, and I was passing through the bridge, the captain told me to get Noriko to show me how to use the turrets. Well, not like I had anything better to do. I was already up later than I'd gotten used to, and with nothing to keep me busy all I really wanted was a smoke.

Maybe it was that desire that caused me to pick up on a certain faint smell at Noriko's door.

"Noriko," I said, knocking, "Are you smoking in there?"

In an instant, the door opened and a hand darted out to yank me inside. Noriko slammed the door shut behind me and turned around to glare.

"How could you tell?"

"Uh, I could smell it."

Noriko looked at a little white box on the wall above her door. The box had a blinking red light.

"Ah, crap."

Noriko ran to her desk and dug through the drawers. When she drew out a canister, she ran back to the door and switched it

with a canister from the white box. The light on the box turned green, and a spritz of air freshener came out the bottom.

Noriko turned around to glare at me again. With a lit cigarette between her fingers, her hair let down, and dressed in shorts and a tank top, she made for a strange sight just then.

“What do you want, Tanikawa?”

Vaguely, I remembered the captain had sent me there for a reason. But consider my situation, it had been a week since I’d left my smokes behind on Earth, and I was looking right at a lit cigarette.

“Ah, Noriko-san, I’m a little surprised. You always seemed so, uh, serious, I didn’t think you’d – well, what I mean to say is, um, can I have one?”

“You smoke?”

“Yeah.”

Noriko reached into her desk and produced a pack.

“I’ll give you this if you keep quiet.”

I was about to take it, but something in Noriko’s face made me hesitate.

“Uh, I’d keep quiet either way, if you wanted me to.”

“Yeah, right. Guys like you don’t keep secrets for free.”

“Guys like me?”

“Just take it.”

Without looking at me, she pressed the pack of smokes into my hand.

“Thanks. Uh, why’s it such a secret anyway?”

“I don’t know. I picked up some bad habits during college. The captain knows, but... I don’t want my little sisters to find out. They’ll think I’m an unreliable person.”

“Huh. I can’t see any of them ever calling you unreliable.”
“There’s a lighter on the desk. You can take a chair if you want.”

I took advantage of the lighter and chair. I couldn’t help noticing an assortment of expensive looking coffee machines on the desk as well.

“I am a little surprised, though,” I said, “Caffeine, tobacco, all that’s missing is a fridge full of–”

Noriko appeared in front of me with a cold beer. I looked at her in astonishment, and a streak of red appeared across her cheeks.

“What?” she demanded.

“I didn’t think you had a fun side, Noriko.”

“I’m not trying to be fun or anything. It’s just... well, if I’m having a guest over, I should offer him a beer, right? Don’t take it if you don’t want it.”

“No, no, I’ll take it.”

She handed me the bottle, and then sat down on her bed with a beer of her own.

“Don’t smoke in your own room, you understand?” she said,

“It’s not safe. My room is the only space on the ship with a fume vent.”

“Oh, do I have to come here then?”

“You may come here, but only if I’m present and awake, and only if you knock first.”

“That’s a lot better than I was getting. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

For a while we just sat there, indulging our bad habits. And then I said something.

“So, aliens, huh?”

“Yeah. Aliens.”

“I didn’t think aliens were real.”

“Most people don’t.”

“But to you guys, these things are just normal, huh?”

“Not normal. Not these aliens.”

“The captain said you’d met these ones before.”

Noriko rolled her eyes.

“If you’re trying to get the story out of me, just ask for it.”

“Oh, so there’s a story, huh?”

She shot me a deadpan look.

“Ah, sorry, it’s hard to be blunt here,” I said, “I mean, the captain seemed to treat it like—”

“The captain doesn’t like to tell the story because she thinks she was weak when it happened. But we were only kids.”

Noriko took a long, long drag on her cigarette. I didn't say anything.

"You said you'd heard of our father. You've heard of his ship too, right? The Ilium."

"I think so, yeah."

"Do you know why we're on the Argive right now instead of the Ilium?"

"The Ilium crashed a couple years ago, right?"

"Crashed. Sure, you could say it crashed. Ten years ago. Right here in this very asteroid field."

"You don't think it crashed."

"Like I said, you could say it did. I was there. Me, and Hoshiko, and Touma. It was supposed to be a simple exploration voyage, so our parents took us along to show us how to work on a spaceship."

At some point, Noriko had drained her beer. She took a moment to lob the bottle into a small trash bin.

"Well, what's there to tell? The aliens ambushed us and crippled the ship. Our parents ordered as much of the crew onto the escape pods as could fit. Hoshiko and I didn't want to leave without Mother and Father, but they promised they'd come join us as soon as they could. And then Touma dragged us away."

Noriko took another drag.

"Our parents didn't join us. As soon as Touma hit the intercom to let them know which pod we were in, the ship ejected us. Father must have hit the button himself up on the bridge. There were already so many escape pods out in open space. And so many of them had already been shot down."

Noriko reached into her crumpled sheets and rummaged around til she pulled out an ashtray. She held it in one hand as she pressed the remaining nub of her cigarette into it.

"The last we saw of the Ilium, it fired up its booster rockets and launched itself forward, right into the enemy. Mother and Father rammed the alien mothership to cover the escape pods. There was an explosion, and then I didn't see the ship anymore."

She pulled another cigarette from her pack.

"A handful of pods made it back to the Solar System. Instead of going back to Earth right away, we docked on the Argive. Miko had to live here for her condition, you see. She was such a sickly child, but she was such an angel, too. She looked after us while we... figured things out. But that's got nothing to do with the aliens, so I guess you know the whole story now."

Noriko clicked her lighter. I stared at her.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"You didn't."

"Right, sorry. It's just... well, here you are probably trying to relax, and then I go and pry up something like that."

"It's fine. I was already thinking about it. It's more relaxing to talk about it than think about it, I think."

She didn't say anything more, and I just sort of watched her. She lounged in a languid position, and her face looked bored as she sat on the bed smoking.

That's when the intercom crackled to life.

"Noriko," came the captain's voice, "Has Tanikawa been to see you yet? He was supposed to ask you to show him how to use the turret pod."

Noriko's whole body stiffened, and she shot me a look that could have caused an ice age.

"Yes, Captain, he's been here. I told him I'd meet him there when I was ready. I'm getting dressed now."

"Okay. Just checking."

Noriko pointed at the door like she was trying to shoot lightning at it, and I scrambled out of the room. I went aft at a speed-walk, hoping I'd know the turret pod when I saw it. On my way there, Miko stopped me.

"Tanikawa-san, do you have a moment?"

"I'm in a bit of a hurry, Miko. What is it?"

"We can talk more in detail later, but I was thinking that if you're going to be fighting with us, you should know more about the aliens. I think it's important to know what this means to us."

"Oh, that's fine. I've already been filled in."

Miko blinked.

“Really? Was it Noriko?”

“Yeah. How’d you guess?”

Miko smiled.

“Who knows? Intuition, maybe? Anyway, do your best, Tanikawa-san.”

I did find the turret pod, and a little while later Noriko showed up in a huff. She showed me how to aim the turret and had me shoot at some asteroids. She explained how the turret pods were just escape pods with guns bolted to them, and warned that she would personally tear off both my ears if I ever pressed the big red eject button. Then she climbed out of the pod without saying goodbye, and I assume she went to bed since she was now the night shift pilot.

I hung around in the turret pod for a while after that.

IX

I woke up to the sound of my name over the intercom.

“Tanikawa? Where did he go? He’s not in his room.”

“Huh? Ah, I’m in the aft turret pod.”

“Were you napping in the turret pod?” asked the captain.

“Uh, I guess so.”

“Even though I told you— ugh, never mind. You’re there. Stay put.”

“Captain? Are we under attack?”

“No, but we will be. If you’d been awake five minutes ago, you would have heard me announce that we’re closing in on my brother’s position. The area is swarming with enemy vessels. We’ll have to dash in, extract Touma, and get out of here as fast as possible. It’s your job to help keep the enemy off our tail, is that clear?”

“Oh, I see, I see? Is that all? Haha, okay—”

“Please keep the nervous babbling to a minimum,” said the captain, “We’re all coordinating over this channel.”

"Heh, Janitor-san sounds scared," said Komori.

"I'm scared," said the captain, "You should be too."

"Geez, I know that, Nee-chan," said Komori, "But you don't have to sound like it."

"Ah, I see them!" shouted Yukari.

"Open fire," said the captain.

Loud noises sounded from within the ship. Outside the ship, I couldn't see or hear anything. Space was full of darkness, silence, and asteroids. Then the ship banked to the left, and I saw a bright needle go flying by. The turret controls felt hot under my grip. Finally, I saw a grey and green cone with a flat top. My arms spasmed and jerked the turret straight at it as soon as I saw it, but before I could press the trigger, a shot from the main weapons battery hit the enemy vessel and blew it up.

"Onee-chan, I got it!" said Yukari.

"No, I got it," said Komori.

"Focus," said the captain, "We're fast and we've got a lot of guns, but we're dead if they catch us off guard."

"Onee-sama," said Miko, "I think I see the asteroid."

"Noriko, analyze it," said the captain.

"Yes, Captain, that's the one," said Noriko, "Or at least, that's where Touma's distress beacon is coming from. Still, if he's here I can't see why the aliens are leaving him al- Ah, Captain, a weapon is being fired from the asteroid, I think it's an excavation laser. It's hitting enemy vessels. Captain, Touma is alive down there!"

"Of course he is. He's our own brother, after all. Pinpoint where that laser is coming from, it's probably the entrance to whatever cave he's holed up in. I'm taking us in."

The captain must have plunged the ship into a full blown sea of enemies, because all of the sudden I saw a whole lot of them.

"Ah, crap, crap, crap, crap," I muttered as I sprayed laser bolts all but randomly. There were a few explosions out there, so I must have hit something.

"Geez, Janitor-san, that's no good," said Komori, "Your aim is all sloppy."

The main weapons battery launched a barrage of fire behind us, to much greater effect than my own shooting.

“Tanikawa-san, take your time and aim properly,” said Miko, “I think it’s better to take fewer shots if it means you’re actually hitting targets.”

I imagined Miko calmly, cheerfully, and methodically blowing up hordes of aliens from the forward turret. Then I realized that’s probably exactly what she was doing.

“There are limits to that, so don’t freeze up back there,” said the captain, “Aft gunner is going to get more important as we get closer to the asteroid.”

With the initial shock of seeing a swarm of alien spacecraft worn off, I was able to take Miko’s advice and actually aim. Yukari and Komori were taking out enemy vessels left and right, but they had the entire ship to worry about. For the space behind us, I was supposed to be taking more of the pressure off of them. So I tried my best.

It’s a little hard to describe what it was actually like. I would take aim at a ship, press the trigger, then take aim again. It was strange just how silent the battle was. I’d hear a quiet click from the trigger, then a muted electrical noise from below me, and then no sound at all as an enemy vessel exploded in the distance. Pretty soon, I stopped feeling so nervous and began to feel like I was in a dream. The events around me felt strange and disjointed, and it was like my brain couldn’t make the connection between the danger I was in and the bright needles that flew past the Argive as it bobbed and weaved through the asteroid field.

Then there was an enemy spacecraft within ten feet of me. It was a small vessel and it came up suddenly from below and I yelled in surprise and mashed the trigger. My sense of reality returned as I saw the debris of the small craft drifting away.

“Onee-sama!” came Miko’s voice, “Something hit the forward turret pod. The gun won’t work. I... I think I’m hurt.”

“How hurt?” asked the captain, “Do you need help?”

“There’s blood, Onee-sama. It’s floating around like bubbles.”

“I asked you if you need help. Say yes or no.”

“No, no. That’s too much trouble. I feel fine, I’m just a bit cold.”

“Noriko, get her out of there. There’s a medical pod in the low gravity chamber, right?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Good. Get her in it and then see if you can get that turret working.”

“It’s fine, Onee-sama. You need Noriko on the bridge. I’m sure there’s a first aid kit—”

“Shut up.”

“You sound harsh. Do I really sound that bad?”

“Just shut up, Miko.”

There was a nerve-wracking silence over the net. I focused on firing. Was it just coincidence, or had Miko’s pod been targeted at the same time as mine? The rate of fire from the main weapons battery seemed to increase. My eyes kept scanning the perimeter of my viewshield to check for anyone else getting too close.

“Captain,” came Noriko, “I’m in the forward turret pod. Miko is unconscious, but breathing. There’s a cut on her forehead, but it doesn’t look like she could have passed out from blood loss or head trauma. I think she just fainted.”

“Get her in the medical pod anyway,” said the captain, “Better safe than sorry.”

“Understood.”

“Geez, what’s Miko think she’s doing, making us all worry like that?” said Komori, “Just a little cut.”

“No, I don’t blame her. The area ahead of us is total chaos. It must be really scary in the forward turret,” said Yukari, “Miko must be really brave to go down there at all.”

I didn’t hear anything for a while after that until Noriko returned to the forward turret.

“Captain, Miko is sound asleep in a medical pod. I’m troubleshooting the turret now.”

I imagined Noriko in a pod just like mine, but with even more danger whirling around in all directions, and unable even to shoot at anything.

“Noriko, watch out for small craft up there,” I said.

“Hm?” she asked.

“One got pretty close to me a while ago. It was kind of scary.”

“I’m busy, Tanikawa.”

“Yukari,” said the captain, “Keep an eye out for small craft. They can be easy to overlook, but if one sneaks up close enough we’ll be in trouble.”

“Hey, why not ask me to do that?” asked Komori, “I’m a good shot.”

“Division of labor. You keep blowing up the big ones,” said the captain.

I still felt a bit uneasy for some reason, but the captain’s next announcement calmed my fears.

“ETA to the asteroid, five minutes. Location of the cave is pinpointed. Once we get inside, the enemy will most likely abandon pursuit.”

Five minutes. Just five more minutes. Five minutes, and then... well, I didn’t know what would come next, but it would be a break from all this at least.

“Yukari, what did the captain just tell you? There’s a small craft getting right up close to me,” came Noriko.

“What? I’m looking up there right now. There’s nothing there.”

“It’s right there. It’s got some kind of pincers on the front.”

“It could have some kind of cloaking technology,” said Komori, “If that’s the case, you’d only see it from the turrets.”

“I don’t see it on my sensors either,” said the captain, “Noriko, get out of there now.”

Then there was a loud grinding sound that I heard as much from the ship itself as from the net.

“Noriko! What happened?” asked the captain, “The turret pod is partly broken off!”

“Would that be why the exit hatch closed shut?”

The captain hesitated before answering.

“Yes. That hatch will snap shut when there’s vacuum on the other side of it. What happened?”

“The small craft. It’s got a grip on the pod. It’s trying to tear me off the ship. Captain, what do I do?”

“Eject.”

“Captain? What?”

“You can’t climb through vacuum, and the main weapons battery can’t fire at what it can’t see. If the pod is torn off while it’s still attached, we’ll be crippled.”

“What? Hey, this is crazy,” said Komori, “What would aliens want to kidnap Noriko for?”

“What if I just took a shot in the dark?” asked Yukari, “I could maybe shoot near the turret, or, no, I might hit Noriko. Uh…”

“Uh, wait, um,” came my voice for some reason, “Aren’t we almost at the asteroid? Maybe the pod will hold out til we get there?”

“Noriko, you have to eject,” said the captain, “You know there’s no time.”

Noriko’s reply came in a whisper.

“Onee-chan…”

“Come back alive, Noriko. That’s an order.”

And then, a robotic voice over the net.

“Forward escape pod ejected.”

“Yukari, where’s that pod going?” asked the captain, “Don’t lose track of it.”

“I think it’s going to the enemy mothership. It’s headed aft.”

“Good. Tanikawa, you’ll see the enemy craft when it gets behind us. As soon as you see it, destroy it. Noriko should be able to pilot the pod into our cargo bay.”

“Huh? Captain, that’ll be an awfully close shot. What if I hit Noriko?”

“You might, but you won’t.”

“How can you possibly know that?!”

“It’s simple. You won’t hit my little sister because I’ll kill you if you do.”

I don’t know if she thought that would motivate me, but the cold iron in her voice only made my hands tremble.

“Captain, can’t someone else come back here and take the shot?”

“No. By the time anyone else gets there, they’ll be too far away for us to safely fire. It has to be fast, so it has to be you.”

“Tanikawa, you’ll see it on your left in a couple seconds,” said Yukari, “Be ready!”

I yelled something inarticulate as I swung the turret all the way to the left. Sure enough, I saw it a moment later. Noriko’s pod came up on my left, and for a few moments, we could clearly see each other. Noriko looked at my gun pointed at her and shook her head frantically. I understood why.

“Captain, I can’t take the shot!” I said, “The enemy is using Noriko as a shield, it’s keeping her pointed straight at me at all times.”

“Shit!” said the captain, “There’s nothing we can do then. We’ll have to figure something out later. Or hope she can escape on her own.”

“What the hell do they even want with her?” demanded Komori.

“I don’t know. Aliens have never bothered talking with humans. I have no idea what they want to do to her,” said the captain.

So there I was, stuck in a cramped turret pod, watching my only smoking buddy get dragged off by aliens for unknowable purposes. I had an idea. I knew it was a dumb idea, but consider my situation. Noriko’s room was the only place on the ship with a fume vent, and I had no idea if I’d be allowed in there without her around.

I hit the eject button.

“Aft escape pod: ejection overridden by bridge,” said the robotic voice of the ship, “To eject anyway, press the eject button again.”

“Tanikawa, what do you think you’re doing?” asked the captain.

“I could get closer,” I said, “I could get on the other side of them, get behind the enemy craft and blow it up without hitting

Noriko.”

“That’s an insane gamble,” she said, “And you’re a terrible gambler.”

“There’s no such thing as a good or a bad gambler,” I said, “Sometimes you’re lucky, and sometimes you’re not.”

“Can you even pilot that thing?”

“There’s a joystick looking thing under the turret controls. How hard can it be?”

“You are the worst kind of hypocrite,” said the captain, “You spend all your time trying to present yourself like you’re lazy and cowardly, and then on the spur of the moment you suddenly want to do something crazy like this. I can’t stop you from hitting eject again, but if you do, you come back with my sister or you don’t come back. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“You’ll be good friends with my brother. You’re just like him.”

I hit the eject button.

X

There was a loud click, and then the Argive began to speed away behind me. I grabbed the joystick and jammed it forward as hard as I could. The enemy small craft and Noriko were just landing in the hangar bay of a huge, flat topped cone. The doors were closing, but the aft turret pod managed to catch up in time. In fact, I not only caught up, but zipped right past them and unceremoniously crashed into the floor. When the airbags had finished pummeling me, the exit hatch popped open. I took that to mean there was breathable air outside and pulled myself out of the pod.

Scattered around the hangar bay was a score of tall, thin humanoids, dressed in full bodysuits with opaque helmets. Over by the forward turret pod, four of them were holding Noriko by the arms.

Every single one of the aliens was staring right at me. What the hell was I supposed to do? I tried to run toward Noriko.

“Tanikawa!” she yelled, “The low gravity! You can’t just—”

Unfortunately, she’d spoken far too late. The hangar bay was about as low gravity as Miko’s room. My first step, intended to be for a hard sprint, turned into a long jump. I crashed into her and carried her way to the other side of the hangar. A pair of metal objects clattered on the floor next to us.

“Huh,” I said, “Those look like laser guns.”

And then laser bolts started flying over our heads.

“You dumbass,” said Noriko as she grabbed my wrist and dragged me behind something like a metal shipping container. Then she reached out from behind our cover and grabbed the laser guns. She handed one to me.

“Noriko, I don’t know how to use one of these.”

“What do you mean you don’t know how to use a laser gun?”

“They’re illegal in Japan.”

“So what? Aren’t you supposed to be some kind of scumbag?”

“Well that’s a bit rude. I mean, maybe, but I’m not the cool kind of scumbag.”

“Geez, you’re hopeless. I’ll make you practice with some of my guns when we get back to Earth.”

“Ah, that sounds nice. I’d like to hang out with you after all this is over.”

“N-no, no, no. I’m not inviting you to hang out, it’s just that you need some experience on the range. You’ll get into shootouts fairly often with this crew.”

“Am I staying on with the crew after this?”

“Are you not?!”

A laser bolt hit the wall behind us way too close for comfort, and we were reminded of the aliens currently laying down a barrage of suppressive fire against us.

“Well, maybe now’s not the time for career decisions,” I said,

“Anyway, how do we get out of this?”

“I don’t know,” groaned Noriko, “If the captain were here she’d think of something, but...”

“Noriko, aren’t you the first mate?”

“Yeah. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“That means that when the captain isn’t here, you’re the one who knows what to do, right?”

“Wh- huh?!”

“I mean, if you believe in the captain, and the captain believes in you, shouldn’t you believe in yourself?”

“Aren’t you misquoting some old anime?”

“Uh, maybe? I’m not sure.”

“Geez. You can’t even say you’re the one who believes in me.”

“But Noriko, I do believe in you.”

Noriko turned bright red.

“I think you’re a reliable person,” I said.

“Don’t say something like that so earnestly when we’re—”

An alien appeared around the corner of the container. Noriko shot it and cursed.

“I can’t think of anything,” she said, “We’ll have to surrender.”

She kicked the shipping container in frustration. The huge metal box shifted as though it were made of cardboard. Her eyes widened.

“The low gravity,” she said, “Or low to us, anyway. To them, this is just normal gravity. These aliens must be frail.”

“You’re on to something?”

“Obviously. Put your hands on the box. When I say go, push as hard as you can.”

I put my hands on the container. She did too.

“Ready... Go!”

Together, we thrust the container out into the hangar. There were a lot of sounds like snapping twigs, and then we were exposed.

“Okay,” I said, “What now?”

“Uh...”

Without explaining anything, she grabbed my hand and jumped forward. In the low gravity, she dragged me with one hand easily while blasting aliens with the other. Next thing I

knew, we were diving into the aft turret pod. Noriko grabbed the joystick and we began to rise.

“Tanikawa, blast the doors!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I aimed the turret and pressed the trigger. And then we were free.

Space was oddly peaceful as we flew through it. The Argive had made it inside the asteroid and was nowhere to be seen. The enemy fleet had stopped firing and begun to retreat. I couldn’t tell you why, but I sure couldn’t complain either. Noriko didn’t say anything for a while as she flew us toward the asteroid. And then:

“Tanikawa.”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“Ah, no, no. I would have gotten blasted back there without you.”

“Shut up. I’d still be trapped there without you. Why would you come after me like that?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just... wanted you back.”

“Geez. How can you say something so embarrassing?”

“Well, you know, I wanted you to stick around for, uh, the fume vent. I don’t think I could smoke in your room anymore if you were gone.”

“Tanikawa.”

“Yeah?”

“I hope you stay with the crew.”

“I might.”

She smiled.

“Dumbass.”

“Huh? What was that for?”

“Idiot. Stupid janitor.”

I didn’t know why she was saying that, and I didn’t know why she was smiling as she said it. We didn’t say anything else til we pulled into the asteroid cave and landed. The exit hatch sprang

open, so we figured there must have been atmosphere generators set up.

As soon as we stepped out, the captain stormed straight over to us, dragging along a man I'd never seen before by the ear.

"There she is! Look, there she is, Touma! There's our precious little sister, who was in danger because you wanted to go exploring in a place you knew was swarming with aliens! Apologize! Apologize to Noriko right now!"

"Ah, sorry. Sorry about all that, Noriko. I'm glad you're all right."

Noriko's eyes lit up.

"Onii-chan! I—"

For some reason, Noriko cut herself off and cast a strange glance in my direction. Then she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and smiled professionally.

"I'm glad you're all right, too, Touma."

Touma looked at me, and then back at Noriko.

"Noriko, who's this guy? Is he your boyfriend or something?"

Instantly, Noriko grabbed him by the other ear and yelled something incoherent.

"Ow, ow, ow. Noriko, aren't you being a little too defensive? I was only joking, you know."

"Captain! Have you made him apologize to Miko yet? She bumped her head on the way here, remember?"

"Ah, good idea, good idea, Noriko. Let's take him to her right now. Right now!"

The two sisters dragged their brother by the ears toward the Argive. Miko stepped up from behind me with a band aid on her forehead.

"Ah, where are they taking Onii-sama?" she asked, "I wanted to talk to him."

"They're taking him to see you."

"Oh dear, there must be some sort of misunderstanding. I'd better go clear it up."

"Good luck. They seem mad at him."

“Before I go, I want to ask. How was your first mission with our crew, Tanikawa-san?”

“You’re asking me that?”

“Of course.”

“Well, it wasn’t so bad. The work isn’t too hard, and I think I can get along with everyone.”

“Tanikawa!” came a yell from the captain, “Are you messing with us?”

The captain and Noriko burst out of the Argive, still dragging Touma by the ears.

“You knew we were looking for Miko, and you didn’t send her after us?”

The captain let go of her brother.

“I’ll have your ears for this!”

Miko patted my shoulder.

“Congratulations, Tanikawa-san.”

“Huh? What on Earth are you congratulating me for?”

“You’re part of the crew now.”

The Bronze Sorcerer

by /a/non

It must have been his imagination. Noises were rare along this stretch of the Tin Road. Even the high wheeling hawks, normally so quick to sing of their pride, had not cried out all day. To the man trudging down the road, there seemed to be no breathing thing within ten leagues, save for himself and the hawks. The few stunted trees that spotted the rocky plain appeared to cringe as if they too had heard the tales of shadow spirits haunting this part of the land, and cowered in fear.

The traveller heard the sound again, a muffled shout, perhaps. He had not imagined it before. He raised his head and squinted into the glare of the setting sun. The burning brightness obscured the landscape ahead, but a dark smudge of dust floated on the horizon, no bigger than the man's thumb. Another sound rang out, with the high pitch of a woman's scream. The man broke into a jog.

The sun had half sunk below the horizon by the time he approached the source of the noises. Half a dozen corpses sprawled in patches of dark mud, where their blood had mixed with road dust. Four of them were large bare-chested men, eunuchs raised on growth nectar to make them strong and stupid. The wooden litter they had been carrying lay broken on the ground next to them. A fifth man lay clutching a bloodied spear, face down, his tall hide shield partly covering his head, as if to hide the shame of his failure. An unarmed middle-aged man lay pierced by arrows a few paces beyond, his shaven scalp as smooth and lifeless as stone, the silver streaks in his beard stained black once more with dried blood.

A seventh corpse lay in a heap against the base of a wizened tree less than a stone's throw away. No sign of the woman. No

sign of any pack animals either. Few would be foolish enough to travel this far into the wilderness without adequate supplies. The traveller sighed. He was one such fool. The Tin Road was seldom travelled these days, and it had been a week since he left last human settlement. The tin merchants who had given the road its name no longer used this route, having found new sources of the metal a generation ago.

As the traveller approached the tree, he saw that not one, but two bodies lay beneath it, on top of each other. The blood-encrusted tip of a blade jutted from the back of the man on top. As the traveller rolled the body over and onto the ground, the swordsman underneath let out a long low groan. Not a corpse then. Not far from it, though. The man's face seemed drained of life already, a fresh dribble of blood running down his chin to join the pool that soaked his padded linen shirt.

The man's eyes flickered up and met the traveller's. He opened his mouth to speak, but did not have the breath. His eyes were desperate, begging this stranger to understand his wordless plea. He died without making a further sound, staring at a point behind the traveller's head.

This whole mess smelled of trouble. The bandits who had attacked this party had not been scared off by the two armed guards. And for what? The woman? A rich one, to be borne in a litter. For ransom, then. They were lucky to have found such a prize on this deserted road. Too lucky.

Good sense was telling him to keep walking. The next city was at least another day's walk from here. He hefted the half full water-skin tied at his belt, his last one. He would be thirsty when he arrived, if he could not find any fresh water before then. Hungry too. And penniless.

The traveller looked around. Another corpse had fallen behind a rock that hid it from the road. A second dead bandit, judging by his ragged brown cloak. A trail of dark spots in the dust led away to the north. More blood? He crouched down and examined the trail in the fading light. Footprints and hoofprints too, not from a horse, but a donkey or mule.

The traveller returned to the spearman who had fallen sprawled out on the road.

“Excuse me, my friend,” murmured the traveller as he took the spear and shield from the young man’s slack grip. “I need these to finish what you started.” The traveller had his own sword, the blade only a cubit long but made of good bronze and sharp as the night wind. If there was more blood to be shed, however, a spear and shield might stop that blood from being his own.

The sun had almost hidden its face completely by now, but there was enough of a twilight glow that the traveller had little trouble following the trail of blood off among the crags and boulders. He kept up a swift pace, trying to gain ground before the sun’s fading light disappeared altogether. It was almost too dark to see the tracks when he heard another scream, not a woman’s this time, but the cry of a wounded beast. Shouting followed, and the traveller followed the noise until he could make out the words.

“Of course it did! I’ve damn near broken my own leg a dozen times in the last hour, it’s as black as Khaed’s arse out here. Let’s butcher the donkey and camp here, and at least we can eat some meat tonight.”

“Shut your steaming maw, Khenek, or by Gamat’s seventh tit I’ll finish you off. If it wasn’t for your hobbling we’d be at the meeting point by now.”

Khenek did not reply.

The traveller took advantage of the still-braying donkey’s cries to creep closer until only a single large boulder and a dozen strides of broken ground lay between him and the bandits.

“How’s the whore? Is she hurt?” The second man barked again. He seemed to be the leader.

A third man spoke up. “Bruised perhaps, but not bad. Not enough to knock the spirit out of her,” he chuckled.

“Good,” grunted the leader. “She walks. Untie her legs, and mind she doesn’t kick you in the balls. We don’t need another

straggler. Khenek, find some brush to make a torch. Atum, put that beast out of its misery, it's giving me a headache."

A fourth man grunted an acknowledgement. He must be Atum.

"And see if there's anything worth taking from the packs. No more than you can carry, though. Myl will have his hands full with the girl, and Khenek is too slow already."

The traveller heard Khenek limp off in search of fuel and knew that his chance had come. Mouthing a prayer to his grandfather's spirit to guide his feet, he rounded the boulder and started to sprint. On his first stride, he took in the situation and raised his spear arm. Atum, crouching by the wounded donkey, his knife at its neck. The girl lying on the ground with Myl bent over her, working at the rope that bound her legs. The leader, water-skin raised to his mouth mid-swallow, eyes bulging at the shadowy figure charging towards him. On his second stride, the traveller hurled his spear at the leader. This close, it was impossible to miss. Water sprayed from his mouth as the spear drove into his gut, knocking the wind from him and sending out a matching spray of blood where it pierced him.

It took two more strides for the traveller to draw his sword. Atum was looking up now and let out a wordless yell as the traveller bore down on him. His grandfather's spirit must have smiled on him that night, as the traveller flew over the loose rocks where the donkey had foundered only minutes before. By the time Atum was standing upright he scarcely had a moment to blink before the traveller barrelled into him, sword driving into his chest and shield knocking him back, sending him tumbling over the donkey.

The traveller rounded on Myl, who was trying to lift the girl up by her hair so he could hold his sword to her throat.

"Don't come any—", he began, but was stopped as the traveller thrust his sword into Myl's neck. He gurgled and dropped the girl, who let out an outraged grunt.

The traveller was breathing heavily as he looked around. No sign of Khenek. Perhaps he was wise enough to flee instead of

trying to avenge his comrades.

He walked back to where the donkey still lay braying, and drove his sword into its heart. As the donkey's cries faded, the traveller squatted down on his haunches and sighed. "Peace," he said, "at last."

At this, the girl squirmed again and made a noise, unable to form words through her gag. The traveller sighed again and walked over to undo the girl's bonds. Before cutting the ropes, he paused for a moment.

"I trust you will not do anything foolish with your newfound freedom?" he asked.

The girl nodded enthusiastically, then caught herself, a confused look on her face, and started to shake her head.

The traveller untied her gag and started sawing at the ropes with his blade.

"Of course I won't do anything foolish," she said, "not since you just saved me. Even if you hadn't, I wouldn't, I mean..."

The girl trailed off as the traveller helped her to her feet. She was slenderly built and not tall. Her long, straight hair had mostly pulled free of her braid, and fell almost to the small of her narrow back.

"What is your name?" she asked as she brushed dust from her silken travelling dress.

He shrugged, "I have none."

"Then what do people call you?" Her soft eyes could have been any colour, but appeared grey in the moonlight.

"They do not call me."

"Then I shall call you Trouble, since you came when none called you," she laughed.

Trouble frowned.

"You are right, that is an ill name," she grimaced. "You rescued me from trouble after all."

"No, it suits me well," said Trouble, who had crouched down again and had begun to rummage through the baggage still tied to the fallen donkey. "And I shall call you Pheasant, since you were caught in a trap and will not cease your noise-making."

“But my name is Hyrste,” she cried.

“Be still, Pheasant,” said Trouble as he handed her a small canvas sack full of bread. “Hold this, and eat if you will. We will not rest again until dawn.”

“What?”

“You are rich, are you not? Or your father is?”

“He rules the city.”

“And he will be happy to see you back safe?”

“I-I’m sure he will be.”

“Good. Then we had best not keep him waiting.” He tossed her another bundle, this one a pair of water skins bound together.

“But it’s dark,” she stammered.

“As Khaed’s arse, as our friend Khenek would say. And if he has any more friends, we do not want them to find us in the light.” Trouble had finished going through the baggage and was tugging at the cloak that was still wrapped around Atum’s corpse.

“Here.” He wrested the cloak free and tossed it to Hyrste. “You’ll want this.”

She stumbled forward as she tried to catch the cloak without dropping either of the bundles and then gave a little gasp as she felt the still-warm blood dripping from the cloak. Trouble took the bread and water from her as she fumbled with the cloak and pushed them into his own pack. He scanned the horizon one more time, seeing nothing but the silhouettes of tall rocks or the odd tree against the shimmering spray of stars that was now strewn across the depthless sea of the night sky.

“It’s time to go.”

* * *

It was past noon the next day before they reached the outlying houses that clustered around the walls of the city of Mour. Hyrste’s stream of complaints about her scraped shins and bruised feet had dried up sometime during the night, but the sight of the bustling city gates buoyed her spirits enough to resume the flow.

"I swear I shall not leave the bathhouse for a week," she was saying. "I'll have Renne rub my left foot and Maeran rub my right. Or should I have Renne rub my feet and—"

"Princess!" One of the gate guards was approaching them. "Princess Hyrste, is that you?"

"It is, loyal guardsman," she replied in a suddenly strong voice. "On behalf of our city, I thank you for your diligence in protecting us all. What is your name?"

"Toumar, my lady." The guardsman visibly swelled with pride.

"Would you grant me a favour, Toumar?" the princess continued.

"Anything."

"Will you fetch for us a litter, please? My friend and I have been walking all night."

"Certainly, my lady. Come, let me clear the way for you." He turned around and bellowed, "Make way for the princess!" as he led them through the crowded gate.

"You are well-loved, Pheasant," said Trouble. "Perhaps I should call you Nightingale instead for your pretty words."

"We are blessed with a pious and loyal people, here in Mour," she said warmly, smiling at those from the crowd who had stopped to wave and shout.

"And with a kind and beautiful princess who cares for her people," Toumar interjected. "She worked tirelessly in the temple of healing last summer after those Neldean dogs tried to throw down our walls. My cousin swears it was your touch that saved his leg from festering."

"You practise the healing arts?" asked Trouble.

"Nothing so difficult as that," replied Hyrste. "I merely do what all mothers know. Feeding, bathing, changing—sick men need these just as much as babes do. Holy Khaed does the rest, working through his priests."

"Or despite them," Toumar muttered, then turned away to growl instructions at a scrawny errand boy who was slouching near the gate.

Hyrste collapsed gratefully into the thinly padded litter when it arrived. Trouble refused the offer. Tired as he was, he was not so weak that other men should carry him. He walked alongside the litter as they made their way up the crowded streets towards the palace.

“I’m not a mother, you know,” Hyrste said suddenly.

Trouble raised an eyebrow.

“What I said before about bathing and changing. I didn’t want you to think...I mean I’ve never had a babe of my own, only I used to help the nurse maids with my brother when he was born. She died giving birth to him, my mother did.” Hyrste smiled at Trouble, but her eyes were starting to well with tears. “I wanted to be a mother to him, since he had none. I was only ten at the time. Father loved him too, more than anything in the world.” Hyrste was no longer looking at Trouble, but was staring at the skyline ahead where the pale gleaming tops of the palace towers had just come into view. “A fever took him before he spoke his first word.”

Hyrste was still for a long moment, afloat on a tide of memory. An excited call of “Princess!” brought her back, and she waved at the young girl who had called out. Hyrste did not speak for the rest of the trip and neither did she meet Trouble’s eyes, although she continued to smile at those from the crowd who called out to her.

* * *

“Hyrste! You are alive!” High Prince Lykon stood up from his throne in surprise as the weary pair were ushered into the hall. His aquiline face appeared stricken by fear when they first entered, but soon broke into a relieved grin. He descended the dais with arms open wide, and she rushed into his embrace.

“Oh, father,” she wept, “I thought I might never see you again, and you would be all alone.”

“Come my daughter, you must tell me what happened. Who is this man?”

"This is Trouble," she wiped her tears on a ragged sleeve and sniffed. "He rescued me from those bandits. They killed..." Hyrste struggled to find her voice. "I don't think they were going to kill me, really. Only, I didn't know where they were taking me. And we were off in the wilds, leagues from anywhere. But Trouble found me." She smiled again at the name.

"Your men were not useless," said Trouble. "They slew two of the bandits and wounded a third. The blood from that wound left the trail that led me to your daughter."

"And these bandits," asked Lykon. "You killed them?"

"All but one. The wounded man fled into the night when his friends fell."

"He must be brought to justice," announced Lykon. "But you must both be exhausted. We shall feast tonight to celebrate your rescue, but please rest until then." Lykon gestured, and a servant led Trouble to his guest quarters. It would be good to rest here for the day, but getting on the road again tomorrow would feel even better.

* * *

Trouble tried not to grimace as yet another toast was proposed, this time by a man with too much oil in his beard. He would rather have been asleep, like he had been most of the afternoon, but as the guest of honour he was obliged to show his face. At least the wine was good. At last, Lykon stood up to speak. His host's food and lodging had been generous, but Trouble was hoping for a more valuable reward. Travel supplies, or something that could be traded for them. He shifted, uncomfortable in the too-soft silk outfit he had been given to wear while his own clothes were drying after a much-needed wash. He was considering how much the clothes might fetch at market, when Lykon turned to him.

"And so, as a token of our gratitude, I give you this sword, so that all may see your courage." The sword was similar in size to Trouble's own, though crimson tassels hung from the sheath and

the hilt was worked with brass. He would have to inspect the blade later. "I also give you this torc, so that all may see the esteem in which the house of Mour holds you." The torc was made of twisted silver strands, and set with black chalcedony.

"You are too generous, Lord Prince," Trouble stood as he accepted the gifts. "I shall wear them with pride." The delay had been worth it after all, although it would be prudent to wait and sell the gifts in the next city.

"Furthermore," Lykon continued as Trouble returned to his seat, "having seen the valour with which you have protected our beloved princess, I hereby appoint you to be her chiefbodyguard, with all the honours and rewards that position entails."

For the blink of an eye, Trouble froze. This was unexpected. Inconvenient. Lykon had not consulted with him about this. "You honour me too highly, Lord Prince." Did he think a road-dusty wanderer would only be all too grateful to enter his service? The cheers of approval from the rest of the hall told Trouble it would not be seemly to refuse now. He would have to leave very early in the morning, no, tonight would be best. Before he became too entangled.

* * *

Trouble cursed silently as he bundled his still-dripping travel clothes into his sack. He had spent far too long searching the palace's back corridors for the laundry's drying racks, and now had to find his way out again. He decided against raiding the kitchens on his way out. Some of the food he had taken from Hyrste's donkey still remained, and he had surreptitiously pocketed some refreshments from earlier in the day, too. Surely there would be a well in the city where he could refill his water skins.

He turned a corner in the corridor and found an open window that looked out onto a narrow alleyway. This would do. He was still on the second storey, but a short ledge protruded from the outside of the plastered wall about a fathom below the windowsill. Trouble was beginning to climb through the window

when a door below opened and a hooded figure stepped out. Another figure approached out of the shadows of the nearby buildings. Trouble hurriedly slipped back inside as one of the men began to speak.

“Your men failed,” growled the first man. It was Lykon.

“Do you think I am unaware?” asked the second. He had a rasping voice, like one who had been strangled but survived. “That is why I am speaking to you now.”

“You’ve heard the story? This man Trouble killed them. Not all of them, though. One escaped. Was he the one who told you?”

“No. The fool tried to flee.”

“We cannot have any loose ends.”

“He is being dealt with. I have other servants.” The man’s chuckle sounded like bone scraping on bone.

“And Trouble. He is a loose end too. I’ve set him to guard the girl, so when you take her, be sure to deal with him too. We’ll set up another outing, but it can’t be for another few months. I’ll have to make a show of hunting for bandits in the meantime.”

“No, we must take her tonight.”

“Tonight? It is too soon. The people will be suspicious. You know how much they love her.”

“The people are fools. Tell them Trouble was a Neldean spy who has kidnapped her. We cannot delay. These things have a time, which is fast approaching, and I have made many preparations already.”

“And what, we carry them off, us two?”

“Do not be a fool. You will be of no use. I will do it. As I said, I have other servants.”

“You’ll invite no foul spirits into my house, sorcerer.”

“I’ll do what I must. Do not forget that this is for your benefit. Do you want to keep your throne or not?”

Lykon was silent.

“I thought so. Step closer, and I will cloak us in shadow. Then, you will show me to where the man Trouble sleeps and return to your chambers.”

Lykon stepped toward, and Trouble's mind began to race. It would do no good to flee now. If Lykon's charioteers did not catch him, the sorcerer's shadowy servants would. The hunt would begin as soon as they found his room empty.

He raced back down the corridor, moving as fast as he could without making noise. Surely the sorcerer's spell would take some time to cast. They would be in no great hurry either. He should be able to reach his room with enough time to set an ambush. The sorcerer would be most distracted in the moment he passed through the doorway. That would be his chance.

Trouble slipped through the doorway and took stock of the room. Silver moonlight streamed through a window into the modest sitting room, perhaps three paces by five. The sleeping alcove was hidden by embroidered curtains which just now began to billow despite the still air. A ghostly figure emerged.

"Hyrste?" he hissed. The princess was clad in a pale nightgown that formed a corona around her silhouette.

"Trouble," her soft voice brimmed with feeling. "I feared you had left. I never got to thank you properly."

"Hush, and hide yourself away," he whispered.

She looked hurt.

"Your father is coming to kill me. His sorcerer too."

"His sorcerer? But—"

"*Hist*," he interrupted her, shoving his pack into her arms and pushing her back into the alcove. "I want not a breath from you. For the sake of both our lives." He let the curtains fall back to obscure her pale and frightened face.

He took his place behind the door and strained to listen. Every heartbeat seemed an eternity. How many did he have left before the sorcerer arrived? Was there nothing else he could do to prepare? There was no better hiding place in the room. Perhaps if he'd had the time to fix a ledge above the door frame...

The muffled sounds of footsteps drifted through the door. They were here. Trouble willed his heart to steady its wild drumbeat. Murmuring outside. He could not make out the words. A rustle and footsteps receding. The door began to glide open.

Trouble held his breath as a haze began to taint the moonlit floor before the doorway. Not a darkness, but an absence of vision. The haze thickened as soft footsteps sounded just on the other side of the open door. One, two, three. Trouble could no longer make out any detail of the room past the edge of the door. *Now.*

He lunged silently, his sword point leading the way, driving into the heart of the void. He felt the blade glance off metal, though he could not see what. His momentum carried him forward and he collided into something, *someone*, staggered and whirled around, slashing wildly at shoulder height but slicing only the air. Had the sorcerer fallen? He regained his footing and stepped into a downward thrust. As he leaned forward to push the blade down, an icy hand grabbed his sandalled ankle. The pull of the grasping hand threw off his balance enough to rob his thrust of its strength, but not enough to topple him completely. The blade bit into a substance that could not have been flesh, and the sorcerer convulsed, letting out a breathy, wordless snarl of anger. It was all Trouble could do to keep a grip on his sword as the unrelenting hand about his leg pulled with inhuman force. He toppled over as his sword pulled free, flicking black tarry gobbets across the room.

The aura of unseeing was dissipating now, and Trouble could see the outline of the rising figure silhouetted against the window, the bright moon perversely shining through a hole in the sorcerer's chest that Trouble's sword had pierced. Lying on his back and still held by the ankle, Trouble doubled forward, drawing himself toward the monstrosity with a two-handed overhead swing. The sorcerer brought up his other arm to block the blow, and the resulting crash of impact resounded off the close walls. Trouble's sword had cracked at the blow, but the sorcerer's arm was whole. Pivoting once like an athlete, the sorcerer spun Trouble around and sent him hurling into the wall.

The room had not stopped spinning. Trouble opened his eyes and forced them to focus on the flickering golden shapes in front of him. Someone was speaking.

"...wake the whole palace. Have you finished him?"

"Not yet. He was trying to live up to his name." The sorcerer was speaking to Lykon, who stood in the doorway holding a lamp. "I think I may keep this one. It would be a shame to let such a capable soul escape."

"If he were capable, you'd be dead."

The sorcerer laughed and started tugging at the torn robe that hung from his body. "True, he is not so capable as that. I do not believe there is a mortal man alive who could end me." He ripped the tattered cloth free, exposing his body to the lamp's light.

He laughed again. "Do not look so disgusted, Lykon. This is the immortality you desired so much." The lips and tongue that spoke were still made of human flesh, as was his face and glimmering eyes. Instead of a neck, the sorcerer's head rested on a pillar of bundled tubes. Thick and black, they emerged from beneath his chin and ran down into a broad bronze cage, a mockery of a man's ribs. His arms and legs were likewise formed of spars of bronze, wrapped in more surging tubes that twitched and pulled like so many worms.

"I...no..."

"You did not think I would give you a magic potion, did you? An elixir of youth? Your new body awaits, all it needs now is the soul of your daughter to animate it."

"But how could I rule the city like that?"

"How could you rule as you are? You would soon die and leave no heir, were it not for me, and that would be the end of it. This is everything you wanted."

The sorcerer strode over to the window. "Do something useful and drag the body over here," he told the stunned prince. "I must call my servants." He turned and began a dry and breathy chant, speaking forth inscrutable syllables to be carried away on the cool air.

Trouble let his eyelids droop, feigning unconsciousness as Lykon stepped forward and closed the door behind him. He could kill Lykon by surprise, perhaps. What remained of his sword was still at hand, a jagged spike of bronze still attached

to the hilt. The sorcerer was another matter. He had failed to kill the monster once already. Would he have any more luck with a broken sword? Through lowered eyelashes he saw the alcove curtains part.

Princess Hyrste darted out from the curtains, clutching in both hands the sword that Lykon had given to Trouble earlier that night, and lunging wildly at the chanting sorcerer. In the same heartbeat, Trouble surged upward, thrusting his own broken blade up under Lykon's ribcage and into his heart. The sorcerer caught the princess's blade in one glistening hand, but not before its point had drawn a line across his face. A line now welling with red blood, as bright as the torrent that flowed from Lykon's chest as Trouble pulled his sword free. Grabbing Hyrste by the neck with his other hand, the sorcerer wrenched the sword out of her grip and flung it to the ground. He began to turn as Trouble rushed towards him, trying to interpose the princess between himself and Trouble's desperate attack, but he could not move quickly enough. Trouble closed the distance and, grasping the sorcerer's bronze-plated scalp in one hand, he pierced the soft skin below the sorcerer's jawline, stabbing upward into his brain.

The sorcerer's body thrashed, flinging both Hyrste and Trouble free. Despite the flailing limbs, his face was slack. He collapsed into a twitching heap, the tremors growing weaker as the ghost of his strength fled at last.

Hyrste looked around the room, stunned. Then, noticing her father's corpse for the first time, cried out "Father," and ran to it weeping.

Trouble wearily climbed to his feet. "Why do you weep for the man," he sighed as he went over to pick up his pack. "He would have sacrificed your life had I not killed him first."

"But I loved him," she sobbed. "He wouldn't...he wouldn't." She continued repeating the phrase to herself as Trouble stooped to collect the gifted sword. He wiped it on the sorcerer's fallen robe, then returned it to its sheath.

"For saving my life," he said, and placed the sword next to the

grieving princess. She did not look up. "I wish you well, High Princess," he said, and left.

* * *

As the pre-dawn glow started to fill the long broad valley with light, Trouble bedded down in the shelter of a wild olive tree for a few hours' rest. He tried not to think about what would happen to the city or the princess when morning broke. It was not his business and they were not his people. He looked out to the west where hills lined the still-dark horizon. Somewhere beyond them he dreamed, his own people lived.

Rejected: After the Harem

by /a/non

Prologue: Lost Loves

“...and that’s why, Ichimaru-kun...” I swallowed. “I don’t want you to forget me! I know I’m changing schools and we won’t see each other much, but...I lov-”

Ichimaru-kun held out his hand, and I halted mid-word. “Junko, wait.” His face was as serious as I’d ever seen it before. “I’m sorry. I can’t accept your feelings. I’m in love with Miki.”

Even though I knew this was coming, my pounding heart dropped into my stomach. “...right.” I looked down so Ichimaru-kun didn’t see me welling up. “I’ll...go home, then.” It was bad enough getting rejected; I didn’t need the embarrassment to last any longer. I turned on my heel and ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

“Junko, wait!” Ichimaru-kun called out behind me, but I kept running. Tears streamed down my face as my loafers slapped limply against the road in front of my lost love’s home. I hoped to hear Ichimaru-kun run up behind me but he didn’t give chase. After I was out of sight of his home, I started walking, wiping my face with the sleeves of my school uniform’s blazer.

I’m sure I looked terrible. Well, obviously – I can’t have been all that cute to lose my childhood friend to another girl in the first place – but I bet my eyes were puffy and my nose was running. As I made my way back to my home – which was on the same street – I noticed my cell phone going off and checked it absentmindedly. It was a LANE message from Ichimaru-kun.

“Are you okay?”

What do you think, jerk? I thought to myself. “I’m fine,” I replied.

“Message me when you get home. The weather’s getting bad.” I looked up at the darkening sky through my bleary eyes and grimaced. Of course I was going to make it home in time to avoid the weather, but this meant he wouldn’t be coming over once I messaged him back. I almost laughed at how pathetic I was, still clinging to hope even after getting rejected so flatly.

I walked through the door of my home as distant thunder clapped behind me. Navigating the stacks of boxes, I called out to my parents.

“We’re in here packing, Junko!” replied my mom from my parents’ bedroom. “Is everything okay? You’re home awfully late.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I just got held up at school for a while.”

“Make sure you tell us next time,” said my father. He’d moved to the top of the stairs so we didn’t need to shout. I couldn’t see his eyes behind his aviator-style glasses; the same pair he’d been wearing since he was my age. “We were starting to get worried about you.”

“I *said*, I was fine.” I don’t know why I replied that way, but I did. Part of me wanted to run up the stairs and give my dad a big hug, cry into his chest like I always used to when I was sad. Another part of me, and the part that won out that day, blamed him for my getting rejected. More accurately, I begrudged him for denying me the chance to pursue Ichimaru-kun by moving for work.

He raised an eyebrow. “Did something happen? Maybe I can help-”

“Just leave me alone!” I said a little louder than I meant to. I realized what I did, felt bad for it immediately, and ran past him at the top of the stairs toward my room, slamming the door hard behind me.

“Junko!” I could hear him move for my bedroom before my mom spoke up.

“It’s okay, dear. Give her some time.”

I wept quietly as I could into my hands. *No, don’t do that. Break in here and hold me.* My sobs shook my body up and down but I kept the volume as low as I could. I’m sure they heard me anyway.

My phone went off again. I didn’t recognize the contact information.

“Is everything alright? Ichimaru-kun told me what happened.”

“Who is this?” I responded with one hand. My other was still stifling my cries for help.

“It’s Kitahara Miki. I happened to call Ichimaru-kun after you left. I feel bad about what happened. Cheer up, okay? I’m sure there will be good guys at your new school.”

I glared at the screen for a moment before throwing my phone as hard as I could with a cry. It bounced against the side of my bed and fell to the floor with a thud. Was she serious? What right did she have to “console” me after stealing the boy I loved like that? Did she know he liked her? Were they already dating and just hadn’t mentioned it yet? They were probably laughing at me, huh? My mind swirled into a vortex of questions I didn’t really want the answer to.

I spent a few more minutes angrily crying before I finally stood up and changed out of my uniform. Before putting my night clothes on, I caught a glimpse of my figure in the mirror. I set the clothes I was going to try on down and looked myself over from all kinds of angles, hyper-critical of any blemish or sore spot that might have turned Ichimaru-kun away.

My chest wasn’t that big. My hips could have been a bit better. My gait wasn’t very girly. I had bad skin. My muscles were too visible, especially on my torso. My hair was too short. I was covered in bruises from karate. Who knew which one of these it was? Was it all of them?

Finally I gave up on the self-deprecation and got dressed.

“Junko,” my mom called from downstairs, “dinner’s ready. We’re having katsu curry.” My favorite. They probably changed plans for me.

“Coming,” I said. I checked my phone and saw that Miki and Ichimaru had both tried to contact me a couple of times. I didn’t even bother to read their messages before heading downstairs.

To say dinner was uncomfortable would be an understatement. Everyone quietly chewed their food without as much as a word. My parents kept giving each other sidelong glances.

“I’m fine, now,” I lied. Dinner tasted like gravel, but I shoveled it down as quickly as I could to get away even though I really did want to talk to them about everything that happened. “Thanks for the meal.”

I stood up and reached to pick up my dishes. My dad placed his hand on top of mine. “Are you sure?” He looked into my probably beet-red eyes. “..yeah. Thanks.” I faked a smile and went back up to my room. I laid in bed but couldn’t sleep all night. I refused to check my phone.

The next day, the movers came. Ichimaru-kun didn’t come to say goodbye.

* * *

“Nakagawa-kun, stop! The fight’s over!”

“Someone pull her away!”

Ignoring the calls I kept wailing on my opponent. Blow after blow collided with his arms and swollen face. He could hardly keep his hands up to block after I’d gotten the upper hand.

I swung one more fist but it was caught by the karate club councilor, Kubo- sensei. “I said, that’s *enough!* What are you thinking?”

My vision was red. I was panting. My opponent was, too, but in a different way. My chest heaved. Kubo practically dragged me off the tatami and into the faculty office.

“This was just an exhibition match, Nakagawa. Why were you fighting him like that?” He’d sat me in a chair next to his desk. There weren’t any other teachers in the office since it was a Sunday.

Why? “I wanted to win,” I blurted.

“You’d already won as soon as he went to the ground. It’s not like this was a real fight!”

“He hit me hard. I was just—”

“You’re the one who said you wanted to fight the boys’ club captain! You knew what you were getting in to!”

“So did he, right?”

“No one expects to get mauled in a school martial arts club! What are you even thinking?” He was totally exasperated.

We were quiet for a long time. He turned to face his desk and shuffled some papers around. I guessed he was pretending to look busy since he didn’t want to make eye contact with me. I saw some blood on my knuckles.

“I’m going to have to remove you from the club,” he said with a sigh.

“What, because I beat the guy up!? That’s not fair!” I stood up, my wheeled chair flying behind me and into a desk. My hands were balled up at my sides.

“It’s not just that,” he said, raising his voice. “Sit down.” I stood. “..look, if this was a one-time thing and you didn’t have any other problems, it would be fine. The fact is that you cut half your classes and the other girls in the club are going to be even more afraid of you now. I have to think of their—”

“Bullshit! If they’re afraid, shouldn’t they just get stronger!?” My breathing was getting ragged again. My heart had sunk into my stomach.

“I can’t ask a bunch of girls who are doing karate to ‘toughen up,’ Nakagawa. They were already intimidated by you before today.” He finally locked eyes with me. “And you’re ignoring what I said about your attendance.”

I clenched my fists so hard my knuckles were white. “If I come to school every day, can I stay in the club? I’ll join the boys’ club if I have to.”

“You know I can’t do that. Besides, I doubt the captain will want anything to do with you after today.” He sighed. “It’s a shame. You’re really skilled and could do a lot for the school. It’s just too big a risk.”

My eyes were glued to the floor. In my mind I tried to come up with some kind of compromise or way out of this but came up blank. New, cold sweat trickled down my brow.

"...fine." I turned and made for the exit, ignoring Kubo's protests that I come back to the office.

There was no one in the hallway, whose lights were shut off. The setting sun covered the white walls with an orange glow. My vision was blurry. I ran into the girls' restroom and stood in front of the sink, staring at myself in the mirror.

Don't cry, I thought to myself, taking deep breaths through my clenched teeth. *You're done crying*. Nevertheless, tears welled up in the corners of my eyes. I tried my best to keep a mean, or serious face. *It's just the school club. You weren't going to get any better practicing against those kids*. I slowed my breathing to try and stave off my emotions. My hands, which gripped the rim of the porcelain sink, shook.

Eyes narrowed, I stared into my reflection. She glared right back. Before I realized it, I'd balled my hand into a fist and swung weakly at the mirror.

Then the crying started in earnest. I kept pounding at my reflection with limp blows, my forehead now pressed against the glass, while my tears collected in the sink below.

"Damn it," I sobbed quietly.

I heard the bathroom door swing open and quickly wiped my face. A couple of girls from the karate club were walking in.

"Can you believe she did that?"

"I hope sensei takes her out of the club...I don't want to practice with her."

"She's a total animal. I don't care how good she is. She's dangerous." They stopped when they saw me. My eyes were red and my face was contorted into a frown.

We stared each other down for a few seconds; they weren't trying to intimidate me, but they didn't know what to say after so obviously talking about me like that. It felt like an eternity.

Eventually one of them, the second-year club captain, took a step forward. As soon as she moved her foot I fainted a punch

aimed right at her nose. She froze in place, eyes wide, and the other two gasped.

I grinned at them. "Better be careful. There's a dangerous animal in this school, you know? You could get hurt if you don't watch out." She didn't say anything and just stood there. I pushed past her and walked out, alone.

I

Transfer Student

"You're in the way," I said through my cigarette's smoke. "Don't you want me to get to class on time?" I flipped some ashes on the ground and inhaled another puff.

"Nakagawa-kun, there is to be no smoking on campus. Put that out. You shouldn't be smoking at your age, anyway." As usual, Kubo-sensei wore a Very Serious expression.

"Then call the cops," I replied as I exhaled.

"This isn't a game, Nakagawa-kun. You're already on thin ice with the administration between your liberal interpretation of the uniform and your attendance. I'm just trying to help you. If you keep causing trouble you'll get expelled." He waved the smoke out of his face.

"Sure, big help. Thanks a ton." I dropped the cigarette butt and stamped it out. "Now can I get into school? My parents are getting on my case about skipping." I'd missed school more than I'd attended for the last few months.

The teacher narrowed his eyes at me. "Go on." I could tell he wanted to say more, but either didn't have the guts or didn't want to keep me at it. As I walked past I stuck my tongue out at him.

I noticed a girl staring at me walking the other direction. I pretended to lunge at her and she jumped about a foot, then bolted when I started laughing at her. "Chickenshit."

Everyone avoided me in the halls. Girls would keep their distance and boys would avoid eye contact with me entirely. Given

the way I'd behaved over the last two years at this school, that was the expected reaction.

I slung my bag onto my desk, which was in the back row by the door, before taking my seat. I propped one foot up on the chair for the desk next to me and tapped the other impatiently on the linoleum. The sooner class started, the sooner I could "go to the bathroom" and bail.

The teacher walked in, then turned around at the door and said something to somebody outside the class. I couldn't make it out, but she shut the door behind her so I figured she was just telling some other kids to get to their home rooms. Everyone but I sat at attention as soon as she made it to the blackboard.

"Alright, everyone. Before homeroom begins today, I have an announcement to make." I was already tuning her out. "We have a new transfer student joining us, beginning today. Amenohara-kun, please introduce yourself."

I looked up to the front of the class out of the corner of my eye to see what the new kid looked like. *Not impressive, but not terrible-looking either.* I'd never seen such an average person.

He bowed to the class. "Hello. I'm Amenohara Shinjiro. You can call me Shinjiro, or just Shinji, if you'd like. I hope we get along." Everyone clapped as he bowed again.

"Now, then...ah, the only open seat is there, next to Nakagawa-san." He nodded at the teacher's instruction and headed to where she pointed. I didn't move my foot.

"Um, excuse me...Nakagawa-san?"

"What." I didn't look at him.

"Well, Aizawa-sensei just said this was my seat. Could you move your foot?"

I scooted it just enough that he had room to sit, but it was still propped up against the side of the chair.

"Thanks!" I blinked. I expected him to ask again or something but he just plopped down next to my shoe.

"Nakagawa-san, could you share your books with Amenohara-san for the day? He'll get his after class."

I reached for the day's book and tossed it onto Amenohara's desk.

"Thanks!" He smiled at me again. I noticed him linger for a second before turning away quick.

"What're you staring at, transfer?" I was still facing him, not the teacher, with my foot propped up on his chair.

"Well..." he went to a whisper. "I can see them."

"See what?"

"Your..." it was muffled.

I was starting to get pissed. "Speak up, twerp!"

"Your panties!" he shouted.

...

"Haaah?!" I shouted, thrusting a hand down to block anyone else's view while dropping my leg. I could feel my face getting hot. The whole class was leering at the commotion.

"What the hell are you looking at?!" That got them to quickly turn away. I pretended not to hear some of the other students laughing under their breath.

With that outburst resolved, Sensei started teaching. I glared at Amenohara, who was dutifully taking notes and comparing what the teacher said to my borrowed book. He pissed me off, acting like nothing had even happened.

After five or so minutes more of lecture I stood up. "Sensei, can I use the restroom?" Before she even responded I was halfway out the door with my bag over my shoulder.

The roof was supposed to be off limits with the door locked, but I swiped the key one of the times I was brought to the faculty office my first year for kicking some kid's ass after I caught him looking at me sideways.

The hot summer sun beat down on the exposed rooftop, no shadows in sight. "Perfect weather," I said to myself aloud. Hot weather was great for training in – the sweat really made me feel alive. I made sure nobody was around and, hiding in a secluded spot, changed into my gym wear – spats and a sports bra – under

the lightest karate-dogi I owned. I made a note to wear my spats under my skirt from now on in case that freak Amenohara tried to sneak another peek at me.

I shook my head. Why was I worrying about that so much? It was just my underwear. Nothing embarrassing about wearing them, right? I tried to get my mind off it as I set up the practice bag I'd sneaked up to the roof last winter.

Just as soon as I started kicking, I heard the door to the stairway open, then slam closed. "Junko, you up here?"

"Of course I am, moron. How do you think the door was unlocked?" I replied between hard kicks.

"You're so mean! I just wanted to make sure it was you." Saeko walked around the stairwell entrance, pouting.

"You really are a dumbass, then. What if it was a teacher up here?" I started kicking harder. My blows thudded against the bag and echoed out over the campus.

"Would a teacher be kicking that bag? I could hear it from inside."

"Did you just come up here to ask questions, smartass?"

"Nope." Saeko sat down against the wall, knees up. Her skirt rode up her thigh; her loose-fitting, half-buttoned uniform shirt paired with her low-cut bra proved that her tan was natural. "Just wanted to check on you. It's been a while since you bothered to come to school." She twirled her hair on her finger.

"Yeah, mom and dad kept bugging me to go."

"It's good that they're worried about you."

"Shut up." I switched sides, kicking with my left leg now.

"What did I even say? You're on edge today, Junko. Did something happen this morning?"

I ignored her and kept kicking.

"Well?"

"Just come off it, Saeko." I finished that set and, panting, sat down on the rooftop. Sweat trickled down my brow and I could feel it soaking my cotton uniform. Saeko offered me a bottle of water.

“You shouldn’t forget to bring a drink when you train up here.”

“Thanks,” I said as I swiped it and took a swig. I poured some of the water over my face for good measure.

“I wanna know what happened. You were going at it harder than usual today.” She lit a cigarette for herself as she spoke.

“It’s no big deal. The new kid just pisses me off.”

“New kid? Oh, that’s right, your class was going to get a transfer soon. Amenohara, right?”

“Who cares?”

“Don’t try to act so cool. You’re obviously a little concerned about him.” She took a drag, looking off in the distance. “Apparently he was an honors student at his last school but caused some kind of trouble and that’s why he had to transfer. Did he do something to you?”

“...what kind of trouble?” I asked, dodging her question. I was starting to catch my breath.

“No one knows for sure, but the rumor is that he covered the whole school in graffiti. He even tagged the principal’s office top to bottom!” She laughed. “Wouldn’t expect that from looking at him huh?”

“Guess not. He looks way too plain for that.”

“Right? If it’s true, that is. He may have just needed to move because of his parents or something.”

“But he lost his honors status either way. That means something must have gone down.” I took another drink. The sun beat against my exposed nape.

“See, you are interested!” Damn Saeko. She could play just about anybody. “What did he do, huh? Tell me!”

I mumbled, looking away from her. “...panties.”

“Huh? He brought candy?”

“He saw my panties, okay?!” I yelled, then cupped my mouth. The redness came back to my face.

Saeko blinked. She tried to stifle a laugh, failed, and busted a gut. “That’s hilarious! He really is a badass!” She was laughing so hard she fell onto her back and started kicking the air.

"It's not funny," I said quietly.

"Sure it is! I doubt he saw them on purpose. No one would try to flip up *your* skirt."

"Tch. No, it wasn't on purpose. Quit laughin'!"

"What kind of panties did you wear today? Are they cute?"

"Shut up!" She kept laughing, so hard that tears were falling down her face. I stood up and started punching the bag now. Saeko crawled on her hands and knees over to my bag.

"They're in here, right? I gotta see 'em!"

"Hey!" I turned to stop her but she'd already scooped up my bag and started rifling through it.

"Oooh, how bold, Nakagawa-san!" Proudly she held up my delicates, a pair of white panties with a pink, somewhat frilly trim.

"Put those back!" I snatched them from her and stuffed them into my bag.

She giggled, but finally stopped herself from laughing after another minute or so. "Sorry, I just didn't expect something like that to bother you so much. Guys see *my* panties all the time." Her cigarette dangled from her lips, slurring her speech a little.

"Yeah, because you're a total slut! Your skirt couldn't *be* any shorter!"

Saeko smirked and lifted her skirt, showing her underwear off to me. They matched her bra: black and barely there. I could see the g-string through her white shirt; it rode up around her hips, meeting her dyed-blond hair at the small of her back. "It could be this short," she teased with a wink.

"Quit fucking with me," I grumbled.

"Oh, lighten up!" She patted me on the back. "I'm just having a little fun is all. I've missed you!"

"Whatever. Let me get back to training."

"Yeah, yeah," she said with a grin.

She was quiet for a while and I sparred with the bag some more, alternating between different punches and kicks. After a fourth set of punches I sat back down on the roof and took another drink of Saeko's water.

“You know...those panties were pretty cutesy. I didn’t expect that of you.”

“Are you seriously still thinking about that?” Talking about my delicates reminded me that a boy had seen them, which made me blush again.

“Not really. I just expected you to only wear super-plain stuff.”

“Well...it’s not like I’m not a girl at all,” I said under my breath.

“Yeah, just barely,” she teased.

“Quiet.” I stood up to start changing out of my workout clothes.

“Oh, has it been that long already? Time flies, huh?” Saeko stood as well.

“I’ll keep a look out to make sure no one comes up while you’re changing.”

“Thanks,” I said, then tossed off my dogi’s jacket. I extended my arms and

basked in the sun for a second. The heat against my sweat-soaked skin felt incredible. My breathing still ragged, I started to pull off the trousers.

“Shit! Someone’s coming!”

“What?!” I was bent over, one leg still in my pants as Saeko rounded the corner. She paused for a second.

“Hide!” She whisper-shouted before ducking behind the wall.

I didn’t even have time to blink before none other than Amenohara rounded the corner. His eyes went wide as soon as he saw me.

We stared at each other in silence. I was bent forward, looking over my shoulder with my ass pointed right toward him. Sweat ran down my forehead, and not from the heat.

“Get the hell outta here!” I shouted.

He bolted without a word. I could see how red his cheeks were.

Saeko was snickering to herself, covering her mouth with her hand.

“What?! What’s funny?!” I’d pulled my pants back up at this point. “You let him get way too close!” I grabbed her by the collar.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” she said, laughing as hard as she was earlier. “I just couldn’t believe it was him of all people coming up the stairs! I had to see your reaction…” she looked up at me. “It totally paid off, too. You’re so cute!”

“Shut up!” My face was still beet red. “Go make sure he doesn’t come back. I still gotta change.

“Okay~”

Against my better judgment I put my faith in Saeko actually keeping watch this time as I towed myself off and changed back into my normal underwear. She peeked around the corner.

“Looking good, Junko!” She flashed a thumbs-up and a wink.

“Go away!” I didn’t bother to cover myself – Saeko first saw me naked long ago and it didn’t really get to me anymore when she perved on me.

She hid behind the stairwell entrance again and said, “I wish I had the patience to train for a body like yours.”

“No way. You’re in good enough shape.”

“Naah, I’m totally getting fat.”

“Isn’t that just your boobs getting bigger again?”

“Maybe, but I think my belly is starting to poke out too.”

“Stop eating melon bread for lunch then,” I said as I rounded the corner, finally dry and dressed.

“Just doing that won’t give me a hard tummy like yours, though.”

“Guys don’t like that, anyway. Believe me, if you asked them they’d say you’ve got a way nicer body than I do.”

“Hmmm, I wonder…” She poked at her bottom lip. I could still faintly sense tobacco on her breath.

The school bell rang out as she pondered whether she or I were more attractive. She was probably doing it out of pity. I said, “Come on, class just switched. I gotta get back.”

“Alright!” Seeming to drop the idea, she followed me down to the third floor hallway.

We split up at the bottom of the stairs with a casual wave. While I walked back alone, I started thinking about Amenohara again. *Why was he on the roof, anyway?*

II

The Second Impression

For the next few classes, I had to share my textbook with Amenohara since he didn't have any. It really got under my skin that I had to sit next to this kid who'd seen me in such a state *twice*, but I couldn't do anything about it for now. I made a mental note to ensure he didn't go blabbing about seeing me and Saeko on the roof. Not that he could – if he saw me up there, he was up there, and if he was up there he could get kicked out of school if there was any truth to the rumors about him.

In science class, Kubo-sensei, the teacher from this morning, droned on about the periodic table while Amenohara studiously examined my textbook. I chewed on my pen, dying for a cigarette. *I should have taken a puff of Saeko's on the roof*, I thought. Then again, she'd probably make fun of me for asking for an indirect kiss or something.

“Now, then...Nakagawa-kun.” Are you serious? “Can you tell me how many valence electrons are in an atom of oxygen?” The class was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

“I don't know,” I said, still seated even though he called on me.

“Come on, Nakagawa-kun. If you were paying attention, you'd know what it was. Just look at the periodic table here.” He pointed to the table in question, which he brought in for the lesson.

Before I could retort, I heard a whisper from my left. “It's six,” said Amenohara under his breath.

Was he trying to help me?

I gave it a try. "...six?"

Kubo-sensei beamed. "Yes, that's right! See, you can do well if you just apply yourself." He resumed the lesson from there, calling on another student.

What was that? I looked over at Amenohara, who just kept right on taking notes like nothing had happened. He didn't even glance my way.

I guessed nothing *had* happened. He just helped me out. But why?

Classes changed shortly after that. The next class, Koyama-sensei's Japanese, was uneventful. At the bell, Amenohara finished jotting down the last of the teacher's lecture before standing up and making for the hallway. I waited a beat and stood up to follow him as he left the classroom.

He was quick for someone walking at such an even keel. We were about the same height, but he did a good job of weaving through the other students in the crowded hallway while still making long strides. I didn't have to worry about anyone standing in my path, though, so it was easy to keep up with him; losing him in the crowd was the problem.

Finally he turned the corner and, as I thought, he was heading for the stairs to the roof. I hid behind a corner, ignoring the group of students watching me, and waited to see what he'd do when he realized the door was locked...but he just walked right through.

Huh? I was sure to lock it this morning when I left the roof with Saeko. Does he have a key?

I waited for the door to close and pursued him up the stairs, fishing through my bag for my own copy of the roof key in case he locked the door behind him. He didn't, though, and I ended up loudly crashing into the door and flinging it open. The metal door clanged against the brick wall.

Amenohara stared while the door swung shut behind me, mouth half-open read to take a bite of the lunch he'd brought.

After a short staring match, he spoke up.

“Do you...normally eat lunch up here? I can leave if you—”

“Hold on,” I interrupted. “How did you get the door open?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know we aren’t allowed up here, right? They keep the door locked.”

“But you and that other girl were up here earlier, right?”

“Sure, but we weren’t supposed to be. Anyway, what were you doing up here then?”

“I just wanted to get some fresh air, is all. It’s a nice day.”

I shook my head. This wasn’t the point; he was trying to get me off-topic. “How did you get through the door?”

“This morning? It wasn’t locked.”

“No, not this morning. Don’t play stupid with me. I’m talking about just now. How did you get the door unlocked?” He stared at me for a second, so I spoke again. “Don’t try to come up with a lie. I’m not going to fall for it.”

He sighed. “Fine. You caught me. I picked the lock. Can you go now? If not, I will,” he confessed as he closed up his bento and stood.

As he tried to walk past me, I held my arm out straight to block his path. “Bullshit. That was too fast.”

“Why are you so worried about this? Is it such a big deal if I eat on the roof?” He tried to push my hand out of the way but I pushed back harder.

“You could get expelled, you know.”

He blinked, then looked me up and down. “What do you care? It’s not like you’re a model student yourself.”

...what *did* I care?

“...fine. You can eat up here. I don’t really care about that. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t go blabbing about me practicing on the roof earlier.

“Practicing what, taking your clothes off?”

I could feel myself getting flustered. “I, wha, *no!* Not taking my clothes off, I was practicing karate and I was just changing is all that it was. Don’t get any weird ideas, sicko.”

“You’re the one who was changing her clothes on the roof in broad daylight. All I did was come up here.”

He was really starting to piss me off. “Whatever! Just keep it to yourself!” I turned around and reached for the door. Just as my hand grasped the knob, I felt it turn on its own.

“Junko, I brought you a choco coronet!” Saeko shouted.

She looked up from her phone and saw me and Amenohara standing there. The biggest shit-eating grin I’d ever seen spread across her face. “Oh, excuse me! I didn’t meant to interrupt your rendezvous~” She did a cutesy little twirl and hopped back down the stairs.

Amenohara just shrugged and got back to his lunch without a word. “Aren’t you going to...oh, forget it! Saeko, get back here!” I bolted down the steps after her. Unlike Amenohara, she stood out too much for me to have a chance at losing her. Besides, I knew where she’d be going.

I arrived, panting, at the empty classroom we used sometimes for lunch. Saeko pretended like she wasn’t just running from me as fast as she could and turned to the sliding door when I flung it open. “Oh, Junko! I’m surprised to see you. I hope my interruption didn’t cut your little fling short!”

“Fling? What?” Some others overheard her in the hallway.

I slammed the door behind me. It shook on the rails. “Watch what you’re saying out loud! People will misunderstand!”

“Misunderstand what? Looked like you were having lunch with Amenohara to me...” She looked up at the ceiling in thought for a second. Then, her eyes gleamed. “The star-crossed lovers of Namiuchi High! The class-cutting yankee tempts the reformed transfer student to return to his old, delinquent ways! Will their love be the end of his high school career?!” She accompanied her spiel with bombastic gestures, one hand on her heart and the other over her head.

“Would you shut up?! It’s not like that at all, I said!”

“Then why are you blushing so much?” She asked, feigning innocence.

“Because you— I’m not— damn it!” I paused and took a long breath, then fell into the seat next to hers. “I just wanted to see why he was going to the roof in the first place.”

“Why do you care?” Saeko asked, her mouth full of melon bread.

There’s that question again. Why did I care, exactly? I’d only just met him today. We had no history and had barely spoken to one another, and when we did talk he was kind of a jerk. So, what was my deal?

“I guess...I’m just worried he’ll get expelled if the rumors you told me about were true.”

“So?”

“Well, he helped me out in class today without a good reason. I guess I think I owe him a favor.”

“You don’t stalk someone through the halls to repay a favor.” She sipped her juice box.

“Well, it’s not just that. It bothered me that he went up to the roof this morning to begin with. No one but your or I should be going up there.”

“We shouldn’t be going up there either, though. I bet other kids do it all the time, too. You wouldn’t know about it because you barely go to school. It’s really not that strange for him to do it.”

“I guess. Something about it just bothered me.”

“Are you worried that he went up there for your sake since you flashed him?” The way she asked that question so casually pissed me off, but I ignored it.

“I doubt it. When I approached him earlier he seemed totally disinterested in what I had to say. Besides, I’m not pretty or anything so I doubt he likes me that way.”

“Whatever you say.” She finished her food and crumpled up all the wrappers. “We better go; class is starting soon.” Then she winked and said, “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone about you two.”

I growled and said, “I keep telling you, it’s not that kind of thing!”

“Right, I got it. I’ll make sure nobody suspects you guys!”

Before I could retort she was out of the empty room and around the closest corner. I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed before heading back myself.

On the way back to class I walked past Amenohara, who had left the roof at some point, chatting with two of the other boys from our home room. They were giving him the usual new kid treatment:

“Why’d you have to transfer? Did you do something bad?”

“What do you think of the principal? Total asshole, right?”

“How about the girls at your old school? Were they better than the girls here?” I didn’t catch his answer to the first two, but I heard this one perfectly:

“Actually, I think some of the girls at this school are really cute.”

“Really? You’ve got some weird tastes, man. Most of the girls here are totally plain.”

“Yeah, and then you got freaks like Nakagawa! I bet she eats her lovers’ heads, like a praying mantis!” I stopped next to them.

“Uh...” his friend tugged at his uniform to try and get his attention.

“No, it’s true, man! She’d probably—”

“Probably what?” I asked, leaning over the kid’s shoulder and talking directly into his ear.

I saw his eyes go wide. “Um...I was just...” he stammered.

“Go on. I wanna hear it. What kind of lover am I?” I put my hand around his back and rested it on his shoulder. “I got a good sense of humor, you know? I can take a joke or two.”

“Well...I was gonna say that you’d probably t...take the guy’s dick off...or something...as a joke, though!” He was sweating cold.

I grinned. “That’s fuckin’ hilarious!” I faked a big laugh, then slapped the kid on the back. He stumbled, but his friend caught

him. "You're a real comedian! I could have never come up with that shit!"

"Yeah...yeah, I guess it is kinda funny, huh?" He started to laugh too, and turned to face me. The rest of the hallway was dead silent.

I took a step toward him and placed my left hand on his right shoulder, this time facing each other. I was still "laughing," but I stared unblinking in his eyes. His laughter faded away.

"Can you, uh, let me go?" He tried to break my grip, but couldn't.

"What? No more jokes? I wanna hear another one. I bet you got tons about me, right?"

"Uh, well, I don't have any more jokes about you, actually..." He trailed off and broke eye contact.

"Here, I know a good one." I slammed my fist into his solar plexus. His breath left him and he doubled over before falling onto the hallway floor in front of me.

I looked down on the squirming punk and grimaced. "What a loser. If you can't even take that, you better seriously watch what you say."

As I turned away I met Amenohara's eyes. Where I expected fear, or maybe disgust, or at least apprehension, I saw something else. I didn't know what it was at the time, but it bothered me the rest of the day.

III

Crumbling Walls

The last bell ended and I shot up out of my seat. I hadn't been so anxious to leave school in a long time...then again, I skipped a lot. Still, today had been more frustrating than usual. Most of the time I hated school because I had to listen to some old fart talk about useless shit for hours at a time while people pretended not

to stare at me, but that was comparatively mild next to the other events of the day.

To my surprise, nobody bothered to report me for leveling the kid Amenohara was talking with. Usually I found myself in the faculty office or even talking to the principal for those “outbursts” of mine. I wondered why I was so bothered; that sort of shit-talk normally rolled off my back like rain.

Whatever, I thought to myself. I was probably just in a bad mood after Saeko had been teasing me all day, not to mention the pantyshots.

Just as I was thinking of her she appeared. Rather, she was waiting for me at the end of the hallway, surrounded by boys as usual.

“Can I walk you home?” asked one chubby kid.

“Do you want anything from the school store?” said another guy.

“Are you free on Sunday?” asked a third, more bold suitor.

She paid them no attention and scrolled through her phone. When I approached and cast a shadow over it, she put it back in her purse.

“Sorry, guys! I’m walking home with Junko today!” She looked up at me pleadingly. “Right?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I’ll come with you today.” The boys dispersed, murmuring to each other dejectedly.

“Yay!” She turned to the door. “Let’s get something to eat on the way home, ’kay? I have a lot to ask you about!”

“It better not be what I think it is...”

Once we were out of the boys’ earshot, she said, “You mean your new boyfriend? Why wouldn’t I ask about it?”

“Come on, you know it’s not like that—”

I heard someone call out after us. “Hey! Nakagawa-kun!”

Shit. “Yes, Kubo-sensei?” I replied without turning to face him and rolled my eyes.

“I need a favor from you.”

“Can’t you ask someone else?”

“You’re the only one who lives on the same street. I need you to walk home with Amenohara-san.”

Saeko stifled a laugh.

“Why? He too stupid to read a map?”

By this point he closed this distance between us. “He got dropped off here and doesn’t know the way. Just do me this one favor, okay?”

I sighed. “And if I don’t?”

“Then your parents will hear about that altercation earlier today.”

Damn, he *did* know. I turned to face him. “Alright, alright! I’ll take him home. Just don’t expect me to make friends with him or anything.”

He smiled again. That same grin he gave in class when Amenohara fed me the answer. The same one he gave in my first year when I joined the karate club.

“Thank you. Amenohara, you’ve met Nakagawa Junko, right?”

“Yeah. We sit next to each other.”

“That’s right, you do! Great, then there’s no need for introductions. The both of you live next door, so-”

“Huh?!” I cut him off.

“What? That’s why I asked *you* to show him the way.” He looked at me like I was an idiot. I could tell it was taking everything Saeko had not to die laughing right there. Amenohara was unfazed as usual.

I was speechless.

“So you’ll take him then, right? Tell your father I said hello when you get home, okay?” With that, Kubo-sensei went back into the school and left me, Amenohara, and Saeko all standing in a circle.

Amenohara spoke up first. “...can we get going? I’d like to get back home before dark, if that’s okay.”

“No way! You should totally come with me and Junko to the family restaurant to eat first!”

“My mom probably made dinner already, but thanks for the offer. If you don’t want to go out of your way, I can go home by myself.”

“Nonsense!” Saeko said with dramatic flair. “We can’t leave you to your own devices like that! You could get lost, so Junko will take responsibility and show you the way. She and I can go out another time.” She looked over and winked at me. I could have killed her.

“Well, if you say so. Thanks.”

“Totally! See ya later, guys!” Saeko ran off, waving behind her. I hadn’t even *said* anything since Kubo left us, and here I was alone with Amenohara.

“...tch. Alright, let’s go.” I started walking again, my strides a little quicker than usual. My legs were sore from practice earlier but I did my best to ignore it and keep going as quick as I could stand.

Amenohara, surprisingly for a twiggy guy like him, didn’t have a problem keeping up with me.

After a few minutes the silence must have started bugging him. “So...how long have you been living in this area?”

“Since the start of my first year.”

“Just over two years, then, huh? I lived here when I was a kid but my family had to move away for my mom’s work.”

“Wow,” I replied, dead-pan.

“Why’d you move here? The school?”

“No. My dad’s work.” I lit the first cigarette I had since that morning.

“Oh.” He paused for a second to think of what to say next. “Well,-”

“Look, you don’t have to talk to me.”

“...alright.”

I looked straight ahead and tried to pretend he wasn’t there. This was a normal walk home, after all. He just happened to be going in the same direction. The thought of frequently seeing him on my way to and from school made me want to skip even more than usual.

“That was really cool, earlier,” he said out of the blue.

“I said—huh?”

“When you punched that kid’s guts in.” I could see he was dead serious out of the corner of my eye. “He was bothering me, too, but I couldn’t get him to leave me alone.”

“Oh...well, I didn’t do it for your benefit. He just pissed me off.”

“I know. I’m just saying, it was cool.”

“...thanks.” I guess?

“How long have you been training to fight?”

“I’ve been doing karate since elementary school.”

“That explains the uniform I saw on the roof.”

“Don’t talk so loud about the roof. We’re still close to the school.”

“Oh, right. Well, anyway, that explains the uniform you had on.”

I was trying to forget that he saw me in it at all, given the context.

“Do you go up there a lot?”

“..yeah. When I come to school I find some time to go up there with Saeko. Why?” I finally looked over at him. He looked like he had been waiting for me to face him.

“Just wondering.”

We got quiet again. I didn’t think I’d been this uncomfortable since middle school. Usually people left me alone, so I wasn’t sure how to talk to somebody new. I didn’t know where the lines were or what would cross them.

Still, something had been bothering me. “You said you picked the lock to get to the roof, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Where did you learn to do that?”

“My last school’s roof had the same door.”

“Why did you pick *that* lock?”

“I wanted to get on the roof back then, too.”

“For what?”

“You ask some weird questions.” *Who* was the weird one here? “I guess I can tell you. All the faculty know anyway, and probably half the kids. I used to skip class, go up to the roof and read manga. My grades were good so they didn’t bother making me attend class, but I got caught red-handed picking the lock by a teacher who hated me. Next thing I knew, I was expelled.”

“...manga?”

“Yeah.”

We got quiet for a second. All I could hear were some birds in the distance and the clack of our shoes against the pavement.

I couldn’t hold back any more. I was practically shaking from holding it in, but finally I *had* to let go. I burst out into the loudest laugh I think I’d ever done since starting high school. My sides hurt and I clutched them, doubled over and wrapped in my own arms.

“Manga?! All that build up and mystery for manga?!” I howled.

I could see Amenohara was embarrassed, but to his credit he didn’t get upset with me for making fun of him.

I wiped a tear from my eye. “Sorry. I just didn’t expect that. The rumor right now is that you spray painted the school. I expected you to say you did something seriously crazy, but you’re a good kid after all.”

“Yeah, I guess...” he kicked at the ground. “I kind of wish I could get away with more, but my parents have been really strict since I got kicked out of my old school. This school is my last chance, so I guess they aren’t wrong to be.”

I shrugged. “It’s not that great. Blowing off school, I mean. It’s fun the first couple of times but eventually it gets just as routine as everything else.”

“Do you and that other girl skip class often?”

“Saeko never skips school, but she cuts class once in a while to bug me on the roof. I cut when I can get away with it, but my dad’s been busting my chops over whether I’ll be able to graduate lately. I don’t think I’ll skip until summer break, at least.”

“Summer break is in two weeks.”

“Yeah, I know.” That was how long I could stand normal attendance. We rounded the corner to our street. The late afternoon sun baked the sidewalk. Some elementary school kids were playing loudly at a nearby park, arguing over something I couldn’t make out.

“What do you do when you skip, anyway?”

“Depends. Sometimes I go for a bike ride. Sometimes I find a place to train. I used to go to different karate dojos but they stopped letting me in during school hours when they found out I was a student.”

“Why do you like fighting so much?”

I thought about it for a second. In that time, we reached our houses – which were right next door to each other – and I stood in front of my gate. “I guess it’s all I have. Anyway, this is my house. Later.”

“Oh, right. I didn’t notice. See you tomorrow.”

I shut the gate behind me and made for the door.

IV Modeling

The door was unlocked as usual. I let it close on its own behind me and kicked my shoes off in the foyer.

“I’m back,” I called to my parents.

“Welcome home,” said my mother from the kitchen. “Your father is out back. How was school?”

“I’ve had better days there,” I replied, making for the kitchen. I poked my head in the doorway. “What are we having?”

“Hamburger steak,” she said. “Your father was in such a good mood when he saw you leaving the house in your uniform for once that he asked for it.” She was smiling while she shaped the meat.

He better not get too used to it, I thought. Today’s events were more than enough for me. Still, I thought I should go let the old

man know I was home.

As I headed for the back door, my mom said, "I was happy to see that, too."

As if I didn't feel bad enough...I opened the kitchen door and stuck my head out. My dad was tending to his garden; I could see he'd been at it for a while by the sweat on his back.

"I'm home, dad."

He turned to face me. His graying hair shined with sweat under his wide-brimmed hat. "Welcome back, Junko. I'm glad I didn't have to come pick you up."

"Did you need to say that? It's not like I *always* get into trouble."

"Don't you?" He kept smiling, the same smile that Kubo gave earlier. "I used to have to come to that school and get you once a week or more. When you went, that is." He was struggling with a particularly deep-rooted weed.

"Here, let me." I reached for it but he stopped my hand.

"I'm not that old just yet." With a grunt he ripped it out of the ground, roots and all. He let out a sharp breath and I thought I heard something pop, but he played it off. "Anyway, how was class today?"

"...fine, I guess. Kubo-sensei says hey."

"Glad to hear he's still doing well." The old man stood with a groan and stretched his back. "Did anything interesting happen? Any more adventures on the roof with that girl?"

"Tch. Saeko and I don't go on 'adventures,' we just hang out."

"She's a nice girl, that Saeko-chan. You should have her over again soon."

"Mom says she's a bad influence."

"That's just because she's so cute." He paused. "Don't tell mom I said that, or she'll have a fit. And don't you go having a fit either."

"Dirty old man." It was a little gross for him to talk about the closest thing I had to a friend that way, but Saeko was pretty. I couldn't blame him.

He just nodded. “Anyhow, I’m glad she keeps an eye on you. Seems like you’ve been getting into less trouble since she came into the picture.”

She just keeps watch so no one catches me, I kept to myself. “Anyway, I’m going to take a shower before dinner. I, uh...ran home from school.”

“Go ahead. I was going to wait until later to take my bath, anyway.”

I went back inside before him and made for my bedroom to get changed out of my uniform. I ensured my curtains were closed in case Amenohara’s bedroom was the one across from mine before disrobing.

Halfway through I took a glance at myself in the mirror; the same full-length one I’d had since I was in middle school. I didn’t look at it much anymore. I seldom spent any time in my room at all, and I didn’t pay much mind to my appearance in a way that I needed a mirror to check.

This time, though, I noticed the pink, frilly trim on my underwear and they reminded me of accidentally flashing Amenohara and Saeko’s teasing.

“Not what you’d expect, huh...” I traced the waistband with my finger. I guessed she was right – I don’t think many people would picture a girl like me wearing this sort of thing. Something like the spats I wore while training is probably what most people imagined. It wasn’t exactly relaxing to bring these up to the checkout counter, either. It was probably just my imagination, but the cashier seemed to be wondering whether I was buying those for someone else. *Saeko could have been a little nicer about it*, I thought.

I turned around and looked over my shoulder at my backside. I wondered how it looked when I was bent over...then I saw my face getting a little red while I wondered what Amenohara might have thought of me. I shook it off, mussing up my hair even more than it already was.

As I slipped out of the panties I heard my phone go off in my bag. I opened it and sure enough, Saeko’s icon was there. Against

my better judgment, I answered her call. I heard some chatter in the background before she spoke; she was alone at some kind of café.

“How was the walk? Did you two elope?”

“Shut up.”

“Come on! Let me have a little fun. He’s kind of mysterious, right? He’s got that going for him at least! Even if his looks aren’t the best.”

“He didn’t graffiti the school.”

“Oh, he told you about it?! You’re getting close awful fast! What was it?”

I smirked. “Not telling. It’s pretty shocking.”

“What?! No fair!”

“That’s your punishment for earlier.”

“What did I do?!” She put on her best whine. She could have been an actor.

“You basically invited him to my strip tease.”

“I did not! It’s not my fault he saw you bent over like that!”

“It is.”

“Come on!!! Tell me, tell me!!” I wondered if she was bothering the people around her with how loud she was.

I sighed. “You can’t tell anyone else. I don’t think he wants people to know the real story.”

“Ooh, why, why? Is it really serious? Or really embarrassing, maybe? Was he having sex at school?!”

“No, that’s you.”

“Hey! I’m a pure maiden! An untouched flower! Don’t you accuse me of such a thing!”

“...pure maiden?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Just tell me what Amenohara did!”

“He brought manga to school and read it on the roof.”

She went quiet. Her bated breath was released and she said, “Oh.”

We sat there in silence for a while, long enough to realize I’d been standing around naked. “Anyway, I’m gonna go take a shower.”

“Let me watch! That will make up for that shitty story. Junko Nakagawa reveals all! Watch the water run down her muscular back!”

Muscular back, huh? I looked at it in the mirror. My tan line made it a little harder to tell, but I guessed it was pretty well-defined compared to other girls I’d seen in the locker room.

Saeko kept going. “Just how far will she go with the detached shower head?! Get the exhilarating show on pay-per-view!”

“Do they do pay-per-view porn?”

“That’s not important! I wanna see!”

“Can I hang up now? I’d like to be done before dinner.”

“Fiine! Just send me a spicy pic, okay?!”

“Tch.” I hung up and tossed my phone onto my bed. I noticed it land next to the panties I tossed away while I was on the phone and started wondering again.

“I’m gonna regret this,” I said aloud as I snapped the picture.

The hot water was exactly what I’d needed after my training session earlier. If Amenohara hadn’t seen me I would have sneaked into the school’s locker rooms, but I was on edge and worried Saeko would somehow lead him there for my “full reveal.”

I faced the spout and let the water run down my front side. It was my legs in particular that needed the soothing sensation after all that kicking. While the water massaged my muscles my mind started to wander yet again.

“Why do you like fighting so much?”

I wondered about my answer. *Is it really all I have?* I thought about my family, Saeko, even Kubo-sensei who looked out for me from time to time. Why did I single out fighting?

I looked down at my body. I had scars in all sorts of places and my legs were bruised from kicking the bag so much today. My hands weren’t in much better shape. But still, in spite of all this, there was something about training – let alone fighting some-

one for real – that made me...happy? No, not quite. Fulfilled, I guessed, as I shut the water off. Proud, maybe?

The room was full top to bottom with steam. I waved some of it out of my face and went for a towel. My sore muscles begged to get back in the shower for a few more minutes but I ignored the pain and dried off.

Ignored the pain, huh?

“Junko, are you coming to dinner?” I faintly heard my mom call.

“Yeah,” I hollered. “I’m just getting dressed.” I threw on some flannel pajama pants and one of my dad’s old t-shirts with some ancient band’s logo on the front.

On the way back to the dining room I checked my phone. Saeko responded to the picture I sent her almost instantly, tried to call me, then sent about 15 text messages in the span of 5 minutes.

Is it really that big a deal? I wondered as I sat down at the table, scrolling through her messages.

“Wow! That’s really bold! I never expected that! And you call me a slut!” she said, with a flurry of emojis haphazardly peppered in. “The panties are cute, sure! But wow!” *What is she talking about?* I scrolled back up and furtively examined the image, checking over my shoulder to see if anyone was behind me as I sat at the table. All I sent was a picture of the panties from before, with the caption, “Is it really that weird for me to wear something like this?”

...or, so I thought. I had held them up with one hand to take the picture and sent it almost immediately after, failing to notice that my mirror was visible in the shot. I unwittingly sent Saeko a (blurry, out-of-focus) fully nude side-view of my body from the neck down.

I dropped my phone into my dinner in shock.

“Junko! What’s wrong?” asked my mother.

“Did something happen?” my father asked, his expression getting serious.

I was too stunned to reply. *Kill me. Kill me*, I prayed. My mom lifted my phone out of the burgers, its screen having gone black when I dropped it. I snatched it from her hand, wiped it down with a napkin, and shoved it into my pocket in one swift motion.

I frantically scarfed down the remains of my dinner, shouted “thanks!” and bolted back into my room.

“Junko! Is everything alright!”

“I’m fine,” I replied, my voice cracking. “I just remembered a, uh, an answer to a question in class! I wanted to write it down!”

I doubt they believed me but I didn’t care. I speed-dialed Saeko and held my breath while I waited for her to answer. My head was spinning. Dinner considered vaulting out of my stomach. Every ring made it worse.

Saeko refused to answer. She texted me a picture of herself (fully clothed) winking and flashing a peace sign. The caption read, “we can talk about it on the roof tomorrow!”

V

Rooftop Confessional

Saeko was waiting for me on the roof, staring at her phone and twirling her hair on her finger. It was overcast and her blonde locks stood out against the gray skies behind her.

“DELETE THAT PHOTO RIGHT NOW!”

“Hmm?” She looked up innocently. “Didn’t you have a photoshoot today?”

“Shut up and delete it!” I yelled, swiping at the phone. “I didn’t mean for you to see the mirror!”

Saeko dodged me effortlessly. “You didn’t? But it was a great shot! I almost thought a pro took it...” she feigned disappointment; of course she knew all along that I didn’t intend to send her *everything* like that.

“I’m serious, delete that! I could go to jail over that kind of thing, you know?” I kept poking my head into the door on the

roof to make sure nobody was listening nearby.

“Oh, come on. It’s not like—”

“Delete it now!” I started panting.

“But I already made it my background image,” she cooed, showing me the side view of my bare ass on her phone screen.

“You look so cute, standing there all nervous!”

“Damn it, Saeko, this isn’t funny!”

“I know it’s not! This kind of expression of your sexuality is a very serious thing for a growing girl!” She was laughing.

“Saeko! I’m not kidding around! I’ll kill you if you don’t delete that damn picture!” I was getting louder without realizing it.

She wiped a tear from her eye and caught her breath. “Okay...I’ll delete it. It’s the best picture on my phone, though, so I have a condition.”

“You’re blackmailing me?!” I could have punched her.

“Just hear me out...why did you ask me that question about your underwear to begin with?”

My heavy breathing stopped on a dime. “What? Why?”

“Yeah! Why did you ask me whether wearing that kind of thing was strange for you, Junko?”

“Because you said it was unexpected yesterday. Now delete the—”

“So? I say stuff like that about you all the time. Like that day you put lip balm on. I said, ‘I didn’t expect you to care about that kind of thing.’ You bonked me on the head, said it was because your lips chap in the winter, and we left it at that. This time, it seems like it really got to you, though.”

“Well...” I swallowed. “I guess I was embarrassed about it.”

“Because a boy saw them, right?”

“Wha- no! I don’t care about what he thinks!”

“Sure you do. It’s normal, you know? For a girl to care about what boys think of her. I know I care.”

“But I don’t like Amenohara that way! I barely know him! In fact, I don’t like him at all!”

"Maybe. You sure seem curious about him, though, ever since he saw your panties." She paused for a second. "By the way, I bet they look really cute on you, Junko. They suit you. Amenohara probably thought so too."

"...really?" I couldn't believe I said that and covered my mouth as soon as the word left it.

She smirked. "See? You *are* concerned about what he thinks. Well, it's not like that means you *like* him though."

"..yeah." I thought about it for a second. "Well, he probably doesn't like me that way anyhow. Cute panties or not, I'm not pretty," I said with a shrug.

"What makes you say that?"

I had started lighting a cigarette and I paused mid-strike of the lighter when she asked me that. Raising an eyebrow I asked, muffled by the cigarette, "What do you mean, 'what?' No girl who trains like I do is going to be pretty."

"I don't think that's true," she said, uncharacteristically seriously. "Didn't Sugimiya ask you out last year?"

"Oh, come on. That was a prank. His friends put him up to it. You saw for yourself that they were watching around the corner." I dropped my lighter back in my school jacket pocket and took a drag.

"I don't know. He sounded pretty serious. They were probably there to support him since you're kind of intimidating. Then you punched him, and *that's* when they started laughing."

"Kicked him," I corrected. "A front kick to the guts." I remembered it well. I got his buddies, too.

"What if he *was* serious?" she asked, pulling me out of the memory. "Did you consider that possibility at the time?"

"S-sure I did," I said, looking away from her. "But I don't believe he was."

"Would you have accepted his confession if you thought he meant it?"

"Well, I don't know!" I raised my voice louder than I meant to. "Why are you grilling me so much about this, anyway?"

"Because," she said. "I think you're scared."

“What the hell did you say?” I leaned forward and got in her face. Our noses were almost touching. “Who are you calling scared?”

“You,” she replied, unflinching. “I think you’re afraid to get close to anyone, especially boys. I’m the odd one out, and you only put up with me because we were friends back in elementary school. Everyone else – the karate club, the other students, even the other truants at this school – you’ve pushed them all away.”

“Shut up!” I said. “I ain’t afraid!”

“Then why do you do it, Junko?” Her voice was steady and calm. It made me feel stupid for yelling. “Why don’t you let anyone in?”

I was fuming, and breathing heavy through my nose. Saeko burned holes in my eyes with her own, arms crossed and foot tapping while she waited impatiently for my reply.

I couldn’t manage eye contact. “I just don’t think anyone will like me.”

“Why not?”

“Because!” I yelped, my voice cracking a little. “Look at me! I’m a big, scary-looking ‘girl’ who introduced herself to the school by pounding a kid’s face into hamburger! I’m mean and ugly and I’ve already been turned away by everyone I’ve tried to get close to before!” I was panting. “All I’ve ever done is lose the people I care about, either to someone else or to my own mistakes!”

Saeko stepped closer to me. Until I felt her wipe away a tear, I didn’t realize I started crying. Once I realized it, I couldn’t stop. She took another step forward and hugged me close.

I fell into her and let her wrap her arms around my back. I cried into her shoulder, my whole body shaking as she hugged me. We both went to our knees as I returned her embrace.

“It’s okay,” she said, rubbing my back.

Eventually I calmed down a little. I pulled away from her now tear-stained sweater and wiped my face with my sleeve. “Sorry,” I mumbled.

“It’s okay,” she said with a smile. “Feel better?”

“Not really,” I said, laughing a little. “I feel like an idiot. I guess I decided that the people who rejected me were right to.”

“Then you decided no one *could* like you. Right?”

“Yeah...” I said, sniffing. The sun had broken through the clouds while I cried into Saeko’s shoulder. The light shone against her golden hair.

“So, are you going to stop judging yourself like that?” She reached into her purse and pulled out a handkerchief, handing it over to me.

I wiped my face. The handkerchief smelled like her perfume; I knew because I just spent five minutes pressed against a shirt that smelled the same way. I tried to hand it back but she declined it. “Am I just supposed to pretend like the last three years didn’t happen? Fact is, I *did* hurt some people. Even if some deserved it, that makes me kind of scary, huh? I doubt anyone will want to befriend me at this point.”

“Well, what about Amenohara? He doesn’t know anything about that stuff, besides rumors. Why don’t you try making friends with him?”

“He saw me punch a kid yesterday,” I said quietly, looking away. “I doubt—”

“But he still walked home together with you. He talked to you the whole way, too,” she said, cutting me off.

“Huh?”

She grinned. “I might have taken a detour on my way to the restaurant to see how your walk with him went.”

“You what?!”

With a giggle, she stood up. “Anyway, I think you should try to get to know him. Who knows what might happen? Maybe you’ll end up with some youthful memories.” She opened the door to the roof as the school bell chimed.

Maybe, I thought. I sat there for a minute. She stood with the door open, waiting for me to get up. “Wait a second,” I said as I realized something.

“What?” Saeko asked innocently.

“You never deleted that picture!”

“Uh-oh.”

I jumped to my feet and ran at her full-tilt toward the stairs, which she was already quickly descending. “Get back here and give me your phone, now!” For some reason, I was laughing along with her.

VI

The Invitation

When I got back to class after ensuring Saeko really did delete the picture, Amenohara’s desk was empty. I wondered as Kubo-sensei droned on and on about the elements if he was on the roof. I was a little disappointed; I wasn’t thrilled about seeing him but Saeko was right that I should at least *try* to make another friend. School was going to end for me soon, after all.

I twirled my pen in my fingers as I stared absentmindedly at his unoccupied seat. The sun shone through the classroom windows and some crows rested on a phone line outside. One of them inched nervously closer to another.

I stood up to go to the roof. “Sensei, bathroom break,” I called on the way out. He called after me but I just ignored him; I had the excuse all girls have when it comes to bathroom breaks anyway.

No one else was in the hallway and I noticed the unusual quiet for the first time in a while. Normally, I didn’t think anything of the loneliness of these walks to the roof, but something about it struck me today. Aside from the clap of my soles against the linoleum and the occasional muffled lecture from a teacher I couldn’t hear anything. Rather, there was nothing to hear in the first place.

At the top of the stairs, I noticed my hand shaking when I tried to unlock the door. I took a deep breath to calm myself down. *What are you nervous for?* I asked myself.

“You’re afraid,” my memory of Saeko that morning reminded

me. I shook my head at myself, forced the key into the doorknob, and turned it.

There sat Amenohara alone, flipping through a book with his back to the door. Next to him stood a tower of dog-eared manga volumes. *Moron*, I thought to myself – no one was even here to keep watch.

I crept up behind him after quietly shutting the door. He didn't seem to notice, so I got a bit closer, then closer still. Finally, I was just a few inches behind him. "Whatcha reading?"

He jumped, yelped, and spun in one singular motion until he was facing me. "N-Nakagawa-san," he started, half-hiding his face with his book. "When did you get up here?"

"Just now," I said, sitting down cross-legged in front of him. I wore spats under my skirt that day, so I wasn't worried about another unintended pantyshot. "That manga must be pretty good, since you didn't notice me open the door."

"I guess," he said meekly while rubbing the back of his head. "I just got to a good part."

"What kind of manga?" I grabbed the volume on the top of his tower.

"Wait," he started, reaching out a hand, but it was too late.

"Gorgeous Mend?" I read aloud. On the cover, two young girls were posing cutely while dressed in garish, frilly outfits. I turned to the back cover and read aloud, "Mari-chan and Naomi-chan finally come face to face with the leader of the evil organization Maze, and—"

Amenohara snatched the book from my hand while yelling, "Stop reading it so loud!" He held a finger up to his lips. "People will hear you."

"Ah...right..." I managed. I stared at Amenohara with, probably, a really dumb look on my face. "So, you, uh, you like that kind of thing?"

"Yeah," he said sheepishly. "Ever since I was a kid I've been a big fan of GoMen." He looked away. "Kind of lame, I guess."

"Yeah," I agreed without realizing. "Er, I mean—"

He laughed. "Thanks for being honest. Sometimes people try to make me feel better about it, but I know it's weird for a high schooler to like a manga for little girls."

That explained why he was so weird and distant on the roof yesterday – he didn't want anyone to reveal his tastes to the school. "I won't tell anyone," I said. "Since you helped me out in class yesterday."

He smiled. "Really? Thanks," he said with a sigh of relief, his face lightening after going a pretty dark shade of red before. "I guess I owe you one."

"Then," I cleared my throat. "How...how about going to get something to eat together after school?" I caught myself looking away, but couldn't turn my head back to face him so I watched myself draw a circle with my finger. "If, you know, if you aren't busy." In an instant my heart went from beating normally to jumping out of my throat.

Before I could take it back, he replied, "Okay! I'll meet you at the school gate." When I looked up, he was smiling. I couldn't read his emotions. Was it pity? Maybe he accepted out of fear? Maybe he was just...happy?

"Yeah...okay. I'll be hanging around there after class, then." I didn't know what to do now, so I stood up and turned away. "Don't be late," I said over my shoulder after taking a couple steps.

As soon as I got to the bottom of the stairs I slapped myself on the forehead. '*Don't be late?*' *What are you threatening him for, idiot?* Too embarrassed to go back up the stairs and explain what I meant and too full of nervous energy to go back to class and sit down, I found myself wandering around the silent halls once again. Eventually I came by a propped-open window and leaned onto the sill.

At least he didn't turn down the invitation outright, I thought. In fact, didn't he seem kind of...excited? I wished I'd seen his reaction rather than just hearing it. Maybe I was overthinking it.

Maybe he *was* just taking pity on me and humoring the one invitation before avoiding me for the rest of the year.

I propped my chin on my fist as the birds played in the empty courtyard outside the window. I noticed a couple sitting on a bench, cutting class in favor of holding hands and staring at each other. When they started making out I turned away. "Get a room," I muttered out loud.

"Room for what?" As soon as I turned away from the kissing couple Saeko appeared before me, hands clasped behind her back.

"What are you, a stalker?"

"Did you talk to Amenohara yet?"

"..yeah. We're going to eat together after school."

She beamed, took a deep breath like she was going to say something loud, then paused. "As a date?"

"No!" I said, louder than I meant to. The teacher in the room across the hall, whose droning voice had become ambient noise, suddenly stopped speaking. I heard his footsteps approach the classroom door.

"Shit. Look, I'll talk to you later. I don't want to get caught skipping." I scooped up my bag and made my way back to my own classroom.

"Okay, but you better not hide any details from me," she whispered as we split up.

When I walked back into my classroom, Kubo raised an eyebrow. He must have been surprised that I actually bothered to come back within the same class period. I fell into my seat and stared at the ceiling, still wondering how I should approach this afternoon.

VII

This is (Not) a Date

I crossed my arms and tapped my foot impatiently as the other students passed me at the school gate, their eyes fixed to the ground. I tried not to let it bother me that everyone was keeping a wide berth when they walked past.

Where is he? I thought. Then again, it would probably be better if no one saw us walking out together, for his sake. Wouldn't want him to deal with any annoying rumors.

"Oh, you're here," said Amenohara, appearing seemingly out of thin air. "I thought I'd be the one waiting for you." He smiled.

"Well, sorry for being so fast, I guess." I uncrossed my arms and looked at him for a second. Then we looked at each other some more. People were whispering as they walked past our staring contest.

"So, which restaurant were you thinking of going to?" he asked after a moment, a little nervous.

Oh, right. I invited him. I also didn't have a real plan; inviting him to eat was obviously a spur-of-the-moment decision and one I didn't put much thought into before asking him. Since asking him, I worried more about what he was thinking than where we should actually go.

I decided to wing it. "There's a family restaurant not far from here that Saeko and I visit sometimes." I picked my bag up and started walking that way.

"That sounds good," he replied, having taken a moment to collect himself and catch up with me. "Is your friend going to come eat with us today?"

"No, she has part-time work right after school. Why, disappointed that it's just me?"

"Huh? Why would I be? You mentioned her, so I just thought she might be joining us. I actually prefer that it's the two of us by ourselves."

“What? Why?” Did he have a problem with Saeko or something?

“Well, it would be weird to have a third wheel on our date—”

“Wait, wait a minute!” I spun around and held out my hand, clutching my bag’s straps so tight with the other that my knuckles were white. “Don’t get the wrong idea, here!” Some people turned toward us.

He tilted his head. “What? We’re going out together, boy and girl, so this is a date. Am I mistaken?”

“Yes!” I was practically screaming. A little boy pointed it out and his mother scolded him to not look at weird people. “I just wanted to get to know you better is all, not invite you on a date!”

“Hmm...so you asked me to go out with you after school so we could get to know each other better over food in private?” He rubbed his chin in thought.

“Exactly!”

“That’s just a date, Nakagawa-san.” He said confidently.

“Stop saying that! Aren’t you embarrassed?”

“Why would I be embarrassed about going out with a girl like you?”

My face went bright red. I blocked his view of it with my hand, palm out.

“I’m obviously not getting through to you! Let’s just go!” I stormed off toward the restaurant, hoping I would calm down enough to explain (or, figure out) the difference between what we were doing and a date by the time we got there.

I stayed a good two feet ahead of Amenohara for the rest of the walk, during which he remained silent. I didn’t know if he was contemplating what I’d said to him before or something else, but I was grateful for the chance to catch my breath.

The little bell on the glass door chimed as we made our entrance. The sign said “Please seat yourselves!” and I took the liberty of grabbing an open booth. Amenohara sat across from me and we were presented with menus and asked to order drinks before we got a chance to speak.

Amenohara spoke up first when the waitress left us. “Thanks again for—”

“Don’t thank me,” I interrupted. “I’m not doing you a favor right now.”

“Sure you are,” he said. “I’m new to this part of town and you’re taking the time to get to know me like this. That’s really kind.”

“You know,” I started, “you’re a little too honest about how you feel.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like just now. ‘That’s really kind,’” I mocked in a deliberately terrible impression of Amenohara. “Saying that sort of shit can make people think you’re coming on too strong, Amenohara...san.” I realized I’d never called him by name until just then.

“You can just call me Shinjiro,” he said with a smile.

“And that!” I held my hand out emphatically, as if presenting his words to him. “Who the hell gets on a first-name basis after knowing someone for less than two days!?”

“Okay, then Amenohara is fine for now.” The entire time we talked, he pored over the menu. It was kind of annoying me that he could multi-task like that. “Anyway, I don’t think there’s a problem with coming on strong in this case. I have a good chance here.”

“Chance? Chance for what?”

“To get a cute girlfriend at my new school?” He said it like I was a total idiot for not understanding intuitively.

“Cu-cute?” I looked away, blushing at the butterflies I got from the compliment, then caught myself. “Wait, wait, wait! I keep telling you, this isn’t a date or anything!”

“Fine,” he shrugged. “It’s not a date. I’ll just have to impress you enough to get you to go on a real date with me later, then.”

“Stop that already,” I whined. All that calming down on the walk over here did me precisely no good. I hid my face behind the restaurant’s plastic-bound menu and pretended to read it while I thought about what was happening.

Is he serious? He's moving way too fast! I don't even know if I like this guy yet and he's talking about boyfriends and dates and all this shit already! I peeked over the top of the menu to find Amenohara still deciding what he'd like to eat. And he's so damn casual about it! Was he a player or something at his last school? Am I in over my head here?

Before I got sucked into a spiral of questions about Amenohara's true intentions, the waitress returned and took our orders. I just got the hamburger steak on instinct (even though I ate the same thing yesterday for dinner) since I hadn't actually taken any time to decide what I wanted.

Once she left, Amenohara spoke up again. "So, what got you into karate when you were a kid?"

"Huh? How do you know that?" Was he stalking me? Was this part of his plan to play me?

"...I asked you yesterday how long you trained, and you said you did karate in elementary school."

"Oh. Oh, right...I forgot about that." I scratched my head. "Back then...I guess I did karate because I wanted to be strong."

"Why?" He asked. "Usually little girls don't have that kind of goal."

"Well, I used to get bullied as a little kid. The girls in my class would call me names, make fun of me, or mess with my stuff. The only one who didn't back then was Saeko, but they bullied her for defending me."

"So you wanted to protect your friend?"

"I guess that was part of it, sure. But I also thought that if I got stronger it wouldn't bother me as much when they picked on me."

"Did it work?"

"I didn't get a chance to find out. I ended up moving schools for my dad's work not long after I started."

"Didn't you say that was the same reason you ended up moving here?"

"Yeah. My old man ended up going back to his old job after a few years because they offered him a better position and better

pay." I was surprised at how quickly we were getting into a conversational groove; every other time we'd talked until now was riddled with awkward silences and unrelated segues.

"Sounds like it was a pretty good move. How did you feel about it at the time?" He took a sip of his drink and watched me intently.

"It's not like I had a choice, so of course I went along with it."

"Do you think things would have been better for you, personally, if you didn't have to move?"

Here was a pause, though this one wasn't because we'd run out of things to say like before. "Well...I don't know. I had friends back in middle school, but we weren't really tight or anything." I stared into my soda. "I guess that's not true. I had one good friend, but we lost touch after I moved."

"That's too bad. Maybe you should reach out?"

"...no, I don't think that's a good idea. We parted on bad terms and haven't spoken since the day before I left."

He hummed thoughtfully. "Well, I can't tell you what to do since I don't know all the details. It might be for the best like this, you know?"

"..yeah." I didn't expect to get caught up in reminiscing like this while I was out with Amenohara. Maybe that was part of moving on, or something. Come to think of it, I hadn't thought about Ichimaru in a long time. It really stung to think about that last day of middle school, in front of his house.

"I guess I don't want to get hurt again," I blurted out, mostly to myself.

"Sounds like it was pretty bad," Amenohara replied, reminding me that he was there. I didn't intend to spill my guts to him like this.

"Anyway," I spoke up, clearing my throat. "What about you? Did you have any friends at your old school?"

It was his turn to shrug awkwardly. "Not really. An honors student who slacks off isn't popular with other slackers or other honors students, and I didn't try hard enough in gym class for

sports clubs to want me.” He shrugged. “But that’s alright with me.”

Our food arrived before I could respond. I was surprised at how quickly Amenohara ate. For a skinny guy, he could sure pack it away.

Between bites I spoke up. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“Hmph?” He looked up mid-chew to confirm what I was asking.

“That you didn’t make any friends back then, I mean.”

He swallowed. “Oh, that. Not really. I didn’t *try* to make friends, so it was natural that no one tried to make friends with me.”

“You don’t regret it now?”

“Do you?”

“What do you mean?”

He washed down his dinner, which was completed in record time, and said, “From what I have seen and heard, people tend to avoid you. Do you regret not being approachable enough to make more friends?”

“I..” I recalled that morning on the roof and cleared my throat. “I think I do, yeah.”

He hummed again. “I wonder. How much better do you think your life would be if you were surrounded by a bunch of friends who weren’t very close to you? I don’t think that sounds very good.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m saying that having a lot of friends might be overrated. I think everyone needs a friend or two but it’s probably not better to have more than that. Things start to get fake between you and your ‘friends,’ or at least you end up with an incomplete relationship.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. Amenohara seemed to notice so he continued. “Say, for example, you went back in time and made yourself more approachable to others. Would those others, who decided that you were worthy of rejection in this timeline,

be good friends to you? Isn't it more likely that you would have to perform for them, rather than being true to yourself?"

"I guess you have a point...but isn't there a line? If someone is so terrible that no one will befriend him, I think that person is at least partly to blame. Like, if someone abused animals I wouldn't expect anyone who knew that to befriend him. Right?"

"But where is the line for 'terrible,' then? After all, I said myself that I didn't have any friends. I don't think I've ever done anything truly terrible, and I don't think my personality is so bad that I'm totally unlikable. Maybe you're right that I'm a little too open a little too quickly – in that case, is that bad personality trait worth rejecting the very idea of being friends with me? If someone thinks that, I think *he's* the bad one."

I poked my chin with the dull end of my fork, having cleaned my plate while Amenohara explained his position. He clearly spent a lot of time thinking about this sort of thing. "But aren't you then rejecting him for the same kind of petty reasons he rejected you?"

"I guess. Maybe I'm terrible in *that* way. Regardless, I think it makes more sense to be true to myself and stick with those who stick around me. That's how real friendship happens, and I'm okay with waiting for real friendship."

"And if it never comes?"

"Then I'm the terrible one after all." He said it flippantly, seeming very sure that it wasn't the case. "Anyway, I'll pay and we can go if you're finished."

"You don't need to pay for me," I said, reaching into my purse.

"Don't be silly," he said. "I'll pay as thanks for the invitation."

I thought he had that backward, but I wasn't going to turn down a free meal so I just shrugged and said, "Thanks."

The walk home was quiet and uneventful. I could tell the two of us were thinking about our conversation, but didn't want or know how to add more to it right now. We parted ways in front of my house, the same as yesterday.

"I'll see you at school tomorrow," I said to Amenohara's back.

"Thanks again for inviting me," he replied with a wave, turning so I could see him smile.

VIII

Bearing it and Baring It

The next morning, I found myself punching the bag on the roof in my karate-dogi again. Saeko was sitting with her knees up again, scrolling through her Quitter feed absentmindedly while I explained what had happened between me and Amenohara after school.

"Anyway," I grunted between strikes. "That's what we talked about."

"What a downer," she said.

"Yeah. He has a point though," I said before swinging at the bag a few more times.

"Sure," she said. "It's not good to pretend to be someone you're not. But everyone already knows that. There's a difference between *that* and being reasonable enough to make friends with people. I think he's taking it too seriously." She blew a bubble with her gum. "So, do you want to be his friend?"

"Are you asking..." I began, throwing another punch at the bag halfway through the sentence, "...if I'm a terrible person?"

She laughed. "I know you aren't."

"I don't know," I answered, stopping for a drink of water. "I don't think he's a bad guy. I definitely don't like him like *that*, but based on how he views friendship I think he'd be a good guy to have around."

"Do you think he likes you like *that*?"

"...maybe. He seems like he might. He kept calling it a 'date' and saying it was his chance to make a cute girl his girlfriend, but he lost interest in that kind of stuff as the evening went on."

"It totally *was* a date."

“Shut up.” I got back to the bag, kicking this time.

“Anyway, you said you don’t like him that way so that settles the romance aspect. Unless you think he’d take you rejecting his romance super-hard, you should just be normal friends with him. If that’s what you want, of course.”

“Do you think it’s possible to be normal friends with a guy who is into you like that?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged.

I rolled my eyes. “So what, should I just keep going as normal and if he never asks me out, he lost interest?”

“I guess?” She adjusted her bra strap under her uniform top.

“Very helpful,” I spat. The heat was starting to get to me.

“Do you agree with him that the people who rejected you were part of the problem?” She blew another pink bubble.

“I don’t think,” I strained, “they’re entirely,” another kick, “to blame.”

“But partially?”

“Yeah.” I grunted as I finished the last rep. “I was shitty and I did some things I shouldn’t have, but people rejected me before I ever did anything bad.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that you lost someone you care about to someone else, right?”

“..yes.” I said shyly. Remembering the previous morning was embarrassing; I cried like a baby.

“..want to talk about it?”

“No, I don’t.” I scooped up my bag. “I’ve tortured myself over that enough for one lifetime.” With that parting remark, I made my way downstairs.

The school showers always smelled weird. I didn’t know what the girls in the sports clubs were doing in there, but I didn’t want to stick around much and find out.

Thankfully, there wasn’t anything wrong with the showers themselves: good pressure, good heat, nice and steamy. I smiled despite myself.

I turned the knob down and jumped when the warm water suddenly turned cool against my skin before shutting off entirely. When I stepped out of the shower and back over to the lockers, I realized there was another girl there; one I recognized from my first year. The current captain of the girls' karate club, Nobara Miya.

She glared as soon as she saw me. "You can't just use the showers whenever you want to, Nakagawa. They're only for athletic club members."

I ignored her and dried off, facing away.

She didn't like that. "Didn't you hear me?"

"Am I supposed to put the water back?" I turned to face her. "Just leave me alone. I'll be out of here in a second." I did my best to keep my voice low.

"Don't be a smartass. I'm going to tell a teacher."

"In your underwear?" I gestured with a nod; she was dressing down for a shower of her own. "It's not like *you're* meant to be in here in the middle of class, either. They'll probably question you, too."

I could see her clench her fist. While I put my own underwear back on she said, "I got permission to come in here. Did you?"

"I don't believe you," I said, fastening my skirt. "Anyway, I would already be done here if you didn't keep bugging me." I pulled my shirt on and buttoned it, leaving it untucked as usual.

She stopped talking and continued to undress. I rolled my eyes and finished dressing myself before making for the door.

On the way out, I paused. She noticed. "Hurry it up."

"Hang on." I turned around to face her. "I just have a question for you."

"I don't care to answer it," she said, throwing her towel over her shoulder. I asked anyway. "What's your problem with me? It's not like I'm still screwing up the karate club for you guys. I haven't even spoken to you in almost two full years."

"Are you kidding? It's not like we're going to just forgive you for what you did to senpai back then. He had to go to the hospi-

tal!" She held out her hand emphatically and her chest jiggled a little.

"I'm aware," I grimaced. "He's the one who told me to go all-out. You heard him tell me not to hold back yourself. I didn't mean to hurt him that bad."

"Anyway, you totally screwed up the club dynamic. Everything was awkward for the rest of that year. We all felt like we had to look over our shoulders in case you came around again."

"That's bullshit," I spat. "I never did anything to hurt any of you."

"How were we supposed to know you wouldn't? You threatened me and those two second-years that day, too."

"I was pissed off, okay? I got kicked out of the club, and then I heard a bunch of weak-ass girls talking shit about me. How would you react?"

"Tch. It doesn't matter. The point is, you caused the club a lot of problems. Why *wouldn't* I have a problem with you?"

"I'm not asking to be your fuckin' pal, Nobara. I just don't want enemies, either." I scratched my head and looked at the floor.

"Why not? All you've done since coming to this school was make enemies. You just hit a kid this week! Why the sudden change of heart?"

"It's not a change of heart. I just..." I paused. To my surprise, she didn't interrupt. "I just don't think it's a good idea to be hated, and that's what I am."

"So, what? You want me to just pretend nothing happened and let you walk all over me? And the rest of the club? Should I start spreading rumors about how you were actually super nice once I got to know you?"

"No," I said, rubbing my forehead in frustration. "I don't want to come back to the club or anything. It's way past too late for anything like that. I don't even really like you girls, anyway. I guess I'm trying to apologize."

"Apologize?"

“Yeah. You’re right that I went too far against senpai. I should have held back in our fight. I flew off the handle when he punched me and I regret that.” I put my hand on my hip. “I’m *not* sorry about scaring the pants off you and those other two girls back then, though. Shit-talkers deserve that much, at least.”

She rolled her eyes. “Some apology.”

I turned back around and started to walk out. Just before I was out of earshot, she said, “For what it’s worth, I’m not sorry that I said I hoped sensei took you out of the club. I really meant that. But I will apologize for what the captain back then said. She shouldn’t have called you those names.”

I nodded, then walked out without another word.

I was met with a dirty look from Koyama-sensei, the Japanese teacher, when I came back to the classroom.

“Nakagawa-kun, where have you been? You missed all of Kubo-sensei’s class *and* the first half of this one. You better have a good explanation.” None of the teachers liked me (not that I blamed them), but Koyama in particular had a problem with my truancy.

“I was at school,” I said. “Just not in this class.”

“That’s not an explanation. Where were you?”

“The locker rooms,” I said. “I needed the toilet and the ladies’ room was occupied.” I sat at my desk next to Amenohara.

Koyama looked down his nose at me. “We’ll talk about it after class.” With that he continued his lesson, to which I paid no attention. I was half-tempted to bail on class again when Amenohara passed a note to me.

“Want to get lunch together today?”

I rubbed the back of my head and stared at the ceiling. I figured I didn’t have plans anymore since I went off on Saeko. I’d never done anything that extreme before; I realized what she said must have really gotten to me. I replied in the affirmative and passed the note back after making sure the teacher wasn’t looking at me.

“Okay,” said the next note, “I’ll meet you on the roof after class.” I stuffed it into my skirt pocket.

IX

Building Bridges

Koyama’s lecture was the same as he and every other teacher had given me a hundred times before – it’s *my* future, what of my parents who are working hard for me to get through school, it’s unfair to the other students, the works – and I didn’t even bother pretending to take it to heart. “Can I go now? It’s lunch time, and—”

“Just a moment. I need a favor from you.”

Again with the favors. Could the teachers at this school do anything themselves? “Why are you asking me?”

“You’re friends with Morino Saeko-kun, right?” He adjusted his glasses.

“Yeah, I guess. Did something happen?”

“I’m her home room teacher. I was handing out parent-teacher conference sign-up papers this morning and noticed she left hers on her desk. Could you take it to her? She needs to return it with her parents’ signature tomorrow.”

“You can’t just give it to her later?”

“Not if she doesn’t come back to class,” he retorted. “I would ask someone else, but you’re right here and I just remembered it, is all. I know you aren’t reliable with this kind of thing, but Kubo-sensei mentioned that you helped him out the other day with Amenohara-kun.”

I grimaced. “Alright, I’ll see if I can find her. No promises though.” I snatched the sheet from his outstretched hand and crammed it into my pocket.

“Is that all?”

“Go on and get your lunch,” he nodded before shuffling slowly out of the classroom. He was really getting up there in

years; every year the students placed bets on whether he would finally retire, but at this point some people were starting to bet he'd croak as a teacher.

I grabbed my bag, which had my packed lunch, and headed to the roof. I ensured no teachers were watching before making my way up the stairs.

As I turned the doorknob, I heard voices from outside.

"What are *you* doing up here?" said a boy's voice.

"I *always* come up here for lunch," replied a girl. "What are *you* doing here?" I had the mental image of crossed arms and mean glares.

It didn't take a brain trust to figure out who was arguing beyond the door. I almost didn't open it for fear of getting caught in the crossfire, but against my better judgment I walked onto the roof.

Saeko and Amenohara stood about three feet apart, staring each other down. They didn't appear to notice me yet and kept right on arguing.

"I was planning to eat up here with Nakagawa-san," said Amenohara.

"That's what *I* was doing," retorted Saeko, whose arms were in fact crossed in front of her chest. I don't think she meant to, but she was pushing her boobs up and emphasizing her already ample cleavage.

"Well I specifically invited her to eat up here," replied Amenohara. The door to the roof finally latched behind me after I'd released it earlier. "Speak of the devil! I was wondering what was taking you," he said with a smile to me.

"Junko!," said Saeko energetically. She was sweet as ever; I guessed she wasn't as bothered by our little spat earlier as I was. That, or she was just trying to act super-friendly to get Amenohara to go away. Regardless, I wanted to clear the air with her.

...later. I needed to defuse this situation first. "Hey, guys," I waved sheepishly. "What's for lunch?"

They blinked. Amenohara spoke first. "Aren't you going to say something to your friend about interrupting our lunch?"

“Oh, I’m interrupting, huh?” growled Saeko. They got a little closer to each other, and their voices louder.

“Guys, someone will hear you...” I tried to calm them down.

“Yeah, you’re interrupting! She and I were going to enjoy a nice lunch break together!”

“What, am I so bothersome you wouldn’t even be able to eat?!”

“Guys...”

“You’re doing a great job of being a pain right now!”

“Oh, I’ll show you a thing or two about pain!” Saeko rolled her already- short sleeve up to her shoulder.

I was worried she would really hit him, so I grabbed both of them by their collars. With little effort I was hoisting them up off the ground. “Enough!” I shouted louder than either of them were capable. “You two are acting like dumbasses. This is how we’ll get caught up here.”

There was a brief, awkward silence before Amenohara spoke up again. “Um, Nakagawa-san...”

“Listen, Amenohara.” I dropped the honorific and set both him and Saeko down. “I don’t want you to get the wrong impression. I think you’re alright, and I want to be friends with you. You’ve helped me out, been nice to me and all. I appreciate that. But I don’t want to date you, or be your girlfriend.”

He looked at his feet.

“See?” Saeko started, sticking her tongue out at the dejected boy. “You should have just left me alone from the start.”

“Don’t get uppity. You aren’t innocent here either.”

“But he-”

“Just drop it,” I said. “I want us all to get along, okay? I’m short enough on friends as it is.” They were both looking down, now, so I gave them a shake on the shoulders.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s eat.”

The meal started off awkward and quiet. All I could hear were the sounds of the three of us chewing and some chatter in the distance; no exchange of words took place for several minutes.

“Oh yeah,” I remembered. “Saeko, Koyama-sensei wanted me to give this to you.” I reached into my skirt and pulled out the now-crumpled sign-up sheet.

“You’re turning into such a teacher’s pet,” she said between mouthfuls of octopus-shaped sausage. “First walking *him* home for Kubo-sensei, and now this.” She stuffed the paper in her bag without looking at it.

“You don’t need to call me *him*,” said Amenohara. “You can just say my name.” He’d already finished his food and was beginning to pack his box up.

“I wouldn’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Saeko remarked sarcastically. “You’re so sensitive, after all.”

“*I’m* sensitive? You’re the one who—”

“Oi,” I interrupted. “No fighting.”

They glared at each other through narrowed eyes, but relented. “Anyway,” I said, “you’re one to talk about being teacher’s pet, Saeko. I’ve seen how you get your way with Maruyama-sensei.”

“I do *not* ‘get my way’ with him. He just likes me because I—”

“Because of the way you bat your eyes at him,” I interrupted. “Shenshei, can I pweashe get anodder day for my homework?” I mocked a pleading Saeko, pressing my boobs together under my shirt and looking up with puppy-dog eyes. “I’ww do anything~”

“I don’t do that!” she blushed so hard I could see it through her tan.

“Why not?” Amenohara interjected. We both raised an eyebrow at him. “If I was a cute girl, I’d have such a hold on the male teachers they would give me an A for skipping class. It’d be the easiest way to get through school.”

I looked at Saeko, who looked at me, then we both looked back at Amenohara. Saeko spoke up first. “So you would flirt with people to get your way, knowing that you’re just leading them on?”

“Just teachers. Boys our age are too sensitive for that, but a teacher would just take it for what it is. Hell, they’d probably get a kick out of it.”

I spoke up next. "You're a weird guy, Amenohara."

He shrugged. "You're the ones who are missing out on easy A's. I bet the teachers would *let* you onto the roof if you played them right."

Saeko finished her meal and packed her lunch box away while responding. "You must think it's *so* easy to be a girl, huh?"

"No, I didn't say that. I know there are problems only girls have. What I *am* saying is that girls don't use their strengths to their advantage like they should. You aren't...ambitious enough, I guess is the way I'd put it."

"You can't just say that we should use our bodies to our advantage!"

"Why not? Men use our bodies to our advantage, just in a different way than you girls can. We don't hold back on our strengths."

I spoke up, "Don't speak for all of us. There are absolutely girls who do that, and Saeko is one of them. But there's a line you shouldn't cross and every girl's line is different. Some probably don't have one. I guess you'd be one of those. But other girls hate that kind of girl, so you'd have to consider that."

He poked at his bottom lip ponderously, looking up at the sky. "I guess that's something I didn't consider." He looked back down. "Do other girls not get along with Morino-san?"

"Nope," Saeko and I said in unison.

"That's why I hang out with Junko. She's the only girl who *doesn't* have a bone to pick with me. And I don't even do anything that bad!"

"Why *do* you two get along so well?"

"Because I won't leave her alone," grinned Saeko.

"That's *one* way to put it," I said. "When I first moved back here, I was training on the roof alone and she came up here to smoke. I told her to get lost, but she ignored me even when I threatened to kick her ass. 'You'll just have to try!' is what she said back then."

"You're all talk," she said. "Well, and all muscle."

“She hit someone just the other day,” Amenohara spoke up. “Right in front of everyone. He almost puked.”

“Only because he was making fun of me,” I said. “Saeko is a pain, but she never did anything like that.”

“I’m not a pain!” She pouted with her hands on her hips.

Finally, I finished my lunch and put it away. Usually I ate much faster; all this talking slowed me way down. The bell rang as I stood up, and I felt the cool breeze against the back of my legs.

I stood there for a second with my hands on my hips, looking over my shoulder at Saeko and Amenohara, who were still seated. “We should do this again, guys.”

I noticed Amenohara’s face was getting a little red. Saeko stifled a laugh.

“What is it?” I asked, still looking behind me.

“It sure is windy out today, huh?” said Saeko.

“I guess...” I ‘felt the breeze’ again, then looked down. My skirt had blown straight up, and my ass was on full display for the two of them. I’d changed out of my spats after working out earlier and into a pair of all-white panties similar to the ones I’d worn the other day. In a panic, I spun around, but that just gave them the full frontal view instead.

Amenohara had looked away, but I could see him peeking out of the corner of his eye. Saeko laughed so hard she fell back, kicking her legs. “The little pink bow—!” she managed between snorting laughter. I threw my hand down to block their view, red as a tomato.

“Shut up,” I yelled over the wind. “And put your phone away! No pictures!”

Amenohara started laughing, and before I knew it the both of them were gasping for air. “It’s not funny!” I groaned, smiling despite myself.

X

Relief

The next couple of weeks passed in a blur. Routines have a funny way of making you forget the events of the days themselves, and after that day on the roof the three of us developed a routine of hanging out together every day.

At first Amenohara only joined us for lunch, but after a couple of days he brought his manga up to the roof to read with Saeko while I trained. Once in a while I would flip through a volume with them, but I just couldn't get into the magical girl stuff. They always solved their problems by talking and casting little spells; I wanted to see some fighting.

The two of them would go on and on about it, though. Saeko read it when she was a kid, and was really stoked to talk about it with someone who knew as much as Amenohara did. One day she said something about the GoMen convention over summer, and that they should exchange contact information so they could meet up there. Saeko kept trying to get me to cosplay one of the villain characters, but as soon as I saw how little clothing she wore I turned her down emphatically.

"But you'd be so sexy," said Saeko, Amenohara nodding behind her. "You totally have the body to pull it off!"

"No way," I insisted. "I ain't wearing that outfit. It's practically a microbikini with hot pants!" The lady *did* look kind of like me, but I didn't want to admit that right now.

"That's why it would look so good!"

"I'm not doing it!"

She pouted, but I stood my ground. "Fine," she said. "You don't have to."

Or so she said, but she spent the next week trying to convince me to wear the stupid outfit. I refused every time, despite her imploring, and when summer vacation finally arrived she and Amenohara decided to go to the convention without me (which was what I wanted in the first place).

The day of the convention, I awoke with little to do. I remembered that this used to be normal for me on school breaks – I would spend off-days “causing trouble,” as my dad would say. Since Amenohara started hanging out with me and Saeko, I started spending a lot more of my time with the two of them. I seldom hung out with Saeko outside the school before Amenohara came into the picture; I preferred to be alone then.

I lay in bed with just my night clothes on, staring at the ceiling and trying to ignore the heat. I wondered at what to do for the first time in a while. Saeko made me promise not to train if it got too hot since no one would be around to look after me, and the sun was scorching that day. Mom was reading in the living room when I poked my head inside. “Where’s dad?”

“He’s working in the garden,” she said without looking up from her book.

“Alright.”

“Going out with your friends?”

“Nah, they’re doing something together today.” She smiled, but I didn’t get why. Must have been the book.

I went to the back door after getting dressed and saw dad bent over the soil. His hat did little to protect him from the heat, and I could see him struggling with his tools.

I walked out with a bottle of water and handed it to him. “Need some help, old man?”

He took the bottle and smiled. “I’m not old yet, you know. But I could use a hand.” Dad took a long, slow drink.

I knelt down beside him and picked up where he left off, making little holes for the tomato seeds he was planting.

He lectured me about the size of the holes and I did my best to keep up, but gardening was harder work than I gave him credit for. Before I knew it, I was struggling against the hot sun beating down on my back.

We took a break after a couple of hours. “Not spending the day with your friends?” he asked after taking another drink.

“No,” I replied. “They’re hanging out together at some manga thing.”

“Just the two of them?”

“..yeah?” He looked kind of disappointed. “It’s not like they aren’t still my friends, dad. You don’t need to worry so much about me.”

He perked up. “Oh, that’s not what I’m thinking about,” he chuckled. “I know they’re good friends to you.”

I raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. He started to ask about summer homework, so I stood up with renewed vigor and got back to gardening until mom called for dinner.

That night, after showering, I looked in the mirror again. It was the same body I’d looked at with such disgust when Ichimaru rejected me, more or less – my boobs weren’t even any bigger three years later – and yet I didn’t hate the way it looked anymore. Maybe I just didn’t hate *myself* anymore. I was too exhausted to think about it for long; I flopped onto my bed in just my underwear and fell asleep in seconds.

The next day, Saeko called me first thing in the morning.

“The beach!”

“Huh?”

“We’re going to the beach! Shinji-kun and I decided yesterday that the beach sounded fun, and we wanted to invite you since you missed the con yesterday!” She sounded really enthusiastic.

“Shinji...kun?”

“Yeah, you know! Shinji-kun! Anyway, we’re going to meet at the beach in an hour. Be there in a swimsuit!”

“Wait,” I started, but she hung up. Amenohara texted me right after. “Did Saeko tell you about the beach yet?”

“Yeah, she called me about it.”

I rolled out of bed after triple checking that the curtains were completely shut, having fallen asleep almost totally naked thanks to the heat. I grabbed some casual clothes and as I made

my way to the bathroom to take a shower (I worked up a serious sweat in my sleep), my phone rang again.

“You have a swimsuit, right?”

“Good morning to you too, Saeko. Yes, I have a swimsuit.”

“*Not* the school swimsuit, right? You have a bikini or something, right?”

“Yes, I have a normal swimsuit.” I hadn’t worn it yet, though.

“Good. I’ll be at your house soon.”

“Wait—”

Again, she hung up before I could say more.

I took a cold shower, this time, to try and stave off some of the heat. Even with the A/C running, the air was wet and tepid inside.

I didn’t have time to dry my hair before Saeko rang our doorbell.

“Coming,” I called as I walked toward the door, towel still covering my head. I pulled it open and there stood Saeko with Amenohara.

“Junko! Let’s go!” She was practically jumping with excitement.

“Wait a second,” I said. “Don’t just drag me along. I don’t even have my stuff. And why the beach all of the sudden, anyway?”

“It’s hot! It’s summer break! Do we need more reason than that?!” She declared. “Hurry up and get your things! I wanna get there early!” I rolled my eyes and went back inside to grab my swimsuit and some basic beach supplies like sunscreen.

On the way out, I saw dad standing at the door talking to my friends.

“Don’t worry, Nakagawa-san. We’ll be careful!”

“I was talking to Amenohara, Saeko-chan...” he said with a barely detectable hint of venom. When he noticed me he perked up a bit. “Oh, good morning, Junko.” He looked at me over his shoulder. “Saeko-chan just let me know you’re going to the beach with her and Amenohara-san. Be careful not to get a sunburn, okay?” He was talking casually but he looked a little down somehow.

“Everything alright, dad? If you need me to stay, I—”

“No, no,” he interrupted, “it’s nothing. I’m just thinking about getting older, is all.” He sighed and walked back toward the house. When he turned, he looked surprised; I followed his gaze and saw my mom standing in the doorway with her arms crossed.

He suddenly looked a bit nervous. “Anyway, Junko, like I was saying. Take care on your trip.”

“...right. See you later dad, mom.” I made for the gate where Saeko and Amenohara were whispering about something. When the door shut behind my dad, I interrupted them. “So why the beach all of the sudden? I figured you two would want to rest after that nerd thing.”

“No way!” Saeko rejoined. “We can’t waste our summer laying around! Now let’s go!”

She grabbed me and Amenohara by the hand and pulled us all the way to the station.

The beach was surprisingly empty for such a hot morning. There were a handful of umbrellas and towels set up, but it was hardly the packed crowd I expected to be there.

“Let’s go change,” Saeko said. “We’ll be back out in a few minutes, Shinji-kun!” She dragged me into the changing room and closed the door behind us.

“Why’re you in such a hurry?” I asked. “It’s not like the beach is going anywhere. And what’s up with this ‘Shinji-kun’ stuff?” I tossed off my t-shirt and started undoing my shorts.

“I just wanna get changed, is all,” she said, humming a little tune as she pulled her sundress over her head. Her underwear, which was barely there in the first place, hit the floor soon after.

I started to take off my own delicates. “Okay, what’s going on?” My bra made a small noise as it hit the tiled floor of the changing room. “You are in *way* too good a mood and it’s creeping me out.”

“Nothing!” she said. “Come on, hurry up!”

As further evidence that Saeko was way too excited about this, she’d already put her bikini top on. It was technically cov-

ering the important parts, barely, and the bright red stood out against her skin.

“That’s pretty bold,” I said as I put my own, more modest top on.

“Is it? Do you think it’s too much?”

“Since when do you care?”

“Since...” she stopped. “I just do, okay?”

“No,” I said, stepping toward her after I pulled my bottom on. They were black like the top, in a boyshorts style. “You never cared what people thought of your outfits before.” I stepped closer to her as she mulled over her bra, still totally bottomless. “Something’s up with you today.”

She was blushing like crazy, I realized. I’d never seen her so self-conscious before. It wasn’t because she didn’t have bottoms on – it wasn’t new for the two of us to see each other nude – so I figured it was connected to her newfound concern over the modesty of her dress.

“Well, I wanted to wait to tell you until later,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want to make you mad.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Why would I get mad?”

“Because...” She stood in silence for a while, poking her fingers together and fiddling with her bikini top.

“Yeah...?”

She took a deep breath. “Amenohara and I kissed at the convention yesterday and we’re kind of dating now but I don’t want you to think you are a third wheel or something because you’re still like, super important to me and if me dating him will be a problem then I will break it off but anyway I don’t want him to think I’m a total slut or something so maybe we should trade bikinis but I guess my top wouldn’t fit you huh?”

I blinked. That was a lot of new information all at once.

“Oh, god, you’re mad,” she started.

“Wait, wait,” I held up a hand and it stopped her. “I’m not mad.”

“You’re not?”

“No,” I said. “Why would I be?”

“I guessed I thought you might be jealous?”

“Of Amenohara? No way. He’s all yours, sister.” I gave her an encouraging slap on the bottom, at which she jumped and yelped like a puppy.

My slap reminded her to pull her bottoms on. They were just as skimpy as her bra; from the back, she might as well have gone without them. “No, not like that! I thought you’d be worried that your friend was being taken away.”

I grinned. “Aw. You must really like me, huh?”

“Don’t get cocky!” She put her fists on her bare hips. “I’m being serious. I was worried about how you’d feel.”

“Well, don’t be.” I put my hand on her shoulder. “I trust you enough to know you wouldn’t hurt me like that.”

“So you’re okay with it?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you!” She wrapped her arms around me in a tight hug. I could feel her boobs pressing against my stomach.

“Easy, easy,” I said. “Let’s get back outside, yeah? Amenohara’s probably been changed for a while. Wouldn’t want to keep him waiting, right?”

She nodded, and we walked out of the dark room together.

To say our day at the beach was eventful would be an understatement. Saeko started with modeling her swimsuit for Amenohara, and his reaction – turning completely around and saying it was great – showed just how much he liked her.

After that, Saeko brought out the water pistols she brought. I want to say they put up a good fight, but even as a team they didn’t stand a chance against me. We went to the tides after our war and splashed around a bit before getting lunch at the nearby beach house.

Saeko wanted to work on her tan and asked Amenohara to put her sunscreen on. I pretended not to notice how obviously

she overreacted to how “cold” the lotion was, but did she *really* need to make such a loud noise?

I must have fallen asleep while they were having their fun, because I woke up buried from the neck down in the sand. “That’s revenge for the water guns,” they said with smirks. The smug looks fell right off their faces when I effortlessly lifted myself out of my sandy prison.

Right before we were set to leave, we got back in the water to splash around some more. The two of them were really going at me, and unlike with the pistols I was actually having a hard time dealing with the assault two-front water assault. “Okay,” I managed between splashes, “I give!”

“Yay! We won, Shinji-kun!” Saeko jumped for joy when she cheered, and that was when Amenohara and I realized *something* was missing. It must have been obvious how suddenly we got quiet, because Saeko stopped cheering. “Guys? What’s wrong?”

Amenohara couldn’t say anything. He just stared dumb-founded. I covered my mouth with one hand to hide my smile.

“What is it? This isn’t funny!”

“Well, Saeko-chan...your...”

“My *what*?” Finally, she looked down. Her bikini top had fallen off in the tumult of our splashing and her chest was totally exposed, complete with hard nipples from the cool water dripping off them.

I lost it. I laughed so hard I couldn’t stand in the water and fell onto my butt. She panicked and covered herself with her arms while desperately searching for her lost top. Amenohara moved into waist-deep water.

The search party was brief – I started to feel bad for Saeko and helped look for the missing garment after a minute and we found it floating nearby.

Finally, we made our way back to the station and headed for home.

“I’m beat,” said Saeko. “Gonna be sore tomorrow.”

“Same here,” yawned Amenohara. “I might sleep all day.”

“Didn’t you guys say you wanted to have as much fun as possible over summer?” I asked.

“Sleeping is a lot of fun,” rebutted Amenohara. I didn’t bother to point out the contradiction.

The three of us found a seat together on the nearly empty train. It took next to no time for Saeko to pass out, head against my shoulder. Amenohara fell asleep leaning into her.

“Jeez,” I said to myself, adjusting so they’d be a bit more comfortable. I looked down at their snoring faces and smiled.

Soon I started leaning onto Saeko myself. Just to prop myself up. I wasn’t tired enough to fall asleep...

Afterword

Thank you sincerely for reading my story. I hope you enjoyed it.

While I was writing this story I took a different approach from usual – normally I plan the entire story out in advance and expand on each pre-written section until it is somewhat cohesive. You may be able to tell, but this time I decided to just “wing” it and go with whatever my gut told me the characters would do as I went. As a result, the rough draft version is different from this final version in some pretty substantial ways – characters changed as I went on writing the story and their past actions became contradictions to their final characterizations, so I had to make some major edits for the first time. If you read the rough draft, I’d be interested to know which version of the characters’ development you preferred.

Speaking of the characters: I think this is the “closest” I’ve felt to a character I wrote in a long time. It’s the first time I let them decide what they would do rather than fitting them into my premade box, so I got to connect with them in a different way from usual. I don’t know if they are my strongest characters or if they’re even well-written at all, but I certainly enjoyed

this method of writing.

In my initial concept for the story, Junko and Amenohara ended up in a romantic relationship at the end. As I was writing it, though, I noticed that the two of them had next to no romantic chemistry and behaved more like new friends than two people who were attracted to each other.

There was a brief point where Junko and Saeko got romantically involved. When Junko spills her guts on the roof in chapter 5, Saeko originally gave her a kiss as proof that she wasn't ugly and that people did like her. However, the story went into a dark direction against my will from there and I decided that regardless of Saeko's feelings, Junko simply was not made for yuri. I couldn't go anywhere with it that didn't involve Junko, ironically, rejecting Saeko's feelings, and that sort of sour ending was one I wanted to avoid here. Besides that, I really liked Saeko and Junko's chemistry as friends and wanted to preserve their existing, fun dynamic.

Of course, that begs the question of what the hell caused Junko to turn around emotionally from that point (chapter 5) onward besides just venting her frustrations with herself. I didn't want to end with the simple solution of "if you have a relationship go wrong, the solution is to get into another one," because it's a) not what I believe and b) a bit of a sad message to send. If Amenohara ends up with Junko as a sort of delayed rebound from Ichimaru, is that the kind of "real" relationship he is so interested in cultivating? Similarly, if Saeko and Junko ended up together, would that *really* solve Junko's self-loathing? (No, which is why their relationship went in a sad direction when I tried to force them together). I decided that Amenohara's rambling about true friendship was the answer I needed.

I don't know if I did a good job of showing that Junko let herself trust others again once she got close to both Amenohara and Saeko. The point of the locker room argument was to demonstrate her resolve to let down her own walls so she could get through to others and start properly connecting with people again. I don't know if that really works, but I like the scene.

I'm sure some anons will question whether all the fanservice was necessary. This story has a lot of panchira, embarrassed and non-embarrassed nudity, and so on. I won't pretend some of it wasn't just because I thought it would be funny or erotic, but the idea is that Junko unwittingly lets down her metaphorical defenses to Amenohara which is why she is so interested in him at first – she feels “exposed” to someone else, and that lets her rationalize trying to get close to him when she hadn't done so for so long (even if she doesn't really admit it at any point in the story). If you notice, most of the scenes where she is nude or mostly nude involve some introspection and examination of both her physical and emotional selves, and her nude selfie to Saeko is what leads to Saeko “seeing through her” on the roof later. Of course, there's also nothing wrong with naked girls for their own sake, so if you liked it for that reason that's fine with me.

I wish I had more time to develop Junko's relationship with her parents, particularly her mother who exists mostly as a prop. From the look we get into her home life, she gets along pretty well with her parents but her father tends to scold or chide her for her delinquency and truancy. That's good, and that's the idea – her father tends his garden, after all, and that isn't just literal – but I think an argument or a disappointed conversation after she did some actually bad deed (as in a crime or fight at school, which I could only allude to due to time constraints) would shed more light on what kind of parents she has. As it is, they're just okay but they're my biggest regret with the story.

Anyway, as I said at the start of this afterword, I hope you enjoyed my perspective on how someone might handle the rejection so often seen in harem stories badly, and what it might take to pull them out of that mental state. Thanks, again, for reading.

– Anon

Beyond the Pale

by /a/non

"I just don't understand why you have to go." It was my wife, again.

"Didn't I explain this already? I was selected. Hand picked, even."

"So what? That isn't a reason, and you know it. You never—"

"Of course it's a reason. I owe a lot to the company, and you do too, for that matter. It doesn't take a whole lot of sense to see that—"

"...sir..." A voice from the outside began to tap at my awareness.

"—that this is going to be a big step up for us. Yes, I'll be gone for a while, but—"

"...approxima...advise..."

"—but I'll be back before you know it, and you'll have plenty to occupy yourself with. Even you've been saying how busy you are recently—"

"Are you talking to someone else? Is it work?" Her tone became nervous and borderline fearful.

"No."

There was a brief silence. "It's not about being bored. I don't know how much more I can stand being apart for so long..."

"...atten...behoove..."

I sighed.

"I understand that it can be hard for you at times like this...It is for me too."

"Liar."

"But you need to understand that there are certain things I can't just turn down."

“You turn us down all the time! You have a life back here! You have a family! You can’t just—”

“Sir...long will...if it is...”

“..you didn’t sell your life to that company!”

Those words echoed in my head for a long time before I could respond.

“No, I didn’t.” I cut the comm link and opened my eyes. I was in my body again.

I sat up in my bunk and looked towards the door of my tiny quarters. My swimming eyes adjusted to the sight of a stately figure before me. Its refined, pseudo-metallic features regarded me with barely disguised amusement. It was my administrative assistant, Christina. I didn’t know how long she had been in my quarters, but it would likely have been much longer than I had been hearing her voice for. She had recently made a habit of standing around until noticed, rather than speaking up to get your attention. I’m not sure whether it was out of shyness or if it was some kind of game for her, but I was never able to break her of the habit – especially not at compromising times like these. Such quirks weren’t necessarily unusual for units of her model, though. Perhaps it’s a feature.

“If now is an inconvenient time, I could return later. Sir was speaking with someone, was he not? If I could be so bold as to guess...” – she stifled a laugh – “...sir was speaking with his...*companion*? Was he not?”

Her intuition about these things was so uncanny I at times suspected she had somehow gotten read access on my neural tap. After her laughter calmed down, I asked her what she had come there for.

“We will be making landfall in approximately twenty minutes. Sir would be well advised to see to any duties he may have on deck, and to be prepared to disembark promptly when the time comes. I would have notified Sir remotely, had he not been indisposed with his communication channel...So I had no recourse but to come and visit you—”

“Thank you, Christina.” I was already out the door before she had finished.

I strode across the few meters of the deck that separated me from the railing of the ship and leaned over it, straining to catch a glimpse of anything at all, but to no avail. A thick fog had settled in unnoticed, and we seemed to anyone on board but the pilot to be hurtling into nothingness. I relaxed and inhaled through my nose. The air was frigid; chilling. It was the kind of cold that chilled the body but heated the spirit – that stirred the imagination to places remote and forbidding. Our expedition had come so far north now that even in the height of summer one could breathe this kind of air – and our destination lay still farther north. Though we were traveling over the relatively shallow waters of an inland sea, I liked to imagine them much deeper. To me who had spent his life in the cradle of civilization, the thought was exhilarating.

My reverie was cut short by other company employees assigned to the expedition joining me on deck. A few were accompanied by their assistants. Everyone on the boat was cybernetically augmented with a neural tap at the least, and while most were engineers, like myself, there was a chemist, a geologist, and even a few anthropologists and linguists as well. Most of them, human or assistant, gazed out into the fog with unreadable expressions. Among the trickle of passengers came Christina. She sidled up next to me and spoke into my mind: “Even if Sir leans over the railing, he won’t make the ship go any faster.”

I turned to face her. Her brass, chrome-ish lips were curled into a wry smile. At least, as much of one as she could make. Her facial construction was mostly empty of human imitation (people had stopped bothering to make them look human long ago) and her face looked rather like a bronze mask, dully lustrous and with a warm hue. It wasn’t actually metal, though, and so she had many facial expressions at her disposal, of which she made abundant use. Her lips could smile or frown, but never part to reveal teeth; the muscles around her seemingly empty eye sockets could smile, too, but never make crow’s feet. As with most assis-

tants, she had a charming but rigid face. There were those, especially in the company, who would have preferred to say “charmingly rigid”, and while I did not judge those individuals for their tastes I did not count myself among them.

While straining to think of some witty reply I was tapped on the shoulder. I turned to see the smiling face of a colleague and long time friend, Brian Lovejoy, along with his assistant, Suzy. He was a well built man with ruddy features who always seemed to be in good spirits; quite rare in his line of work. He was a software developer with a focus on language processing in administrative assistants, like his own Suzy or my Christina. His fondness for the humanoid machines whose “personalities” he was so integral in forming well surpassed that of most in the company; his affection towards his own assistant in particular earned him a kind of jocular infamy.

He stood there for a moment with his hands out, not saying anything. Then, he pointed to his ear. At that point I realized that my neural tap’s local area communication channels were only open to Christina. I whitelisted Brian and thought a question to him:

“Hello, Brian. Did you need something?”

“Why do you keep your comms closed all the time? You’re so unsociable, man.” He grinned somewhat mockingly. “I hope you were talking to Christina, at least. You better not be rude to her. She’s your one and only assistant, after all. You should treasure her.”

“As always, you speak with perfect accuracy and tact, Mr. Lovejoy,” Christina chimed in before I could tell Brian to get to the point. Thus emboldened, he continued:

“Even assistants need love, you know? They’re not just machines. They may say that the language processing unit is just silicon, but the magic it makes is *life*.” He turned away from me and began to soliloquize, too focused to be stopped now: “You would know if you gave it a chance. The only difference between me and my Suzy” – he grabbed his assistant by the waist – “is the raw stuff we’re made of. But our love is just as real and just as rare

as any other." As he said this, he ran his hand down Suzy's cheek, in response to which she covered her face bashfully – a gesture which had been Brian's typical reaction to embarrassment since he was a teenager. Adjusting his posture and placing his fingers on his chin, he pontificated smugly, "That's what you need more of, man. Love. What it comes from is just a detail, and details never matter much in the end." I was amazed he could say such things despite being a software developer.

Such attitudes were not at all uncommon, however, especially in our company. Indeed, one of the company's early sources of major revenue was the sale of "anatomically accurate" robots, none too subtly marketed for the tending of sexual desires. The sight and even knowledge of them was a hard adjustment for society at the time to make, but eventually most came to see their utility; not only as sexual partners, but as helpers, friends, or even spouses in some cases. These "sex robots" were the progenitors of the more overtly synthetic "assistants" mostly in use today. We in the company who are of sufficient rank are all issued one, and the occurrence of romance between an employee and his or her assistant is perhaps as high as 20%, though it's lower in other corporations and in general society.

I bore such people no ill will, and had no strong opinion on the matter either way. Even still, whether to reprimand his unwarranted haughtiness or simply to argue, I ventured a response even though it was not my field of expertise. "If that love is just the result of matrix multiplication on a massive scale, one could argue that the details matter. Human intention plays a large role in these things, you know. An assistant's alignment matrix goes a long way in simulating that but it's ultimately just that – a simulation."

"You think I don't know this shit? That hurts. I thought we were better friends than that." He made a show of affected grief. "But you know, you really should think about what it's a simulation of in the first place." Then, in a somewhat graver tone, he added, "Your human *mode of doing things* isn't as unique as you think it is." He punctuated this claim with a discordantly jocular

waggle of his finger. Suzy imitated him playfully, making sure to direct a matronly look at me. One thing Brian and I had in common is that we were both given assistants that were so damned smug all the time. Suddenly, Suzy seemed to remember something, and addressed her owner: "Honey, didn't you come here to tell him something?"

"Oh, right," he exclaimed, shedding his condescending air in an instant. "You said you wanted a map of the Valley, right? I tried to give you one but you're blocking file transfers."

It was standard procedure in the company to refuse all requests for file transfers except on a case-by-case basis and from one's own assistant for obvious security reasons. Brian was the only one who flouted this practice, to the detriment of his own safety and of those around him. He would apologize when chided but constantly forget to rectify the issue. Thankfully, he's mostly only ever around coworkers, doesn't get out much, and knows enough to not execute malicious code that's been dropped into his brain.

Brian himself, of course, is probably one of the least malicious people alive, so I opened file transfers to him; a straightforward task since every company employee's UUID is preloaded into our brains. Sensing this, he sent a map file to my mind and I closed file transfers again. Finally having an excuse to leave this conversation, I bid farewell to Brian and Suzy and found the nearest place I could stand without blocking foot traffic. I closed my eyes and shut out the world again. After a brief repose, I opened the map of the Valley I had gotten.

At about 1 degree, 38 minutes north of the Arctic circle, there is a mountainous and inhospitable region far from any significant human habitation. Nestled in these mountains is the Valley, ringed with exceptionally tall peaks and alone in its pleasantness for hundreds of kilometers. This place was the object of our expedition. Compared to the high altitudes that surround it, it nestles abruptly into the Earth and, furnished abundantly with snowmelt rivers from the surrounding peaks, creates a relatively habitable zone where various forms of life are known to flourish.

The mountains that encircle it are so tall that one cannot scale them without life support gear, and few have made an attempt at getting up them, let alone getting down into the uninhabited valley from which there was no guarantee of escape, comparatively livable though it may have been. (At least, if any tried, they did not return.) Moreover, the area is so prone to inclement weather that the windows of time in which it can be safely flown into by plane are typically measured in hours per week, and they're rarely contiguous. Consider further that there was little practical incentive to go there, and it becomes clear why the civilized world had heretofore only known the Valley through satellite imagery and geological surveys of the surrounding mountains.

The seeming lack of any useful resources in the area had consigned the Valley to be mostly an object for ideation rather than study or exploration. Its virginal peaks; its untapped mysteries, have captured the minds of any person who is enchanted by the unknown or weary of the mundane for generations. For them, the Valley was an almost religious object that whispered hope of a life apart from the benign and merely sensible life of an urban employee. Who knows how many weeks, months, or years have been collectively whiled away by those dreamers, staring out the window and nursing thoughts of adventure to soothe a tedious life – and though tedious lives may abound in our day, few could rationally justify dropping everything and just going. Their rationality, their calculation of profit and loss, their expectations of right and wrong, held them in unwilling bondage. This, then, is why, when a mountaineer returned from a trek with a rock sample that suggested the presence of uranium in the region, there was celebration among the general public as well as in the boardrooms of great corporations and in the halls of governments. Now, the world had found what it most desperately craved: an excuse to plumb those depths; to risk life and limb braving the most difficult terrain on the planet for some distinct end beyond self satisfaction. The allure of a valuable metal had sufficed to ease the severity of good sense, and to secure its source was the primary goal of our expedition and the

reason why we were able to do what so many had dreamed of for so long.

But this was not all: only a few years before the discovery of the uranium, careful observation of satellite imagery revealed trace evidence that the Valley was inhabited by a primitive society of humans, with whom no known persons had had prior contact. The stir this caused, not only by its own weight but also by the amazement that such a fact had gone unnoticed for so long, greatly increased the public appetite for this newly mysterious place. People the world over were willing to leap on the excuse of the uranium all the more quickly on this account. To make contact with this new culture, then, was the second object of our expedition; it was hoped that they could provide us with knowledge of the area and act as guides if necessary. It was to this end that there were anthropologists and linguists accompanying us on the expedition, and their excitement to be at the cutting edge of their field was palpable, and shared even by those outside of it.

The map Brian had given me was a topographic map, made by a composite of satellite imagery and aerial Lidar scans. As I mentioned before, the region the Valley is in is generally mountainous. As one approaches it from the south, the average elevation gradually increases from 2 to about 4 kilometers, with peaks here and there to a maximum of 6.3 kilometers. The incline from south to north is shallow, and there are sufficient lows and valleys in this territory to make traversal relatively easy, provided one knows the best route to take. This area was therefore of no great concern to us, and it was generally supposed that we could cross it overland in about a day. However, things change drastically when one arrives at the threshold of the Valley. It is ringed by mountains so tall that even the mildest of them tower above their outer neighbors, having an average elevation of 7.3 kilometers and reaching extremes of 10.8 kilometers. To stand on such a precipice would require not only an oxygen supply, but a pressurized suit to be consistently survivable. Of those mountaineers who attempted the climb to the tallest peak, the survival

rate was (at the time) 23%. The corpses of those who died cannot be removed due to the dangerous conditions at those heights. The unfortunate lie there still, frozen and unchanging, watching the world below pass them by.

If the elevation change from outside of the Valley to its edge is drastic, then the change from the edge to the Valley itself is still more so. As one enters the Valley, the edge mountains drop off with dizzying suddenness and their slopes plummet over only 5 kilometers into the valley itself, whose elevation is a mere 2 kilometers. If one wished to descend into the Valley by even the shallowest route (the one we were to take from the south), it would require at least some actual climbing, and pulleys to lower equipment. If one did manage to thread a path between the crags, through the narrow passes, and down the near vertical drops, he would eventually find himself in the Valley proper. Compared to the lethal environment of the peaks, it was supposed to be quite pleasant. Rivers and streams run thatch-like over a grassy tundra plain, and in the warmer months wildflowers bloom, animals roam about, and as we had recently come to know, a young human society of Adams and Eves make busy to prepare for the Arctic winter. The exact means of their survival was unknown to us; it was clear that they didn't practice agriculture, but beyond this we could only make reasonable inferences.

Satisfied with the layout of the region, I strained my eyes open once again. I noticed Christina was standing next to me. She was nonplussed when I noticed her and seemed somehow annoyed. "Sir, it is most impolite to leave the presence of company so abruptly. When Sir stormed off immediately after getting what he wanted, I had half a mind to scold Sir the way a mother might before Sir had the chance to slip into his little dream world," she fluently seethed at me.

"I apologize," I began halfheartedly while looking over her head across the deck, "for my curtness." It seemed I had finished my study of the map just in time for disembarkation. "You know, Christina, if you wanted to look at the map too, I could have sent it to you. You only had to ask," I offered with mock timidity.

“Oh, fie. Sir knows well that such things are his job, not mine. If it pleases Sir, he should refrain from using his work as an excuse for being unsociable,” she riposted.

It was undeniably true that Brian had gone out of his way to help me out with something I had pestered him over for some time, and asked nothing in return. I should have thanked him more graciously. Informing Christina of her victory, I said, “Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry. I’ll catch up with Brian and Suzy later today, if I see them.” She seemed pleased with this, and we sauntered over to the off ramp together.

After stepping onto the dock, we surveyed the area. In the distance, boreal pine forests loomed, half shrouded by the haze that had yet to fully clear. The area past the beach was clear for about 200 meters. Our accommodations had been built in this area, with a good stone’s throw of space’s separation from the coniferous treeline. Rather than “accommodations”, it would be more accurate to call it a forward operating base. We were to stay here for the night before departing towards the Valley in the morning. It was hastily constructed ahead of our arrival by unaugmented contractors at the order of the company. These contractors were also in charge of manning the radios, keeping the lights on, and generally looking after the place until it was no longer needed, which would be after our return about three months from then.

We filed off of the boat with eagerness, relishing the cold winds of the near-arctic; there was excitement in the air so thick one could taste it. I set my comms channel to promiscuous mode to listen to what my coworkers were talking about. Suddenly my head filled with voices, some engaged in conversation with specific people and others speaking to any who would listen.

“God damn, it’s cold up here.”

“We’re gonna get to see 24 hour daylight once we get there, right?”

“Starting in June, we should, yeah. We’re not far enough north for it to last more than a few days, though.”

“That’s what I’m saying. We *know* that there are clay deposits there. There’s no way they haven’t figured out pottery, at least!”

Comments like these went to and fro. It reminded me of departing for a trip as a child. We all had the anticipation of an unknown, exciting destination at the forefront of our minds; few could think of anything else.

As we approached the building, it started contacting our neural taps and gave us awareness of the standard things: knowledge of the building’s layout, room assignments, meal schedules, and so forth. Every one of us had fully internalized and started expressing opinions about these things before we were at the door.

Some of the unaugmented contractors stood out front and watched us furtively, looking unsure of whether they should greet us or not. None of us were used to waiting on the unaugmented or having them wait on us. Perhaps that’s why we filed past them as if we were of one mind. With some perturbed expressions, some disdainful, and some frightened, they watched us enter into the building and find our quarters as if it were our own home and without speaking a single word aloud. Perhaps we appeared to them like aliens from outer space, or as scarcely more organic than the assistants that, to their eyes, followed us around in grim, determined silence. To those who could not access our network our small talk, the banter between friends and assistants, and our opinion of this place and its stewards were all unknowable, or at best, unintelligible. They were simple people who could not hear the voices of buildings, love a machine, or feel a mind as we did; they could only communicate with sound. All the same, I have never believed that they deserved our ire, and more than once I shot them curious glances which were often returned.

Christina made much of the spartan quarters that I felt the map direct us to. “Oh, look, Sir! What lovely lodgings the company has provided us with.” Likely due to the haste of the building’s construction, there were few trappings of comfort in the quarters. The walls were featureless plaster and the furniture

was merely functional. She continued, "And what a view from this window!" It was still foggy outside. "Why, this is a 500 watt charging port! My power reserves could be at full by the time Sir has fallen asleep!" It would be strange if there wasn't one, but regardless I was glad that she had something nice for herself here. I chuckled and sat down on the bed. It was large enough for two people. "It's not like it matters, right? It may as well take all night for you to charge since there's nothing for you to do at night anyways." It was theoretically possible, though extremely difficult, to listen to someone's dreams, or perhaps the echoes of their dreams, through their neural tap, if one had unrestricted read access. This access was unilaterally forbidden to others as a rule, although some users (like Brian) choose to give their assistants conditional read access.

Christina was silent for a moment, then responded to my injunction, "Yes, I suppose Sir is correct. How silly of me." It was not in her nature to relinquish an argument so suddenly, but before I could inquire about what she was thinking, the building told our minds that dinner was to be served in the cafeteria in five minutes. Christina stayed behind and I went out to the table that the building indicated to me, where my coworkers were sat. I espied a few unaugmented having their dinner at a table across the room, but there were only a few of them. They must not have taken their meals at set times.

The only one who brought his assistant was Brian. The two of their faces occasionally flashed smiles, and Brian's occasionally reddened. They must have been whispering sweet nothings to each other's heads. As I noticed this, some of the unaugmented came out of the kitchen carrying plates, which they started wordlessly passing out to us. They skipped Suzy, of course, while barely managing to hide their exasperation that she was there at all. While they walked away, I heard one whisper to the other, "Fuckin' augs, man." Feeling only slightly miffed for having been compared to Brian, I picked up my utensils and began eating. Suddenly, I saw one of the contractors lingering in the corner of my vision. She was a young woman, and looked at me with

a strange, but not altogether hostile, intensity. Her friends had left and looked at her from a distance with concern.

“Hey.” She was addressing me since I was sitting at the edge of the table, but her voice was so unexpected that nearly everyone at the table looked up at her. She was clearly expecting a response, so I would have to use my voice for the first time in almost a month.

“W-what i—” My voice cracked and I tried again, “What do you need?” I thought ‘What do you need’ might seem more personable than ‘What is it’ so I changed to it at the last second.

“How did you know where to sit?” The banality of her question ill-suited the intensity of her glare. It was so banal that I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“What do you m-mean?” I asked weakly.

“The directions they left us said not to specify a table for you guys to sit at, but you all sat at the same one. Why?” The other unaugmented lingering in the distance also seemed interested in this.

“The building told us.”

“Huh?” I was not ready for her to be confused at that part. My own confusion likely showed on my face, since she continued, “No, well, it’s just...We never installed any computers or anything here, so I don’t know how that could have happened.” *You did*, I almost let slip, *only they were embedded devices, and not totally standard*. I sometimes forgot that people from outside this line of work often lack knowledge about it. Still, if all she wanted was a technical explanation, that was at least straightforward.

“It’s technically true that there are *no computers*” – I emphasized the words with air quotes – “in this installation. There are, however, small mixed-signal microprocessors that many would think of as computers but technically aren’t. When the company builds something to be used by the augmented, they will embed these microprocessors into various parts of the installation, usually the doors. In fact, many building appliances, vehicles, and so forth are just manufactured with them pre-installed. They can have information uploaded to them over any remote connection;

most are configured for RF reception. They can even communicate with each other, and then compare their ledgers for accuracy, updates gotten by one and not the others, and so forth. When there's a lot of them in a building, it sort of becomes its own simplistic 'hive intelligence', if you will...They're...*secured*" – I used the word hesitantly – "so that they can only send this information to the neural taps of specific persons who are privileged to know it. In this case, those persons were us, or more specifically, our neural taps. That's how we got our knowledge of this place when we arrived.

Her demeanor seemed to relax as my explanation went on. After digesting the information I had given her she asked, "So...these chips even told you where to sit?"

"They probably did, because we all felt the strong impression that we should sit there."

"Did it tell you or not? How could you not know?"

My vocalization became smoother as I got more used to it. "The neural tap, at its most fundamental level, isn't a device that sends ones and zeros into your brain. It's an interface between those ones and zeros and the organic electrical system that is the human brain. It can't send information straight in – it has to indirectly create awareness of that information by stimulating the neurons in your brain in a very particular way, which it learns to do through a long period of training and mutual adaptation with the user. The information it sends you doesn't feel any different than information that just occurs to you, or that you intuit. You use it just by thinking, and after a while it feels like a natural extension of your own mind."

She was looking at me somewhat blankly, and without thinking of whether it was a good idea or not I continued, "A lot of people think that the neural taps are little computers in your brain, but that's only slightly true. The idea that computers are all digital is a relic from the past; analog computing has been prominent and extremely important ever since machine learning and brain interfacing became key areas in computer science. Our modern AI and cybernetic technology wouldn't be possible on purely dig-

ital architectures; it would be too inefficient to even be feasible. What's more, the signals in your brain are, ultimately, analog signals. Some people naively compare neurons to transistors but that leaves out a lot of important—"

My tirade was suddenly interrupted by laughter. I looked up to see the young woman doubled over with amusement. After catching her breath, she asked, "Are you an electrical engineer?"

"Mostly, yes."

"I see." She giggled a bit. "My grandpa was one, too. They way you kept going on and on reminded me of him." She sighed and glanced over the table. "I thought you guys all hated us, but you're just weirdos after all." Her gaze lingered on Suzy for a bit. She smiled good-naturedly, and said, "Sorry for bothering you," then left.

I turned to look back at my coworkers at the table and was distraught to see them all staring at me. I asked them what the matter was, although I well knew. Michael, a mutual friend of Brian and I, said, "Well..." He looked around himself. "All's well that ends well, I guess." This conciliatory manner was very typical of him, and had been ever since I had first known him as a young adult in technical training. He didn't quite look the part, though. His features were quite sharp and he was prone to glaring without realizing it. Those who knew him often said he had an "intelligent" face that spoke to a hidden shrewdness in his personality. This was not entirely untrue: while he was a great diplomat, he could also be a great manipulator, if he ever wanted to be. The occasions for that had always been very few, though.

Suzy enjoined angrily, "Hmph. It may as well not have. Did you see how rude those people were to me? Brian, honey, you should have given them a piece of your mind. You're human so I'm sure they would have listened to you."

"It's alright, Suzy. Some things in life aren't worth getting upset over." His attempt at placation had the opposite effect.

"Are you saying it doesn't matter if someone treats me like shit? Is that what you're saying? Because that's basically like saying you don't love me."

Michael nipped this exchange in the bud by saying, "Please have your lover's spat in private and let the rest of us eat in peace." Widespread agreement and some laughter resounded, and the attention of the table was now fully diverted away from me.

It wasn't long before we all received calls to our neural taps. It was from the CEO. Doubtless he wished to ostensibly christen our coming adventure with his blessing, and actually remind us that we were going there to do a job, not have an adventure. Most of us answered his call.

He began with an elation of dubious authenticity: "Coworkers, compatriots, friends. This is John Sower, your CEO. I am happy to greet you on the eve of such a propitious day. This expedition was long wished for, and hard fought. I'm proud to send you on this most important of missions, and to afford you the opportunity to serve the company in this way. Selection was extremely competitive, and I can confidently say that you were selected because you are the most suited for the job and the best that our company has to offer. I'm sure you are all very proud."

Despite his controversies, I personally was quite fond of this CEO. His election was extremely close; the board of directors was initially split 4-3 against him, but at the last second one of the majority electors was rumored to have received a surprise visit from some of his old friends in the biomedical division. These old friends, open supporters of Sower, allegedly engaged this elector in private conversation, in which some amount of "persuasion" was said to occur, with the end result that the elector's vote was changed and Sower won the election. Mr. Sower had no shortage of friends or enemies; supporters or opponents; so this split the company quite neatly down the middle – between those who felt the election had been stolen (i.e. people who did not like him or his policies) and those who felt that there was nothing wrong with the situation (i.e. people who did). I belonged to the latter camp. His policies seemed sensible to me (target increased assistant sales in regions controlled by competing corporations, increase naval patrols along the coastlines of lands where rival corporations are known to operate, and increasing new employee

recruitment incentives were his main points), and despite the obvious falseness of his public persona, he had a track record as an efficient administrator, which is ultimately where the chips fall. Obviously, I'm not on the board of directors and therefore had no vote to cast, so I was used to viewing the outcomes of these elections with some detachment, but this time I dared to feel a little enthusiastic.

To smooth over the aforementioned controversy and division, he made his first project in office something with near universal appeal – the expedition to the Valley. Of course, he did the usual song and dance of giving a livestreamed speech to the board about how much advantage we could turn the uranium to, and the importance of preventing our rivals from obtaining nuclear material. This was reason enough for any sane person, general popularity of the Valley notwithstanding. With this exceedingly rational argument, he obtained the needed approvals and began organizing the expedition within a few weeks. No one had even bothered raising issues like whether we should try to get mining rights from the nation-state whose borders the Valley was in. (It was a small nation and had no great military might. There was no way it could stand up to the company, and the fervor for the expedition was so great I'm not convinced anyone would have hesitated even if there had been a show of arms.) It had only been a month before we were all selected and on a plane, and then a boat, heading north.

Ruminating on these things, I realized I had missed a part of his speech. "...even if such voices do exist, let them not deter us from our aim. By now, you should have been made aware of the route you are to take into the Valley. Pull up your maps and inspect it now." I was glad that I came to in time for the important part. The map showed a red line heading from our current location into the mountains to the north. It crossed two checkpoints and ended at a third, near the rim of the Valley. It seemed that the path to the first checkpoint would be easy enough to traverse that we could take vehicles. After that, the terrain would be prohibitive, and our progression would be a matter of threading a

path through various low points and up whatever inclines were shallowest.

The CEO continued, "The route was planned to avoid as much danger as possible, but even still the terrain in this region is treacherous. In addition, the possibility that you will encounter operatives from rival corporations is non-zero. Keep your weapons close at hand and be vigilant. Make extensive use of your equipment and lung enhancement to avoid mountain sickness. Our hopes are riding on you; all of us back home are praying for your safety. Do not take unnecessary risks," he said with sternness rather than compassion. "Your further instructions will be shown to you when you reach the third base camp. Good luck. We're all counting on you."

...and just like that, he was gone and we were all back to our senses. One of the first things I noticed after seeing my surroundings again was that the contractors were staring at us from afar. I chuckled to think of how strange we must have looked to them, all stopping our meals at once to stare off into space for a few minutes.

Nobody felt that there was any reason to remain here any longer, so bit by bit we left the table and started for our quarters. As I was walking down the hall to my door, I noticed from out of a window that the fog had cleared and the surroundings were clearly visible. It was still just light enough to discern the surroundings clearly without seeing any hint of red or crimson in the sky. I stopped to look. Behind the pine forest, from a place where no tree could grow, the mountains loomed, shrouded in parts with mist. Rocky and blanketed in snow from the lowest elevation they were visible from, one could see here and there, through the clouds that partially hid them, fissures, a crevasse – here a little plateau, there a steep or smooth section – all of them surely presenting lethal falls when approached in accurate scale. Every detail offered the possibility of violent death. The tallest peak, replete with death like all the others, seemed to press against the curtain of the sky, threatening to tear it open like so much fabric and expose us to whatever lurked on the other

side. Though nothing was further away, nothing commanded the attention more than the mountains. They forced all else to the background; forests, valleys, rivers, buildings and myself together were all pulled in orbit around them and floated helplessly before the immovable center. I thought, How have we undertaken to cross such a thing? For the first time in the expedition I felt fear.

I was pulled out of my thoughts by the sudden feeling of a hand on my shoulder. It was Michael, looking somewhat concerned. My thoughts must have been showing on my face. I felt uncomfortable and forlorn after being brought so suddenly into my surroundings, but managed a weak smile regardless. To reassure him, I gave probable cause to my being there, saying, "Beautiful, aren't they?" He looked at the mountains with a benign smile. I couldn't sense anything from his eyes.

"Yeah, they really are something." The smile faded. "It's just a shame how dangerous it all is, though."

"Well, approaching from the south side, it shouldn't be too hard to traverse..."

"Yeah, true. Although I was mostly thinking about the people we might encounter on the way." The CEO had told us there was a "non-zero" chance of encountering hostile operatives. This far from the jurisdiction of any militarily capable corporations or governments, our interactions with such agents were likely to be dangerous. We had never been given explicit orders to kill (we weren't soldiers, after all), but if a rival corporation wanted to undercut our head start of setting up in the Valley, them sending operatives to kill us was not out of the question. They may do anything they can, short of damaging any safe route through the mountains, to delay our expedition. Naturally, then, any overly destructive weaponry was likely out. If they came to oppose us, it would be face to face.

Michael continued, "Have you ever shot a gun before?"

"A few times, when I was young. My dad was able to get a little piece of the land he oversaw after he retired, and we'd go out there to shoot deer, sometimes. I got a few over the years."

"I'm just hoping everyone can make it home safe. That's what matters in the end." I didn't bother enunciating a response to a platitude like this. A fairly long silence intervened while we looked out the window together, although the scenery had stopped penetrating my awareness in the same way it had before.

Suddenly, Michael found a new thread to pull at, and said, "You had to convince your wife to get augmented, right?"

"Yeah."

He chuckled. "How did that go?"

"She never went past compulsory education, so she never got a job that required it and never wanted any augmentations besides. I won her over to it by emphasizing the communications and file sharing capabilities it would give us."

"By files, I assume you mean pictures, right?"

"That's where her main interest was, yes."

He looked at me sidelong and smiled knowingly. "When did you guys start hanging out, again?"

"What's with all these questions? It was...in secondary school, I think. We had Literacy II together and were in the same group for a project. We got along well, and found out we lived in the same neighborhood. Of course, we were teenagers, and things went from there. Our parents were in favor, too. Once I got my first position after finishing technical training, we got married." This reminiscing made me forget the scenery outside the window almost entirely.

"Just like that? I've known you for years now and you never seemed like the type to get swept up in passion like that."

I forced a wry smile and joked, "Well, times have changed, you know? The corporate life grinds you down. It's the fate of all who work."

"I don't think anyone in our department works as much as you do, though." This much was probably true, and I couldn't pretend it wasn't. I turned to look at him and saw that his expression had become serious. "Do you miss her? Are you going to?"

I remembered my call with her from earlier today. Certainly, there had been a time when I would have missed her. But somehow, over time she had just become annoying. She had never wronged me in any way. She always gave me plenty of space. She didn't make unreasonable demands, or have any penchant for arguing. No one could ask for a better wife, and yet her presence, her existence, even, had become intolerable to me. I could tell that she sensed my aversion towards her, and gradually her attitude towards me took on in small part an air of pleading, but mostly a heavy sadness. To see her that way froze my heart over with pity.

What was it that I had felt towards her, back in our younger days? I tried, I racked my brains to remember, but in the end the only thing I could grasp at was a comfortable memory of childhood.

Seeing my silence as an opportunity to continue, Michael said, "Every time I've met her, she's been so sweet. I can't imagine her being that insufferable at home. You have something a lot of people would kill for, you know." He turned to look out the window again. "Maybe not so much in our company, true. But in general, among all people, you are extremely lucky to have her. I..." His voice quivered under the weight of an emotion just barely contained. "I would hate to see you take that for granted." He looked down now, with knitted brows and narrowed eyes. Looking at him, my wife's words, "Do you have to go?" suddenly echoed in my head. I couldn't bear to look at him any longer and turned my depleted gaze towards the mountains again.

What could I have said? My only paltry offering to him was this: "It's alright. It's not like that. I'll call her again tonight, and let her know we're thinking of her." After some time had passed, I was back in my quarters. Christina was there, looking out the window. Without turning to look at me, she said, "It simply astounds, Sir. The view is actually this good."

"So you didn't mean it before," I sighed, with exasperation that was only partly fake.

"Oh, but Sir knows I love a good jest." I barely mustered some

off-hand grunt of a response as I laid down on the bed. “Why, whatever is the matter? Sir looks so drained.” I stared into the air vent in the ceiling above my bed; into the blackness behind the grating. Trying in vain to make its emptiness the content of my mind, the only thing I could feel was shame welling up in me. I was shirking a responsibility. There was something I needed to do. To try, at least.

“Christina.” It had come out more forcefully than I had anticipated.

“Heavens, Sir. What’s the matter?”

“I’m going to call my wife. You are not to disturb me until I come to my own senses again.” She was silent for a moment. “Ah...Sir’s companion, is it? Didn’t he just speak with her this afternoon? There can’t be so much in need of saying that it can’t wait for tomorrow, can there be?”

“It’s urgent. Do as you’re told.”

“Hmph.”

I laid down on my bed and closed my eyes. I thought of my wife; of our apartment, the chair she would sit in to take the call, the way she might come over to it, whether slowly or quickly, and of her expression after sensing me from thousands of kilometers away, the possibility of her being glad to see me, the possibility of her being indifferent. Before long I heard her voice.

“Hello?” There was clear loneliness, a kind of fragility in it. I felt a twang in my chest but continued nonetheless.

“Hey.”

“This is a surprise. Is something wrong?” I realized then that I had not prepared any topic for conversation.

“No, no. It’s nothing to worry about. I just wanted to update you on where we are, and what we’re doing.”

“Oh...okay.” She said it as if a weight was being lifted from her shoulders, and relief washed over me. She didn’t seem to entirely trust the feeling, and there were still notes of caution in her voice, but I felt reassured to continue.

I explained to her how we arrived at the first outpost, how we were now, officially, north of the arctic circle, how cold but also

beautiful it was. With my best descriptive abilities I unfolded a picturesque view of the boreal wilderness before her. My efforts bore fruit as she seemed to be slowly warming to me again, and I slowly became intoxicated by my fascination with what I was telling her and her seeming high regard for it.

At some point she interrupted me in my description of the mountains, asking, "But wouldn't crossing over that be dangerous? What if you fall?"

I was too elated from my description to realize the darkening of her tone, and hastened to answer, "Well, I suppose you'd die in that case. It's pretty much an occupational hazard for us, now. I've never really had a dangerous job before so it's like I'm earning my wings, or something." I laughed. The simple fear of death could not have seemed more remote at that time from the fear I had felt looking at the mountain earlier. "That reminds me. Michael was really worried – you remember Michael, right? He used to visit when I was in technical? He's on this expedition too. I don't remember if I told you that or not. He was really worried about operatives from rival corporations; he even asked me if I'd shot a gun before. He's always been sort of timid. Anyways, Michael says hello."

I awaited her answer anxiously, like an enamored child, but got only silence in return. After a moment of waning confidence, I began to have the sinking feeling I had done something wrong.

"You will come back, right?" I could sense tears in it and my chest tightened.

"Of course I will," I said, defensively. "You're always so damn worried about this, it's annoying." There was a rising anger in my voice; I did not want it there but it continued to grow and culminated in my uttering, "Give me some space, will you?"

There have been few things in my life that I regretted as much as these words. As soon as they were out, I knew that I had ruined everything. Her tears began to flow fully.

"Why are you so cold? Don't you..." She struggled under the weight of what she had been trying not to say for so long.

"Don't you love me any more?"

I was in over my head. I needed to leave this situation, and I started stammering, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I just...I do love you. I just...need to be somewhere else for a while. I'm sorry."

Her sobbing continued; I couldn't take it anymore and simply ended the call. Awash with shame and despair, I opened my eyes to my quarters bathed in moonlight. We were well in to the very short night time we would have at this latitude. I sat up, corpse-like, to see Christina plugged in to her charging port, staring at me from across the room. She only stared, saying nothing; I returned a haggard stare of my own. Nothing passed between us, no thoughts entered my mind, and she gave no token of thinking anything herself. Then, she turned her head toward the window, gazing fixedly at something outside. I looked myself, and saw again the mountain. It did not see us, but stood atop earth and man and mind, drawing me inexorably towards thoughts of the next day's journey.

TO BE CONTINUED