



Autumn 2024

Black Company,
Tarot and Trains

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by Various

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Space Janitor 2

by /a/non

I

“Did you know,” said Miko, “You can tell your fortune by your starting hand?”

We had been just about to pack up and go when, somehow or other, Touma found out I played mahjong. So there we were, sitting in the asteroid cave, a fleet of hostile aliens somewhere off in the distance, playing mahjong. Touma was apparently something of a wiz kid, and over the months of his internment here he'd set up a comfortable living space. There were atmosphere and gravity generators to keep breathable air inside, there were well pumps leading to ice caps on the other side of the asteroid table, and there was, for some reason, an automatic mahjong table.

“But why would you build that?” I asked.

“I was bored, and it was easy,” he said before going off on a tangent about how he built it that I didn't understand at all.

“But we really don't have time now, right?” I asked, “I mean, we can always do this after we get out of the asteroid field.”

I turned an imploring gaze at Yamanaka Hoshiko, our stern, strict captain. But instead of saving me, she shrugged.

“It's probably fine,” she said, “Just don't take too long.”

Touma laid a firm hand on my shoulder.

“Tanikawa-kun,” he boomed, “Is mahjong your passion, or not?”

“What?”

“Are you part of this crew, or not?”

“Uh, maybe?”

He pushed up his glasses and shouted to the ceiling, “We are the spacefaring Yamanaka family, and everyone in our family has passion! Is mahjong your passion, or not?!”

He looked me dead in the eye. His glasses caught the light and turned blinding white. Somehow, they transmitted a beam of machismo into my brain. I shook off his hand angrily.

“Fine, you bastard!” I yelled, “You wanna see true gambling? I’ll show you!”

Touma was about to shout something back when Noriko grabbed him by the ear and deflated us both.

“Don’t make our janitor say stupid things.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

And that’s how I found myself seated across from Miko with her strange question hanging in the air. To my left, of all people, was the Captain herself. Touma, the one responsible for all this, was not playing. He had been seated to my right, but for reasons beyond my comprehension, Noriko had booted him out and now he was standing behind her.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Your starting hand. You can read your fortune by it,” she repeated, “like tarot.”

Miko sat there, her rose red lips held in the same slight smile she always had, her deep black eyes radiating her usual aura of mystery.

“I’m not telling you my starting hand,” I said.

Miko’s laugh was like a wind chime.

“Worth a try,” she said, and discarded the first tile of the match.

“But that kind of makes sense, doesn’t it?” asked Yukari, who was hovering behind me, “Souzu would be like the wands suit, right? And, um, what else is there?”

The Captain discarded and I drew.

“I don’t know about the rest of the sou tiles,” I said, “But if 2-sou is any tarot card, it’s Death. 2-sou is the most dangerous tile

in the game. In fact, it was a 2-sou that sent me into your cargo bay.”

I discarded and Noriko drew.

“Wouldn’t the major cards be honor tiles?” she asked, “And statistically, any 2 is a bit less dangerous than any tile from 3 to 7.”

Noriko discarded, and it was Miko’s turn again. We went around like that without anything crazy happening while we chatted.

“You can’t play mahjong by statistics alone,” I argued, “2-sou is malicious. It knows it’s less efficient, and it takes advantage of that to trick you. I’m telling you, if you’re in a tight spot, you cannot trust 2-sou.”

“Hm,” said the Captain, as if she were only here to judge me.

“You’re too superstitious, Tanikawa-san,” laughed Miko, “Besides, the Death card doesn’t necessarily represent death. It means change.”

Just then, it happened. I drew a tile depicting two green sticks of bamboo stacked one on top of another: the 2-sou. I had a meld it would fit neatly into, so I discarded a 9-man and didn’t think much more about it. Mahjong superstitions are fun to talk about, but not something to take seriously while you’re building a hand. Besides, I didn’t think I’d need to discard this tile.

Then, the Captain called riichi. The look in her eyes left no doubt: she was ready to destroy any one of us if we weren’t careful with our discards.

“Geez, that’s an early riichi,” said Touma, “Ah, Noriko, drop that one instead.”

“Is he allowed to do that?” I complained, “Just give her advice?”

“It’s no use Tanikawa, they’re super close,” said Yukari, “You’d better get used to thinking of them as one person.”

“You shut your mouth, that’s not true at all!” shouted Noriko as she discarded the tile Touma was pointing at, “Besides, haven’t you been giving advice to Tanikawa?”

“I haven’t said a word to him.”

And it was true, she hadn't spoken a word of advice to me. She had, however, made bizarre hand gestures next to my face and sighed loudly at several of my discards. Everyone at the table could tell she was trying to use signals somehow, but even I couldn't decipher them and I didn't care to try.

Thankfully, I had several safe tiles I could discard without tearing apart my hand. I was safe. Until I drew another 2-sou. Yukari gasped. I checked the Captain's discard pile. No, 2-sou was not safe. I weighed my options for several seconds, and finally decided to fold. I cut a 7-pin and prepared to defend with all my might.

When I drew the third 2-sou, I began to sweat. And then Miko called riichi.

"Geez, that's a late riichi," said Touma, "Are you sure you can win this late in the round?"

"It's more fun if I try," said Miko with a shrug.

My next draw was the fourth 2-sou. I would have to discard two more times, and none of my tiles were safe from both Miko and the Captain.

I stared at my hand and tried very hard to remember mahjong theory. 2 is safer than 3 through 7, and if you know where all four of a tile are, your opponents are less likely to be waiting on it. 2-sou was my least dangerous tile. But it was not safe. I could have called kan, made it impossible for either Miko or the Captain to win off of it, and taken a chance at drawing a safer tile. But there was chance my next draw could be even more dangerous, and if 2-sou passed here then it would pass again and I would be saved.

I made my decision. I cut a 2-sou.

"Ron."

"Ron."

They were both waiting on 2-sou. In the end, neither of them had very big hands, and I should have been able to recover. However, my adventure with the strange malice of 2-sou shredded my nerves, and I was unable to play seriously for the rest of the game. I would have gotten dead last if Noriko hadn't dealt into a

cruel baiman from Miko at the last second. Thankfully, the Captain wouldn't hear of us gambling real money on her watch. Not that I had any money to gamble anyway.

As before, if you don't understand mahjong terms, don't worry about anything I just said. Suffice it to say I got my ass kicked.

II

Finally, we got around to packing up Touma's equipment in the Cassandra and the Cassandra in the Argive. All in all, today had been a very busy day. You may be tempted to think that after battling aliens, rescuing Noriko, and getting destroyed at mahjong, the day's excitement would be done. You would be wrong. Touma was putting on a space suit to take down the atmosphere generators and the rest of us were about to get onto the ship when Noriko drew her laser pistol and fired at a pair of tall, thin figures at the entrance of the cave.

The beams passed right through the aliens. In unison, they raised one hand and spoke, "Peace. We are not present physically."

"What the hell do you want?" demanded Noriko.

"Noriko, let me talk to them," ordered the Captain, who turned on the aliens and demanded, "What the hell do you want?"

"Diplomacy."

The aliens spoke in an unfeeling monotone, but their voices were the sort of clear, ringing voice you would associate with very beautiful women. They ignored the Captain and spoke to Noriko.

"Our apologies. We abducted you by mistake."

Then, of all people, they spoke to me.

"Our forgiveness. Though you are ugly, your rescue of a comrade was beautiful."

“I’m...ugly?”

They ignored my objection, and Noriko spoke again.

“What do you mean, you abducted me by mistake? You tore off that turret pod on purpose!”

The aliens bowed.

“Our scouts told us you had a member of our species trapped there. However, it seems you moved her before we could stage our rescue.”

“We have never held one of your people hostage,” objected the Captain.

But the aliens ignored her and turned to Miko. Then they took off their helmets. There was a cascade of silky, green hair, and then their faces were revealed. The aliens were women. Very tall, very thin women, their skin a shade of blue so pale it was almost white. They were beautiful in a mysterious way, just like Miko.

Miko recoiled as one of the aliens approached her. For the first time since I’d met her, she was at a loss for words. When the alien grabbed her face with both hands, she cried out.

“Hey!” I said, “I thought you said you weren’t here physically!”

The alien who remained by the door simply said, “You would not understand.”

Noriko pointed her laser pistol at the alien, but couldn’t bring herself to fire or say anything. Touma and the Captain clenched their fists and tensed up in preparation for a fight. The alien forced Miko’s head down a few inches and kissed her on the forehead. It only took a few seconds, but it felt like forever. When the alien finally let go, Miko leapt back, almost tumbled over, and clung onto Touma like her life depended on it.

“I see,” said the alien, “You are not one of our species. Our apologies once again. Our mistakes are ugly.”

The alien then addressed all of us.

“Though your species is outwardly ugly, you have displayed some capacity for beauty. Your last stands and daring rescues

indicate the presence of an inner beauty. In recognition of that inner beauty, we will permit you to leave our territory.”

Then she turned to Miko, “And as for the one called Miko, in recognition of your outer beauty, we would permit you to remain in our territory and dwell on our homeworld, if you wish it.”

Miko and the alien stared at each other. Miko trembled when she realized that the alien expected a response.

“Why would I want that?” she whispered.

“Because your life is very sad,” replied the alien, “Our entire homeworld is a planet of low gravity. If you came with us, you could live in the open, no longer trapped in your chamber.”

Miko was the heart of the Yamanaka family. When those around her couldn’t get a handle on their emotions, Miko could do it for them. Always calm, always gentle, always smiling like she guessed more than she let on. Now she looked on the verge of crying.

“Go away,” she hissed, “I don’t want to leave my family.”

“Very well,” said the alien, “There is a beauty in your loyalty. But should you ever change your mind, I have planted a passphrase in your mind. Simply speak it, and we will find you.”

The alien returned to her companion. In unison, they put their helmets back on and winked out of existence.

“They could have killed us all whenever they wanted,” whispered Noriko, “This whole time.”

“Why didn’t they?” asked Yukari.

“They don’t think the way we do,” said the Captain, “Notice how they judge things in terms of beauty. Total slaughter is ugly. Regardless, we have safe passage out of the asteroid field. Let’s make use of it before they change their minds.”

Just then, Komori came tromping down the brow and froze.

“Whoah,” she said, “What happened here?”

“Komori,” said the Captain in a low, dangerous tone, “Where were you?”

“I carried Touma’s foodstuff in. I was organizing it in the galley. Why? What’s going on?”

“A lot. I’ll fill you in later. Everyone, onboard. Touma, get the generators and then we need to talk. I want us off of this rock in less than an hour.”

III

Once we were safely out of the asteroid field, there was an announcement for everyone but Komori to gather in the briefing room. By the time I got there, Yukari was waiting outside with her ear to the door.

“What’s going on in there?”

“Shh,” she whispered, “The door’s locked. Nee-chan and Nii-chan are arguing about something.”

“What is it?”

“I could figure that out if you’d shut up.”

I rolled my eyes, but strained my ears. There was some shouting going on in there.

“What are you doing out here?” came Noriko’s voice from behind, “Go in already.”

Yukari and I both shushed her.

“Whatever’s going on in there,” said Yukari, “I think they’re almost done.”

There was a sound of footsteps, and Yukari straightened just in time as the Captain opened the door. An awkward silence spilled out of the briefing room as she frowned at us.

“Where’s Miko?” she asked.

“Miko isn’t feeling well,” said Noriko, “She’s in bed.”

“Fair enough. Come in.”

Touma leaned back in a chair with his arms crossed. When we entered, he leapt to his feet.

“Thank goodness,” he said, “Guys, help me convince her she’s being ridiculous.”

“You’re the ridiculous one,” snapped Noriko, “Look at you, you’ve got stuff on your face.”

“What stuff?”

“Hold still, let me get it.”

Noriko licked her thumb, wielded it menacingly, and advanced.

“Um, what’s going on?” I asked.

“I’m stepping down as captain,” declared the Captain.

Noriko froze with her thumb pressed to the corner of Touma’s mouth.

“What?” she asked, “But, Captain, you’re—”

“I just said I’m not the captain. Touma is.”

“That’s dumb,” objected Touma, “You’ve done just fine as captain. There’s no need to do this.”

“You’re the oldest one here.”

“Tanikawa’s the same age as me, you wouldn’t put him in charge.”

“You have the most experience in space.”

“On solo flights, not as part of a crew.”

“You’re more capable than me. As long as you’re not in charge, the ship will not be as effective as it could be. I can’t allow that.”

“More capable? What is that based on? What does that even mean? Noriko, you respect Hoshiko. Tell her why she deserves to be captain.”

This whole argument seemed stupid to me. We couldn’t be more than two weeks away from Earth, and there was no way anything dangerous would happen. Why did it matter who the captain was? But the Captain—I mean Hoshiko—was the kind of person who believed strongly that things needed to be a certain way. Touma, I came to learn later, just didn’t want the hassle.

Noriko, put suddenly on the spot, looked like a deer in the headlights.

“Um, well, if it comes to that,” she said, shakily, “I would have to respect the Captain’s decision.”

They looked at her blankly.

“Er, I mean, um, Hoshi— uh, Onee— I mean, Hoshiko...san’s decision. I guess that means you’ll be taking over as first mate.”

“No,” said Hoshiko, “You’re an excellent first mate, and I won’t take the position away from you. As of now, I am the executive officer. Everyone, please just call me Hoshiko or XO.”

“Yes, XO,” said Noriko.

“Isn’t an executive officer the same thing as a first mate?” I asked.

Hoshiko and Noriko gave me a blank, silent stare.

“You know,” I shrugged, “They both mean second in command, right?”

“Excuse me,” said Touma, “I still haven’t agreed to this.”

“Duty calls whether you agree to it or not,” huffed Hoshiko, “Now start giving orders.”

And that’s how Touma was bullied into being the captain. At that point, I figured I didn’t need to stick around. It had been a long day, and I was ready for it to end. I went to my room and would have gotten ready for bed, but the door burst open behind me.

It was Touma.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Ah, Tanikawa, I heard you moved into my old room. Don’t worry, I’m not here to take it back. I just need to gather my stuff.”

“Oh. Yeah, sure.”

Unsure what to do, I just sort of stood there as Touma opened the locker and started grabbing clothes.

“Where are you staying?” I asked, “On the Cassandra or something?”

“I wanted to stay on the Cassandra, but Hoshiko nagged me into taking her room. ‘The captain has to have the captain’s quarters,’ or something like that. I tried to tell her it didn’t matter, but apparently there are some important displays in there.”

“Oh. So the Cap- er, Hoshiko is moving into the Cassandra.”

“No, she wants to move in with Noriko.”

“Oh. Huh.”

I didn’t have anything else to say. An awkward silence would have enveloped the room, but Touma’s eyes lit up at the sight of something in the locker.

“Aw, check this out.”

He pulled out a bright red cape with fringed gold epaulets. For a moment, I had no idea what I was looking at, but he dropped everything else in his hands, draped the cape over his shoulders, and made a grandiose flourish.

“Space pirate captain Yamanaka Touma!” he boomed, “What do you think of that?”

“I’m gonna be honest. I just wanna go to bed.”

“Oh. Fair enough.”

Touma finished clearing out his things and left. At long last, the day was done.

IV

The end of the excitement meant the return of routine. Get up, clean the ship, go to bed. Nothing really happened for the next several days, but things felt different. Before, I was settling into a mission that would go on for who knew how long or how it would end. Now, I was homeward bound. I had to think about what I’d do once I got back to Earth.

The Yamanakas kept asking me if I’d stay with “the crew,” but I didn’t really know what that meant. They were returning to their own daily lives, and I knew they didn’t spend most of their time sailing the stars. Hoshiko managed the family estate, Noriko wanted to finish her master’s degree, Komori—surprisingly—had a job, and Yukari would be starting high school. Only two of the siblings were regularly in space: Touma, who would take the one-man Cassandra out in search of riches and trouble, and Miko, who would take the Argive back into orbit and turn down the gravity for her health.

They were nice enough people, but I didn’t exactly see a future with them. What would I even do? Be a butler at their mansion? The only other option was to go back to my dissolute life of working crap jobs just to scrape together enough money to gam-

ble badly, but that seemed like the most realistic choice.

In short, I was bummed out. I didn't think I'd feel that way about ending this crazy adventure I never signed up for, but there it was. Or maybe "bummed out" isn't the right word. I don't know, it was weird.

The ship seemed quieter now. Yukari, with the prospect of returning to school looming closer than ever, had willingly returned to her studies and no longer bothered me. Miko wouldn't leave the low gravity chamber or even leave the door open to talk to passers-by. Apparently she still didn't feel well. Komori was as engrossed in her games as ever, and since the weapons control room was no longer a disaster zone I didn't spend much time there anyway.

As for Hoshiko, Noriko, and Touma, the three of them were usually together. Touma—still wearing that cape—would go strolling down the passageway, Noriko would be close by his side holding a clipboard and fussing over something, and Hoshiko would be somewhere behind them. I passed them on a regular basis, but they didn't have much to say to me.

I cleaned. I ate. I slept. And day by day the moment of my inglorious homecoming drew nearer and nearer. Actually, would I even still have a home? I wasn't sure if I'd missed a rent payment on account of being in space. I'd already quit my job for that last binge I went on, so no worries there at least. Well, things usually worked out somehow. Sort of.

The thing about my old life was, I wasn't content with it, but I was resigned to it. If I'm a born loser, then there's no helping it. Might as well just try to have fun as often as I can, right? That's simply the only kind of life possible for someone like me.

Well, actually, there was always one escape route available, but I felt I'd rather get beat up behind mahjong parlors than do *that*. I'll talk about *that* later though.

The point is, for the past several weeks, I'd been thrust into a different sort of life. Though things were quiet and uneasy just now, there were at least people I could talk to who didn't see me

as some kind of scum. Could I ever be resigned to my old life now that I knew I could do better?

One day, as I was worrying about things like that, I ran a bit ahead of schedule and found myself in the bridge while the command trio was still working there.

“Yo, Tanikawa,” boomed Touma.

“What is it?”

“Working hard or hardly working, buddy?”

“Uh, hardly working, I guess?”

“Ha, nice.”

“Onii-ch- er, Captain,” scolded Noriko, “Don’t get distracted by the janitor.”

“Didn’t that guy save you?”

“That’s got nothing to do with anything! We’ve got to finish plotting out our course.”

Hoshiko nodded silently.

“All right, all right,” conceded Touma, “We’ll start with this curve.”

And he drew a curve on a sheet of graph paper.

“Captain?” asked Hoshiko, “How did you get that?”

“Huh? I did it in my head. It’s easy, you just—”

The math here has been redacted by my brain.

“You shouldn’t just do that in your head,” said Hoshiko, “What if you made a mistake? Let me check that with the computer.”

Hoshiko turned to a console and pushed some buttons. A few seconds later, she blinked.

“Oh,” she said, “That’s exactly right. Still, we should really verify every course we plot.”

“Sure, feel free to check my work.”

Touma drew another curve. Hoshiko squinted at it and punched some more numbers into the computer. Before she’d turned around again, Touma had drawn another curve. Noriko watched the drawing in wide-eyed amazement.

“Onii-chan, what’s that formula again?” she asked, excitedly, “Let me try.”

“Sure, it’s—”

Again, I can’t keep track of all that math jargon. But Noriko could, and she drew a curve.

“How’s that, XO?” she asked.

“Hang on, let me catch up.”

Hoshiko turned and punched several more times. Finally, she nodded.

“Yes, it’s all correct so far.”

“Great,” said Touma, “We’ll be done in a couple minutes then.”

With that, Touma drew furiously, and Hoshiko typed frantically. In the end, Touma dropped his pencil.

“All right, let’s get this course set,” said Touma, “I’m ready to be done with today.”

“W-wait, I haven’t finished checking,” snapped Hoshiko.

The room went deadly, awkwardly quiet as Hoshiko spent several more minutes checking the calculations with the computer. At last, she conceded.

“Fine,” she said, “You win.”

“Win? This isn’t a competition.”

“I know that. Let’s just...put in the course.”

The trio left, and I finished cleaning up the bridge. I didn’t see Hoshiko at lunch the next day.

V

I managed to get some smoke breaks in during that time. The only smoking area on the ship was Noriko’s bedroom, so for decency’s sake I tried not to go every day. But going much longer than a day was liable to drive me crazy, so I still went there on a regular basis.

Non-smokers don’t realize this, but smoking is the modern world’s last bastion of face-to-face communication. The image of the lonesome smoker picking out some random street and pondering the rain is cool, but nonsensical. Eighteen-year-

old me, having just walked away from home, was drawn into the habit by the lively atmosphere of designated smoking areas. Thrown together, chemically stimulated, and bound by the fellowship of society's most hated vice, strangers from every walk of life become comrades.

With a cigarette in her hand, even Noriko couldn't help but be chatty. She'd sit there in casual clothes, cheerfully complain about something or other her brother had done, and tell me to shut up when I interjected with a bad joke. I liked talking to Noriko, and that was another thing that added to my dread of returning home. Would I still be able to talk to her? If I could, should I? What if she saw the way I lived and was so disgusted she kicked me out of her life?

I'd like to say my existential concerns were the only thing putting a damper on my smoke breaks, but there was one other problem: Hoshiko. Our former captain had moved into her little sister's room, and she was usually there when I was.

Noriko and I would sit as close to the fume vent as possible out of respect for Hoshiko, and she would wrap herself in a blanket, sit up on her cot, and blankly stare right through us. Sometimes to change things up she would turn her back to us, curl up on her side, and become a silent lump under the covers. Noriko, incapable of finding fault with her sister, didn't seem to see anything odd here. I managed to mostly ignore Hoshiko's strange behavior, but any time it felt like things were going well with the first mate, I couldn't help but see the executive officer's black cloud of gloom in the corner of my eye.

The day Hoshiko didn't show up to lunch, I didn't think much of it. But when I went for my smoke break, it finally clicked that something was wrong. For some reason, Noriko was off somewhere. The person who answered the door was Hoshiko. She stood in her underwear, shoulders drooped, jaw slack, and eyes dull.

"Oh, right, I forgot you're not feeling well," I said, "Sorry. I'll leave you alone."

"No. It's fine. I'm useful for holding doors at least."

“What?”

“Come in.”

With two sluggish steps back, she motioned me in.

“Are you sure you don’t want to get dressed first?”

Hoshiko looked down. It’s not quite right to say she looked defenseless. That’s partly because I could now see the lean, toned muscles of her body, but more because “defenseless” just isn’t the right word. I’d say “indecent,” but that implies a sensual quality that also wasn’t there.

Hoshiko scratched her butt and shrugged.

“It’s whatever.”

Should I have gone away and waited for Noriko to come back? Yeah. But try to understand my situation. Actually, never mind. Don’t try to understand. Yeah, I needed a smoke, but seeing the proud Yamanaka Hoshiko lowered like this was just wrong. Regardless, I went in.

Hoshiko stumbled over to her cot, collapsed, and rolled onto her back, limbs and hair strewn about carelessly. I shut the door quietly, sat down by the fume vent, and resolved to get this over with as quickly as possible. After a few minutes of oppressive silence, I was ready to dispose of the stub.

“Tanikawa...”

“What is it?”

“Am I a useless person?”

“Huh? It’s fine to take a day off if you’re sick, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sick. I’m slacking.”

“Oh. Well, it’s fine to slack off every now and then, isn’t it?”

“Oh, never mind. I figured you’d know something about being useless—”

“What was that?”

“—but even you’ve done your job every day.”

“I’ve seen you doing, uh, XO stuff.”

“No. You were right. XO is the same thing as first mate. Noriko is so good at it that there’s nothing for me to do. It’s a useless job.”

“You know, you should probably not spend so much time alone. I know how it is, your thoughts go round and round and—”

“I want to be alone. Can you go?”

“Yeah, totally. No problem. You want, like, a glass of water, or...? No? All right, never mind, I’ll just...”

I left. All was not well aboard the Argive.

VI

“I don’t know, I just think there’s something wrong with Hoshiko.”

Komori looked longingly at the unpause button on her game and sighed.

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked.

“I mean, you’re her sister. She respects you. You could talk to her or something, right?”

“It’s probably fine. Nee-chan is the sort of person who thinks everything should be a certain way. Sometimes that makes her do unreasonable things, and most people can’t talk her out of it.”

“Talk her out of what?”

“In this case, making Touma the captain. Nobody wanted her to do that, but in her mind this is how things should be. Nee- chan is the sort of person who does well under stress, but falls apart on vacations,” Komori shrugged, “You and me, we’d be NEETs if we could, but Nee-chan couldn’t handle that. She just needs to be the captain again and everything will be okay.”

At being so casually classified as a would-be-NEET, I felt some impulse to object. But it was true. More importantly, that wasn’t what I was there to discuss.

“You said most people couldn’t talk her out of this. Who could?”

“Miko usually handles these things.”

The wheels in my head began to turn. When, after several seconds, I failed to respond, Komori unpaused her game and

seemed to think no more of it. I quickly finished cleaning the weapons control room, took my cart, and left. I resolved to talk to Miko as soon as the day's work was done.

But no sooner did I finish up the bridge than Yukari barged in. She looked worried.

"Ah, Tanikawa, was Nee-chan in here?"

"No. Why? What happened?"

"It's Miko. Since she's been sick in her room I've been bringing her meals, but today she wouldn't open the door or take any of them. I thought Nee-chan would know what to do."

"You...haven't seen much of Hoshiko lately, have you?"

"No. Do you know where she is?"

"Shut up in her room. I thought Miko could talk some sense into her."

Yukari turned pale.

"Tanikawa, this is bad. What if the aliens gave Miko some kind of virus?"

"If it's a medical emergency then I'm sure Touma and Noriko will know what to do," I reasoned, "For now, why don't we try checking on her again?"

"It's no good. She won't talk to us."

"Well, let's try anyway."

Abandoning my cart on the bridge, I went to the low gravity chamber with Yukari close on my heels. I hit the intercom button.

"Miko, it's Tanikawa. Can I talk to you for a second?" No reply.

"I was just, uh, wondering if I could get your opinion on something."

Again, no reply.

"Also Yukari was worried you might have an alien brain virus or something. She's here with me, if you want to see her."

Yukari shot me a look, but the door clicked and a languid voice replied.

"Be careful. I've set the gravity down very low."

Yukari shot me another look. I shot one back. Then, I opened the door.

The cheery, pinkish haze of the low gravity field was tinged with grey. Even without stepping inside, I could tell this was the result of the extra low gravity setting. Miko stood in the center of the room, and the weak breeze from the ventilation system was enough to make her long white hair and long black dress flow and flutter like flags on a lazy wind. With the lights turned dim, she looked like a ghost.

“Are you, uh,” I mumbled, “Are you doing okay?”

“Y-you didn’t take any food today,” Yukari stuttered, “Did you want me to get some?”

Miko stood still and silent for several seconds before speaking.

“Aren’t you coming in?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah, totally,” I looked at Yukari “Ladies first, right?”

Yukari responded by shoving me in ahead of her. I’ll spare you the description of trying to keep from flying forward when you’ve just been pushed into an extra low gravity chamber. It’s not dignified. It didn’t help that Yukari was so nervous she forgot to account for the low gravity when she herself stepped in. She flew up, yelled, and grabbed my shoulders. I nearly went flying again, and when the dust was settled Yukari clung to my back piggyback style and refused to let go.

“Can you get the door?” asked Miko, “I don’t want the light right now.”

I shut the door, and the only light in the room was the dull pink haze. Miko slowly fell into a chair and put her hands on her lap. Between the lighting, the shelves of lacy fabric, and the porcelain girl sitting before me, the room had the air of an abandoned dollhouse.

“What did you need?” asked Miko.

“We just wanted to check up on you,” I said, “You know, make sure you’re all right. You’ve been cooped up in here for a while, right?”

“I’ve been cooped up in here my whole life.”

That was true. Due to the circumstances of her birth, she couldn't handle normal gravity for long periods. As a result, she lived aboard the Argive even when her family wasn't using it. But the last time she'd told me that, she hadn't seemed so bothered about it.

"I see that look on your face, Tanikawa-san. You want to ask me something, but you're not sure if you should."

"I—"

"Go ahead. Ask."

"I, uh—"

"Miko-nee," came a timid voice from over my shoulder, "What's wrong? Did something bad happen?"

Miko blinked.

"Did something bad happen?" she echoed, "I don't know how to answer that. Let me show you something."

Miko picked up a sketch pad, opened it, and handed it to me. I held it up so Yukari and I could both see. It was a remarkably well done colored pencil sketch. It featured a wide open space, a garden where ornately pruned plants with glittering ruby leaves grew tall and narrow. All around the garden there were figures of women, beautiful, elegant, and unnaturally lanky.

"When the alien touched me," said Miko, "She learned about me, and I learned about her. Their name for themselves means the Beautiful Ones. That is a scene from their homeworld."

Something clicked in my brain, but I couldn't believe it. I had to ask.

"The aliens' offer," I said, "You... actually want to take them up on it?"

"I don't know."

It was hard to wrap my mind around it. I guess I hadn't known Miko long enough to think I really knew her, but I had my impression, and her family always seemed to think she was so reliable. Wise Miko, who always knew exactly what you were thinking. Lovable Miko, who couldn't stand to see her sisters unhappy. Selfless Miko, who was trapped on this ship for the rest of her life, but never seemed upset about it. Ever since we'd left

the asteroid, Miko had sat alone in this chamber with the aliens' passphrase in her brain. That was the temptation weighing on her mind, and it was wearing her down.

"Well?" she asked, "Aren't you going to tell me not to do it?"

"No," I said, "I know what it's like to want out of a bad situation. I've made too many escapes to judge you here."

"How am I supposed to know what to do?"

"Do you want to try weighing pros and cons?"

"What?"

"You know, like, a pro would be you get to go outside and live a normal life. A con would be you probably never get to see your family again."

Miko buried her face in her hands. I should have guessed those were exactly the points she was stuck on.

"I mean, uh, you could always start a new family," I said, "You know, meet a nice alien guy, and—"

"The Beautiful Ones don't have any men. They killed them all for being too ugly."

"Huh?!"

"The Beautiful Ones value beauty to extreme levels. Things like love, friendship, and family, they have these things in their art, but not in their lives. They believe relationships are beautiful as concepts, but in practice lead to ugly squabbles. If I went there, it wouldn't be a normal life."

"Oh. Well, in that case, it doesn't sound like such a hard—"

"But when am I ever going to get a chance to leave this ship? I used to think it was fine. After all, if this is the only sort of life possible for someone like me, then there's no helping it. There's no sense in wanting what you can't get. But now there's something else I could choose, and now I want all those things. I've wanted them all along. I want to feel sunlight, touch leaves, meet all kinds of people. I wish I could have been a normal girl who went to school and made friends, I wish Mother and Father hadn't been space pirates, I wish—"

In the middle of Miko's tirade, Yukari let go of my neck and gently floated to the floor. After a few short hops, she sat on the

armrest of Miko's chair. Before Miko knew what was going on, Yukari had leaned over and embraced her. The room went silent.

"What are you doing?" asked Miko.

"I don't know. I just... You'll take your food tomorrow, right?"

Miko's body was rigid. But gradually, she relaxed.

"Yes."

And then the intercom crackled to life.

"Attention, Fighting Yamanakas," came Touma's voice, "And Tanikawa. Your attention if you please. There is a potentially hostile contact ahead, so if you could all just—"

"Just call battle stations," came Noriko's voice, muffled.

"Battle stations!" came a manly roar from Touma, "Starship Argive! All hands, to your battle stations!"

"Don't forget to tell them why, you dumbass."

"But Noriko-chan, I was gonna do that the first time."

"We might come under attack soon," announced Noriko, "Just hurry up and get ready. And Tanikawa, you left your janitor cart on the bridge. Get it out of here."

The intercom went quiet.

"Well, Miko. I guess we'll be turret pod buddies again," I said.

"The forward turret pod is still broken. I won't be able to join you. But good luck, Tanikawa-san. Yukari-chan. I'll...think about things."

Yukari ran out. I was about to follow her when Miko stopped me.

"Ah, Tanikawa-san, did you really need advice on something? I'll feel bad if you needed my help and I wasted all this time being selfish."

"You're not selfish. None of what you said was selfish. But yeah, actually I did need some advice. Hoshiko forced Touma to be the captain and now she's got nothing to do so she thinks she's being useless and she's turning into a slob and—well, I guess we'll have to deal with that later though. Anyway, thanks, bye."

With that, there was no more time for words. I departed for the bridge.

VII

I went to the bridge to get my janitor cart. Touma stood with folded arms in front of a blank display. Noriko frantically checked non-blank displays and took notes on her clipboard. Hoshiko sat in the corner looking at nothing.

“Tanikawa!” snapped Noriko, “Can’t you clean up after yourself?”

Ironic, coming from the woman who kept spilling coffee on the console keyboards. But she seemed a bit too stressed out for banter.

“I was gonna come right back for it,” I said, “Besides, how was I supposed to know the aliens were gonna come back?”

“Not aliens,” said Touma, “The Daisangen Group.”

“Huh? Like the financial firm?” I was bewildered.

“That’s only a front. They’re practically yakuza.”

Touma was probably waiting on a video call from them.

“Why do you people have so many enemies? And why do I never hear about them until they’re about to attack?”

“In this case, it’s because Touma had a little incident with them on his way to the asteroid field,” Noriko accused.

“All I took was a little food,” said Touma, “It’s not my fault the Cassandra had a malfunction and made my whole stockpile go stale.”

“You should have just come home and spared us all this trouble.”

“Ah, but Noriko-chan, if I’d done that then you wouldn’t have met—”

The display turned on. Touma stopped mid-sentence and scowled menacingly.

“Yamanaka Touma, you dirty space pirate,” came a rough voice, “I had a feeling you’d be on that rustbucket. That’s a cute girl on your arm though.”

“That’s my sister, you fatass.”

“Hey, whatever you’re into, that’s your business.”

Something about that voice—and the way it made disgusting comments so casually—made me pause. As Touma and the Daisangen man hurled insults and threats at each other, I decided to hurry up, get my cart, and get to the turret pod. The way things were going, there was no telling how soon I'd need to blast someone. But I was curious about the source of that voice, so I decided to pass behind Touma to get a look at the monitor.

I put my plan into action and regretted it. I recognized that face. As Touma had observed, the man was fat, though I knew there was muscle underneath. He had weathered jowls, beady eyes, and—despite the fact that he must have been nearly sixty—dyed blonde hair.

Our eyes met.

“Hey, hey, who’s that behind you? Who is that guy? Don’t I know you from somewhere?”

Instead of answering, I slipped out of the camera’s sight as fast as I could. Noriko aimed a frigid glare at me.

“Hey, you can’t take some thug seriously, right?” I tried to excuse myself.

“No, no no no. I wasn’t sure before, but I definitely recognize that voice. Lemme think here...”

Touma looked at me with surprise. Even Hoshiko shook off her stupor to stare at me. I almost ran for the cart and tried to get out as fast as I could, but on my way back the old bastard caught me.

“A janitor cart? You’re a janitor now? Now I’ve got it. Someone that pathetic could only be Dai-chan! Dai-chan, hey Dai-chan, you brat, look at me when I talk to you.”

That nickname sent a sick feeling slithering up my spine and into my jaw. I froze as if something cold had been suddenly pressed to the back of my neck.

For a story where family is such a central element, maybe you’ve wondered why I haven’t mentioned mine. Here’s why: that man on the screen was my only living relative. Morishita Tarou, my mother’s brother.

"I'll be in the aft turret pod," I said to no one in particular, "If I see anything, I'll blast it."

"That'd be a good threat if you weren't pushing a janitor cart," laughed Morishita, "Is that all you've accomplished on your own? Why didn't you ever come home, boy? You know my offer still stands. I can still set you up with a nice position if you just ask nicely."

"Thanks, but I'd rather wipe up shit."

This was especially true since I'd just learned he was some sort of thug. But I couldn't bring myself to utter another word to that man. He laughed and said something else, but I hurried off of the bridge before I could hear it.

I was halfway down the passageway when Noriko came running after me.

"Tanikawa!" she snapped, "What the hell was that? You know Morishita?"

"No. Yes. I did, like, ten years ago."

If we use a loose definition for the word "raise," then Morishita was the man who raised me. He was gone a lot of the time and didn't talk much about his work, though I knew in a vague way he had some shady job with some shady company. As for when he wasn't working, I'm not the kind of guy who tells sob stories. Suffice it to say he was a mean old bastard.

The instant I turned eighteen I dropped out of high school, left home, and vowed never to see that man again. Over the course of the next decade, I became dissolute, destitute, and useless. Despite that, I had one single source of pride. I never took Morishita up on his "offer." I never took that way out.

Should I have mentioned all that at some point before now? Yeah, probably. But how the hell was I supposed to do that? It's a weird subject for me. Anyway, that's more or less what I communicated to Noriko. I was surprised and angry and I'm not sure just how coherent it was, but I think she got the gist.

Noriko looked troubled. And then she scowled.

"Geez," she grumbled, "And you got mad at us for not telling you things in advance."

“I didn’t know you wanted my frigging life story.”

“You owe me for this. You owe me...something.”

“What the hell do I owe you for? What the hell do I owe you?”

“I’ll decide that later. Go do your job, Janitor-san.”

At long last, the janitor cart was safely deposited into the janitor closet, and I climbed down into the aft turret pod.

“Tanikawa,” said Komori over the net, “Are you there yet?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

“You were just on the bridge, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“What’s going on up there?”

“Aren’t you listening over the net?”

“Noriko cut us off from the bridge. She said Nii-chan was about to talk to the enemy and she didn’t want them figuring anything out from net chatter.”

“Ah.”

“The contact looks human. I’m seeing a Daisangen Group logo on it. Why is some financial firm bothering us?”

“Apparently it’s a black company. Touma knows about it. Didn’t he brief you on this at all?”

“No. Nii-chan’s too absent minded to think of stuff like that. Nee-chan would have done it, but...gah, I guess you were right. It’d be better if she’d get over this funk she’s in.”

“Tanikawa?” spoke up Yukari.

“Yeah?”

“Was Nee-chan on the bridge?”

“Yeah.”

“How was she?”

“Out of it.”

VIII

Hoshiko sat on the bridge feeling tired. Touma was still talking to the Daisangen man, Morishita. Apparently that man had some

connection to the janitor? Weird, but she couldn't care right now.

She could hear her brother's conversation. The words entered her ears and registered in her brain as perfectly intelligible Japanese speech. But her head felt like it was stuffed full of cotton, and only snippets of what she heard managed to penetrate into the realm of meaning. Lots of blustering. Wasn't that a waste of time? Why not just try to escape already? Why not just start shooting? But that was the captain's call, not hers.

A nearby panel made a click, and Hoshiko's eyes were drawn to the solid red LED that had just turned on. The alarm warned of a total loss of power to the aft turret pod. The alarm panel had been set to silent for a reason. There was no need to let the enemy know about the state of the ship. Neither Touma nor Noriko had noticed the light go off.

Hoshiko's eyes flicked to another alarm panel and saw no indication of any damage to the ship. If the turret pod had been torn off by force, that would have been a serious blow to the hull's integrity. But since only the power fault alarm had gone off, it was most likely just a poorly-timed electrical problem.

Still, it would be best to make sure. Even in a best case scenario, Tanikawa would probably come to the bridge to report what had happened, and that would give intel away.

If those two are busy, thought Hoshiko, then I might as well do something useful for once.

She stood up and, as unobtrusively as possible, left the bridge. Alone, the hum of the ship's machinery only made the passageway seem quieter. Things seemed so quiet and still that when the door to the weapons control room clicked open, she jumped.

It was Yukari.

"What are you doing?" asked Hoshiko, "You should be at your battle station."

"Komori is still there. It's just that Tanikawa went silent and we thought one of us should tell somebody."

"I know. I'm on my way to check it out now."

"Oh. That's good. Will you be okay by yourself?"

The strange question, paired with the strange look on Yukari's face, threw Hoshiko off a bit. Of course she'd be fine. Why wouldn't she?

"Yukari, the enemy could open fire any minute. We need you on the weapons system. I'll handle this."

The rebuke didn't seem to annoy Yukari the way it normally would. Instead, the younger girl smiled.

"Okay. I trust you, Nee-chan."

Again, what a strange thing to say, but it made Hoshiko happy for some reason. Yukari returned to the weapons room.

Hoshiko continued aft, but before she could reach the turret pod, someone else called out to her.

"Onee-sama?"

Hoshiko stopped, turned, and saw that the door to Miko's room was open. She was seated at the edge of her bed and looking out.

"Oh. Are you feeling better, Miko?"

"More or less. You left the bridge. Are you checking on something?"

"Yes, there was an alarm. It's probably not a big deal, you can keep resting."

"I feel bad, doing nothing while everyone is getting ready for a fight."

"I...understand. But your battle station is down, so it can't be helped. Please don't let it trouble you."

"Can I go with you?"

They stared at each other for a moment.

"Of course," said Hoshiko.

Miko stood up, picked up a thin book, and came scurrying out of the low gravity chamber.

"It's the owner's manual," she explained, "For the ship. I spend a lot of time up here by myself, so I know it pretty well."

Did Miko's smile seem a bit bitter for a moment? No, that couldn't be right. Not her. They walked aft together.

"What was the alarm?" asked Miko after a few seconds of silence.

“Loss of power to the aft turret pod. We probably just need to help Tanikawa climb out in the dark.”

“I see.”

When they reached the access hatch, Hoshiko saw that the power loss must have been entirely localized to the turret pod itself. This could be an easy fix, even with her meager knowledge of electrical systems.

“All right, let’s get the hatch open. Wasn’t there a lever on this side?”

“Onee-sama, it’s already open. That’s the vacuum seal.”

Hoshiko flinched as though she’d been struck. Looking over, she saw the hatch cover standing straight up and wide open. The cover she’d been looking at was the one that snapped shut on its own when it detected vacuum on the other side.

“*Gh*. How did I make such a stupid mistake?”

“More importantly, doesn’t that mean that the turret pod is gone?”

Hoshiko began to curse herself in her mind. Quit worrying about yourself and focus on the mission! The turret pod was gone! Instead of coming straight here, she’d stopped to chat twice. Twice! Meanwhile a member of the crew was in danger!

“Onee-sama? It looks like the turret pod really is gone. What should we do?”

Hoshiko shook some of the cotton out of her skull.

“We’ll check with Komori. By now the pod should be visible from the weapons room.”

But when Hoshiko stuck her head into the weapons room, Komori snapped at her.

“Nee-chan, we’re busy now! There’s a keep out sign you know.”

“You said I could ignore that.”

“That was when you were the–er, I mean, yeah. Come in, come in. You are my, uh, oldest... sister, after all.”

If Komori thought Hoshiko hadn’t known what she was about to say, she was wrong. But there was no time to think about

it. Hoshiko went in and Miko followed after. Miko was not challenged. Komori and Yukari were both seated in the VR sphere, looking at her. The Daisangen ship still loomed nearby, but there was no sign of combat yet.

“The aft turret pod is missing,” said Hoshiko, “Have you seen anything from here?”

Komori’s seat went whirling as she scanned the area.

“So when Tanikawa went silent, something bad happened?” asked Yukari, looking anxious.

“I don’t see anything,” said Komori, “Are you sure it’s gone? If he’d ejected, we would have heard the notification. If Daisangen tore the pod off, there would be damage. Maybe it really did just lose power.”

“There’s a small window near the access,” said Miko, “If the pod was there, we would have seen it.”

Hoshiko, who had forgotten to check the window, grit her teeth. But only for a moment.

“Moreover,” continued Miko, “The turret pods are attached to the ship by strong electromagnets. The ship’s manual warns of certain EMP frequencies that could disable them if fired from up close. The pod could have been taken without damaging the ship.”

“You’re telling me the bad guys got right up close to the ship without me noticing?” asked Komori, “Twice in two battles? I can’t accept that.”

“Though it looks like a spherical view all around the ship from here, there are actually several blind spots at close range,” said Miko, “This ship is a fairly old model by now, so it’s not surprising that a company like Daisangen would know about that. It’s nobody’s fault.”

“It’s my fault,” interjected Hoshiko, “If I’d ran straight to the access, I probably would have seen the enemy making off with the pod and done something about it. But it’s too late now. I’ll have to tell the captain and take responsibility.”

“Onee-sama,” breathed Miko.

Hoshiko, unable to take the strange stares her outburst had attracted, broke out of the weapons room and ran for the bridge. But the staring didn't stop once she got there. Immediately, the Daisangen man's eyes locked onto her and he grinned.

"Ah, she's back. Look, you two, it's the pretty nee-san who doesn't talk. Did you even notice her leave? I did."

Hoshiko froze in the doorway. Touma looked uneasily between her and the screen, but Noriko only shouted.

"And what's that got to do with you? Focus on the negotiations."

"Forget the negotiations. I just wanted to keep you two talking til she got back. Judging by the time she left, she must have noticed something. Am I wrong?"

Touma's eyes flicked over to the alarm panel and widened.

"Come on," said Morishita, "Tell us what you found."

After the stress of the past several days, Hoshiko had grown despondent. After the turret pod incident, and the failure she saw in it, she was still reeling. Being directly jeered at like this was too much, and her eyes grew hot and watery.

"Y-you..." Hoshiko's fists clenched at her side, "You...you took our janitor!"

Morishita laughed, and the image on the screen changed from him to a rather unflattering picture of Tanikawa. The janitor was strapped to a chair, punctured with drip tubes, and snoring obscenely. The image went back to Morishita.

"Now the real negotiations can begin," he said, "The only reason I haven't blown you brats out of the sky already is because I know your big brother spent months in that asteroid field where the aliens live, and you people must have a cargo bay full of rare minerals. If you want your janitor back, you will bring me every scrap of metal and rock you mined. You have one hour."

The video call ended.

Hoshiko was surprised when Miko appeared behind her. It didn't look like she'd gone faster than a brisk walk, but she was out of breath and Hoshiko instinctively helped her into a chair.

“Miko,” said Touma, “You’re feeling better? I’m glad to see you.”

“I’m glad too, but now’s not the time,” cut in Noriko, “But it’s a good thing Miko is here. We should open the net and let Komori in on this too. There’s a lot to discuss.”

The net was opened, and information was shared. Hoshiko discussed what she’d done after the alarm went off. She was about to apologize for being too slow, but Miko cut her off with an explanation on how Daisangen had used the Argive’s blind spots and detached the turret pod undetected. Komori and Yukari confirmed they hadn’t seen anything. Hoshiko tried to apologize again, but Miko placed a hand on her back and startled her long enough for Noriko to start talking. Apparently, Noriko had confronted Tanikawa and learned that the Daisangen man was the janitor’s uncle, and they had never been on good terms.

In the end, Hoshiko never got a chance to take responsibility.

“Well, if this guy is really Tanikawa’s uncle,” reasoned Komori, “Then it’s not like he’s gonna kill him. It kind of sucks, but it would probably be fine if we just left, right?”

“This is Daisangen,” said Touma, “Morishita will probably do the honors himself.”

“Definitely,” agreed Noriko, “Especially considering what Tanikawa said about their relationship.”

“But this is a trap, right?” asked Komori, “No matter how you look at it, this is definitely a trap. Even if you fly those minerals over, there’ll be a squad of goons waiting for you, and then who knows what’ll happen? And that’s assuming Tanikawa wasn’t a spy right from the start.”

“Tanikawa is not a spy,” huffed Noriko.

“How do you know?”

“I just do. Anyway our course of action is clear. I’ll head over there and rescue Tanikawa. Then we’ll fly away with both the janitor and the minerals.”

“That’s not much of a plan,” grumbled Komori.

“That’s right,” said Touma, “That’s why I’ll have to go with Noriko.”

“Huh?” asked Noriko, “But I’m the one who owes him one. I mean, I’m the best shot with small arms, I don’t need any help. And you’re the captain. The ship needs its captain.”

“The ship has a captain. Hoshiko!”

“Huh?”

“Watch the ship while we’re gone.”

“Huh?!”

“And with that settled,” Touma went on, “There are lots of reasons why I need to go with you. For one thing, I owe him one too for rescuing my precious little sister. And, uh, also this whole situation is kind of my fault. More importantly, since both the escape pods are down right now, the only way to get over there is the Cassandra, which is my ship.”

“It’ll be cramped with three of us,” mumbled Noriko.

“That’s still not much of a plan,” said Komori, “You’re walking into a trap. How are you gonna get out of there? Why am I the responsible one now?”

“When you walk straight into a trap, there’s only one way to beat it,” said Touma, pushing his glasses up, “You break it. With overwhelming violence. That was your plan, wasn’t it, Noriko?”

“More or less.”

“You’ve seen how much I modified the Cassandra’s mining laser, right?”

“We’re going to need space suits, aren’t we?”

As usual, those two operated on the same wavelength. Hoshiko struggled to match them.

“Wait,” she said, “Wait. Is this really okay? I’m not sure I’m fit to run the ship anymore.”

The conversation stopped. Noriko looked bewildered. Touma frowned.

“You’re a great captain,” said Touma, “You got me rescued, didn’t you?”

“But I’m not... I don’t know the equipment that well, and I’ve been forgetting things, and I can’t calculate a course in my head, and just now—”

Touma pointed at her and bellowed, “You dumbass!”

“Huh?”

“Being the captain isn’t about any of that stuff. Who’s a better pilot than you? Who can give commands like you? You’ll do fine, just like always.”

“XO, are you not feeling well?” asked Noriko.

“You’ve been sharing a room with her, how did you not notice?” asked Touma.

“Wasn’t she just tired?”

“I wish your admiration for me could be as pure as it is for our sister.”

“I’ll do fine?” asked Hoshiko.

“We’re all dead if you don’t,” said Touma, “So probably. Anyway, time’s a-wasting. Let’s go.”

Touma and Noriko left. Hoshiko sat still, with wide eyes and shallow breath. Miko took Hoshiko’s hand in both of hers and pressed it warmly.

“Onee-sama, you should take your place by the helm. We’re all depending on you.”

IX

When the Cassandra blasted the Daisangen ship and flew through the hull, the enemy began to shoot. With her siblings down range, Hoshiko didn’t dare order Komori and Yukari to return fire. For what seemed like forever, she took frantic evasive action. Then, just when she thought she couldn’t keep ahead of the enemy barrage for one more second, there was another explosion on the Daisangen ship. The firing stopped.

Hoshiko collapsed into her chair. Her heart was pounding, and her arms felt like they were on fire. When she checked the time, she saw it had only been a few minutes.

Miko placed her hand on Hoshiko’s shoulder.

“You did it, Onee-sama.”

“Looks like their plan is working,” commented Yukari over the net.

“They didn’t have a plan,” said Komori.

“It’s working though.”

“Yeah.”

Hoshiko muted the bridge on the net. If the weapons operators saw something, she would know. But there was something she didn’t want them to hear.

“Miko. When I tried to take responsibility for all this, why did you stop me?”

Miko glanced at the net setting, making sure Hoshiko had set it to mute.

“Don’t be an idiot.”

“Huh?”

“You took too long to get to the access? That’s stupid. How were you supposed to know what was happening?”

“But—”

“Even my patience has limits. Do you think you’re the only one with problems?”

Hoshiko was stunned. She’d never known Miko to speak a harsh word.

“Is... something wrong, Miko?”

Miko tilted her head back and sighed at the ceiling.

“I want to leave.”

“Wha— Leave?”

“I want to leave, but I can’t. Not while you’re like this.”

“I don’t understand. If there’s something you need, then—”

“I need you to be the Captain again. You’re the kind of person who’s no good unless people depend on you. Everyone but you can see it. Tanikawa came to me because he was worried about you. Of all people, the janitor was worried about how useless you’ve become. Komori and Yukari are walking on eggshells around you because they are worried about you. And what do you think Touma just yelled at you for? People expect me to do something about it when I don’t even know my own feelings anymore.”

Miko's knees began to wobble. Hoshiko stood up.

"You shouldn't get agitated in this gravity. You might hurt yourself."

Miko looked down at her big sister with a wet face.

"Onee-chan...I have something to confess."

"Well sit down first. Sit down."

Hoshiko grabbed Miko by the waist right as her knees went out and gently lowered her into the captain's chair.

"It's the aliens," Miko was starting to blubber, "I want to go with them. I don't wanna be alone anymore. When we get home you're all gonna leave me again and...and..."

She cut herself off with a sob.

It took Hoshiko a moment to realize what Miko was talking about. Aliens? Aliens! The aliens that had offered to take Miko to their homeworld?

"Miko! Those aliens killed our parents!"

"I know that. But I've seen their planet. It's full of people who look just like me walking around in the open and I want it. I want it! And I've got their passphrase in my head and it's just three short words and I'm not gonna be able to resist saying it."

"Miko, hang on, I can, um—"

"So I need you to be the Captain again. You need to talk to Touma when he gets back and tell him you're the Captain again. And you need to be the Captain on Earth too. You need to keep everyone together and on the right path. Yukari needs to go to a good school, and Komori needs to go outside more, and Noriko needs to break her bad habits, and Touma needs to stay out of trouble. And Tanikawa needs to stay too, otherwise he'll go right back to his old life. And...and..."

"Okay. Okay, okay, okay. I'll take care of everyone. So please...just calm down."

Without warning, Miko leapt to her feet. She stumbled, but caught herself. Then she looked up and uttered three strange words. Three otherworldly noises that slid off of Hoshiko's brain like raindrops on glass.

Then there was an alien. Hoshiko recoiled as its gaze swept across her and settled on Miko.

“Yamanaka Miko,” it said, “Are you ready to come with us?” Miko looked at Hoshiko. Unconsciously, Hoshiko shook her head and mouthed “no” over and over again, feeling panic well up in her chest. Miko sighed.

“No,” said Miko.

“Then what did you call me for?”

Miko and the alien stared at one another. If not for its pale blue skin and bright green hair, the alien might have looked more like Miko’s sister than Hoshiko.

“That passphrase. Your world. Everything you put into my head,” said Miko, “Take it away from me. I can’t go with you. I can never go with you.”

“If I do this, we will never meet again. Are you sure?”

Miko looked back at Hoshiko, this time with a pleading look in her eye. Much as Hoshiko wanted to shout encouragement at her, that would have been too selfish. She averted her gaze and waited to hear Miko’s final answer.

“I’m sure. Please do it.”

Again, the alien took Miko’s face in its hands and kissed her on the forehead. And then the sisters were alone. Miko collapsed back into the chair right as the main visual display lit up the bridge with an image of a brilliant fireball. The enemy was completely vanquished, and the Cassandra could be seen flying back.

“We really are space pirates, aren’t we?” came Yukari’s voice over the net.

“Yeah,” said Komori.

Hoshiko clutched at Miko’s shoulders.

“Let me help you to your room,” she said, “You need to rest.”

“Not yet. You need to stay at the helm. If something unexpected happens, only you can steer us to safety. Only..you..”

Miko, totally spent, fell asleep mid-sentence. Though Hoshiko was worried, it wouldn’t be long until Touma and Noriko returned. She remained at the helm.

X

The last thing I remembered was getting beat up and drugged by my uncle's thugs. When I woke up and found I couldn't move, I began to panic. When my eyes settled on a familiar, tall figure seated nearby, the panic subsided. Miko was asleep right next to me. Looking up, I saw I was encased in one of the Argive's bright orange medical pods.

Then I looked back at Miko and panicked again. She was even paler than usual, which is saying a lot.

"Miko? Miko! Hey!"

Her eyes fluttered open and took a moment to focus on me.

"Tanikawa-san, you're awake."

"Never mind that. Are you okay? You look terrible."

"Ah, that's my fault. Onee-sama kept telling me to rest, but I guess I was too stubborn. I've spent too much time in normal gravity now."

"Can you get to your room? Let me out and I'll help you."

"Tanikawa-san, you just woke up yourself. How can you be so worried about me when you're not well either?"

The door opened and Yukari barged in.

"Tanikawa's awake?"

Miko nodded.

"Never mind that," I said, "Help her get to bed."

Yukari took another look at her sister and grew flustered. She rushed over and helped Miko to her feet. They started to leave, but Miko stopped to get a few more words in.

"Thank you. Both of you. For talking to me earlier."

"Did you decide what to do?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm staying. I think maybe it won't be so lonely now that you've all reminded me...how much you care."

"Miko, you're shaking," protested Yukari, "We've got to go."

But Miko managed to say one more thing before being herded off to bed by her increasingly fussy little sister.

"You'll stay too, won't you Tanikawa-san?"

Briefly, I lay alone with that question. I still didn't have an answer when my next visitor arrived. She was about two years younger than me, and tall for a woman. She had clear, fair skin and long, black hair to go with her sharp, black eyes. Confident. Stern. Every step an unconscious demand for respect.

"Captain," I blurted out without thinking.

She smiled.

"Sorry," I corrected myself, "I mean, Hoshiko."

"No. It's fine. I am the Captain."

"Really?"

"Yes. Touma has agreed to take on the position of chief engineer. He will be focusing on maintaining our equipment for the remainder of the mission."

"That's great. N-not that I mean to say your brother was a bad captain or anything, I just—"

"I know what you mean. Don't think I don't know about your discussions with Komori and Miko."

"Oh, that? You heard about that? Well, I, uh, certainly didn't mean to say anything bad about you. I just, uh—"

"I know. Thank you."

"Huh? For what?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Okay. In that case, can you let me out of this thing?"

The Captain leaned over to look at the medical pod's monitor. She frowned and hummed at something she saw.

"Not yet. Ask again in an hour."

"Oh, come on."

"Don't be like that. Someone like you is more fun to visit when you're sick."

"Since when do you tell jokes?"

"I don't. I only tell facts. Look, here's Noriko."

The door burst open, Noriko came charging in, and the Captain made a graceful retreat.

"So there you are!"

"Why do you say that like you didn't know?"

"Shut up. You owe me."

“You said that already.”

“Yeah, but now it’s true. I just rescued you, you know.”

“Didn’t I rescue you first? Doesn’t that make us even?”

“I blew up a whole spaceship for you. We are not even.”

“You blew up the ship? Does that mean you killed my uncle?”

“I didn’t kill anyone. Probably. Until the ship blew up. Anyway I thought I saw your uncle get on an escape pod.”

“Isn’t that blood on your face?”

“Hm? Oh. How did that get inside my helmet?”

“That’s not the problem here.”

“Stop getting off-topic. I know what you owe me.”

“I hope it’s not too unreasonable.”

“When have I ever been unreasonable? Listen, you remember how I’m finishing my master’s degree after we get back?”

“Yeah.”

“You have to see me off when I leave. Knowing you, you probably just want to get back to your useless life of gambling or whatever, but that’ll have to wait. You have to be there when I go. Understood?”

“Sure. I can do that.”

Noriko looked like she’d been prepared for me to argue, and she spluttered for a second before nodding.

“Good. That’ll be all.”

With that, she pulled a smart about-face and marched out of the medical bay, apparently mad at me for some reason.

For the next hour, I was alone. An automated message over the intercom announced we were crossing the Kuiper Belt and into the Solar System, and I still wasn’t sure what I was going to do once I got home. I guess part-time janitors and bad gamblers aren’t good at long-term planning.

For now, my promise to Noriko was enough. I’d stick around for a while.

XVI. The Tower

by /a/non

The cracked moon shone bright in the starlit skies of the Old Earth, its pale light shaping the silhouette of the last crumbling tower of Dolarest, a rare vestige of that Ithlumium people who had once, in a more enlightened era, ruled as masters of all those territories touched by the children of Gaia. Yet none who looked down from that lofty height would guess that once a great empire ruled here, for all that could be seen, as far as the eye might reach, was fire and ash.

The top of that tower was like a vast, living tangle of serpents, if each were made of wire and steel tubes rather than flesh and scales. The shifting movements of the tubes, and the glowing light that came from beneath, gave the impression of that ancient primordial ocean from which ancient man had claimed the gods had brought forth all life from—and, indeed, there were men in his day who might claim that a god existed. For this, the last super-computer of the Old Earth, was powered now by the still-beating heart of what mankind had so boldly named the King of Demons, which many had been made to worship in the past eon. Few were there who would contest such a claim, for one need look only to the shadow of the tower to see the great fifty kilometer gash in the ground, from where he first struck down the gods of space with his blade.

In the heart of that vast mass sat enthroned one of the rare few who might contest that claim, for she had been accounted among those who had subdued that great monster, and pulled the beating heart from its chest. Her name was Natalia Evening-Chronicle, the Ruins Queen, formerly the High Archivist of the Ash Legion, and now the last survivor among its officers. More cunning was she than most, and it was indeed a matter of guile

and foresight that she remained atop that tower, while countless of her brothers and sisters were devoured by the all-consuming holocaust that swept the Old Earth below. The red-orange flames flickered in the reflection of her own blood-red eyes, set into the preternaturally beautiful, ethereally pale face of a woman whose young appearance belied a lifetime of conflict, which had seen the passing of ten and two thousand years of human history.

On this night of fire and ash, though, it was not the flames that interested her, nor the countless souls that burned below. It was instead a single man, standing atop the rooftop. Whereas she was garbed in a resplendent dress of black lotus silk, that man was the image of a traveler from a distant, and by no means less rugged past. A long coat for warding off dust, a wide hat, and boots for the road shaped his dress. The man himself was equally rugged, his white beard and rough skin contrasting him against the beauty who sat before him. His dark eyes, though not facing the fires below, nevertheless blazed with the unquenchable fire of a human spirit.

Slowly, the edge of Natalia's lip began to curl, shaping into the face of that thin smile which had been the last sight of a thousand men or more, and with a faint glimpse at her long and sharp canines. She said to the man before, "And who are you, that would intrude uninvited into my domain?"

In response, the man proclaimed to her, "Natalia Evening-Chronicle—I am Father Jeremiah Stonefield, and I have come to bring an end to your calamitous reign. Many of your kind have I faced already, and each I have condemned to the judgment of God the Most High. Yet in spite of the precautions, I hold no illusions of surprising you. For though all and sundry know of your arrogance and pride, so too is it said that none other among the ashen generals exceeds you in the realm of information."

Natalia twisted her body in her seat and leaned slightly forward. Her legs crossed over each other as her right elbow lowered to rest upon the dragon-head shaped arm of her great throne. Against her raised right hand she set her chin, raising the intensity of her stare as she gazed at the man. She said to him,

then, “Indeed, rumors of a hunter have reached my ears. But rumors, however useful they might be, can speak only of what man does. To know a man’s heart, he must be confronted. Tell me, child of man, what has motivated you to challenge my tower? A hundred traps and more I have set, in this place, and guardians aplenty. Failed experiments, broken legionnaires, bound imps, thinking machines, and even the last remnants of the foreign beasts from the skies—but one of the least of these can match a dozen men, and enough I have gathered here to face an army. Yet humble though you look, to be standing before me, torn more by the cruel passage of time than any of my defenses, an army you must well be worth. How did such a spirit come to dwell within me?”

“Such a spirit? You misunderstand. I have walked this world and seen its many corners, and in each, met men of all sorts. In my heart burns the fire that dwells within all men, and each I have passed, has passed that fire to me. Burned though their bodies may be, their spirits, greater and more luminous by far, all survive within me. The Spirit of the Most High stands behind me, my guardian and my guide, and by His will I will show you the brilliance of a humanity you have abandoned. Monster, queen of vampires, I have come to slay you, for you do not belong in this world.”

“Thus say you, man of the present day, for so easily you forget. It was humans who abandoned your Most High, humans who created their own demons to protect against the invaders from the stars, and humans who—when their creations turned upon them—raised us up from corpses as weapons, and in the end sought so casually to discard us. The genetic material which is your life’s blood has been a small price to pay, I think, for the mercy the children of ash showed to you, our forebearers, and for all that we have granted you. For it was we who recovered what was of the old sciences, and we who have given you a world to be fruitful and multiply. Is such a thing truly so monstrous?”

“Say you this, though you sit high upon this throne, while the world burns beneath your feet? Your mercy, as you describe it, is

to see humans as no more than livestock. What else might you call that, besides monstrous?"

"Why, I would call it human! Is it not the most human thing of all, to be a master of the lesser beasts? But as you well know, a man must watch the beast he cares for, lest they turn upon him. He does not walk among his herds without precaution, for should they seek to trample him, he would be buried under the weight. So, too, have we been cautious with you. For you who created us, higher beings than yourself, have feared us from the start. Make justification as you might like, o child of man, but they are there only to soothe your own soul."

At this, she stood from her throne, and gazed down from the high spot to the man before her. With a gaze that shone with such intensity it might kill a man of weaker will, she declared, "Yet if you declare yourself to be such a wild herd, then I shall warn you this—I will not be broken under hoof nor heel so easily. Child of man, in respect for your will in making it here, I will not do you the disgrace of granting you the possibility of quarter. Your life I declare as forfeit, while your blood I shall take, and with it, the memories of each of my kin you have slain. Your broken husk I shall cast from atop this tower into the flames below, where your spirit might burn until the Old Earth is at least cleansed, and the survivors stumble at last upon my tower's door."

"No justification do I need, vampire, for those very flames are my justification. For it is by the hands of your kind that these fires rage below us. Once I have sent you back down to Hell, I will destroy this tower, and the old sciences with it. And with that, the mistakes of the past, of these countless eons of human folly, shall at least come to an end."

No more, then, need to be said by the two of them. The terms of their battle, that between man and monster, had been set and agreed upon. Natalia reached to her shoulder, and pulled her dress away, revealing the more ostentatious dress beneath. She wore a sleeveless bodice-like top, with tight red and black fabric lined with golden thread and metal lace, which put her cleavage on sharp display. A short skirt ran beneath it, exposing

her thighs down to the point where her violet stockings begin. They, too, were laced in gold, which was the color of her shoes. Black gloves of mismatched length were upon her hands—with gold bracelets, of course—while on her neck sat a golden necklace, with a great blood-red ruby sat upon it. The dress in her hand shifted and warped into the form of a sword. The hilt of the weapon was as gold wrapped in topaz, while its cross-guard was like similarly wrapped sapphire. The blade, in turn, was like ruby more brilliant than the one she wore on her neck, and pulsed with an ominous power like the heartbeat of a hateful living thing.

In turn, Father Jeremiah reached into his coat, and pulled out an old, tattered book. By the appraisal of a vampire, who had been ancient when the seeds had first been planted for the trees from which its pages were made, it was no special thing. And yet a book, in the end, is not defined by the paper upon which it is written. It is defined by its words, and the words in this book were very old, and very powerful even now. Though languages had changed, and the passing of eons had obscured the histories within to a mere blip upon the vast canvas of human history, the full weight of that history rested in the hands of the man who held that holy book. With a simple gesture, he raised it up, and kissed it. Then, slipping it back into his coat, he pulled out a long revolver and shot the vampire.

The sound of the gunshot from the old-fashioned weapon sang out across the night. Natalia's blade was first to fall from her hand. Then, her knees slumped to the ground. Next, the rest of her body fell with her, and her face struck the hard ground. The open hole through her forehead bled out to the ground below, and with nary a sound from her proud lips, she laid still on the ground.

Jeremiah stood there, for a moment. He lowered his revolver, and shot again. Natalia's body flopped a bit, her head popping like a grape and spreading a shower of gore across the area. A slight look of confusion fell upon his otherwise stoic face, as he slowly stepped forward, holding his revolver at his side. Ap-

proaching the deceased vampire, he asked, "Is that it? Have you no other tricks? No form of regeneration, or means of retaliation?"

No response came from the still body. He crouched down and, reaching his left hand slowly, poked it. Then, seeing no other response, he poked it again. Still it remained limp, with no signs of any movement coming from the dead woman.

"...truly? No, that's not right. This is all by the power of God, of course, let His name be praised...you aren't playing dead, are you?"

Still no response came from the vampire. Only a growing pool of blood. Scratching his head, he knelt down to lift the still corpse and turned around, looking at the orange-tinted horizon, and found himself almost unconsciously drawn in that direction. The whole Earth, it seemed, was completely wrapped in those all-consuming flames. It was almost a certainty, he felt, that there would be survivors. Just as he stood now at the top of the tower, there were many places for mankind to live. Upon the peaks of mountains, in the depths of the seas, in bunkers deep below the Earth, and in stations orbiting the sky or built into the Moon, there were almost certainly survivors. So, too, would their creations no doubt persist. Even in the midst of this, that hope remained, as well as that threat. But as unexpectedly quick as it might have been, he felt that his mission—to remove the most dangerous threat—was finished.

Reflecting on the souls lost to the calamity, he looked down to the body he was cradling, and cast it into the inferno below. Quietly he uttered the words, "And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."

However, at that very moment, a strange sensation came upon him. He turned around, with his firearm poised again, and found himself faced against that great throne. There sat Natalia Evening-Chronicle dressed in her dark robes, and with not a mark upon her. Nor was the bloodstain, which had been scattered across the ground, still present. With her legs crossed, and a smirk upon her faced, she asked him, "How do you think to

accomplish such a feat? Do you think a lone bullet would be enough for me? Or that you might cast me into those flames, to prevent my regeneration? You are a truly foolish human. You cannot condemn a child of ash to the flame, and expect that she will not rise again, as many times as needed.”

“You—this is not right...”

He looked down at his feet. He had been standing on the edge, before. His head felt foggy, as if his memories weren't quite matching up. What was the last thing she said? What was the last thing he had said? But the more effort he put into attempting to put events into a proper order, the more of a mess it became. Natalia raised an eyebrow, watching him, and asked, “Oh? Did you actually manage to see it? Impressive.”

“My faith and will are strong, monster. Your treachery and illusions can only go so far. Were you wise, you would have taken the chance to kill me while you could. Now that I have seen your tricks, I will not fall for them.”

“It is not a matter of falling for them, human. Now, shall we try this again?”

Once again, she drew her dress away, revealing her battle attire and drawing her blade. This time, she dashed forward, moving with a speed far exceeding that of any human. Jeremiah drew his gun and fired a few shots, but with each shot, his target dashed to the side, or moved around. But with each missed shot, he would have a vision of the opposite—a vision of his blow bringing his opponent to the ground. Sometimes he would see himself standing by the edge, casting her over the edge. Sometimes he would see himself dismembering her, spilling holy water upon her body, using a ritual of sealing, or otherwise putting a final end. He would see himself cut, as well, though never fatally. It was, rather, as though his opponent was taunting him. In the end, though, the center-point always remained that moment from less than a minute back, of him standing and drawing his weapon.

Jeremiah gritted his teeth, as she closed in on him, swinging her blade. He dodged, and leaped back himself, with the ground

cracking slightly under his feet as he launched himself back. His hat, caught by a blow that would have taken his neck, was not so lucky, leaving his long, graying brown hair free to move in the air. He raised his arm to fire once more, only to find himself out of ammo.

Seeing his display, Natalia stopped to laugh, and declared, "Why, such a display of strength! And yet you call yourself human?"

Staring back at her, he reached into a pocket of his coat, pulling out the jawbone of a donkey and displaying it. Then, setting the thing back, he replied simply, "With a donkey's jawbone, I have killed a thousand men."

"A form of logician technique, then? No, you seem more content with calling upon ancient text as your self-hypnosis. Why, that would almost make you more of a magician than, would it not? Can you play any more magic tricks?"

"You speak of tricks, as though that is not your favored technique. But I have the measure of you, vampire."

"Oh? And what do you think that is?"

"You are looking into my mind to predict my actions. You change your movements, and change the sequence. That is how you are able to avoid my shots. The stories of your power, all that you have done—it's nothing but a mere illusion. If I can truly land a shot on you, one that you do not predict, then you will die just as well as your lesser kin. Easier, perhaps, than many."

His eyes blazed with an inner fire as he made his judgment call. She, in turn, raised her hand up to her mouth, and made a wicked smile as she said, "Oh? Is that the conclusion you came to, then? I suppose it an easy enough explanation, one that a human can handle. But it is not quite the full picture. Most humans, in your position, would not even maintain fragments of their memories. You are quite impressive, to have even that much. However, it is not the same for me. Each projection you see, each rush forward, I experience in full. This battle has been mere seconds for you. For me, it has been a long and entertaining dance, and one in which you have claimed many victories."

She raised her sword before her, with her left hand rising up to touch the blade itself, before saying, “But you know, there’s only so long I can stick to this basic sword-play. Shall I show you, then the wielder of a demonic sword, shaped from the demon king’s own spinal cord?”

Blue flames danced around the sword as she held it aloft, calling out, “Ashen Gate—Open! Format: Multi-Edged Striking Blade of the Legion, output 7, variant: glass. Manifest.”

In the air behind her the air glowed with various glyphs, taking a form not unlike that of a great gate. The sword in her hand shifted, the crystal-like blade warping into something with seven separate blades. As she moved it, it seemed as if the blade both moved and remained still, multiple times over. Each stepped away, in turn, so that before Jeremiah there now stood seven different Natalia’s, each a perfect mirror in all respects save the slight variances in their seven swords, each of which had inherited a different spike.

She made no additional comment, for the moment. From each side, the seven swords-women all rushed Jeremiah. He took a deep breath, and exhaled, closing his eyes and saying, “Blessed be the Lord my strength which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight.”

The first Natalia came in. Jeremiah ducked down, drawing his weapon and firing. The charging vampire shattered apart like a shattered stain glass window, the fragments breaking apart. Such was what he imagined in his mind’s eye, for in that moment, his eyes remained closed. With his mind free to be pillaged by the monster before him, there was no choice, in this moment, but to rely on the true strength of his faith. So as the first was destroyed, he rolled to the side, tossing his first weapon aside and drawing two more from his coat.

His body moved on its own, guided by the purity of faith, which had been refined over decades of seemingly endless battle against the worst monsters mankind had created. His arms raised and he fired off another shot, which was followed by yet another shattering of glass. A third shot, then, as he stepped

aside to evade another blow. The next blow he could not evade, instead, throwing his arm up. Yet that blade, which could have struck through solid steel with ease, was caught on the mere fabric of his coat. He opened his eyes, then, facing his opponent as he said, "But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head."

Facing the projection of Natalia, he raised his off-hand gun and blasted her, shattering another. Four shots had been fired, and now, only three stood before him where there had been seven. He raised his arms and began firing at one, who darted back and forth, evading each shot with greater care than the others hand. Soon enough, his bullets ran dry once more. At almost that exact moment, the other two came from him, swinging on each side. He hurled one of his guns at the one, causing her to stumble back, and the second at the other, who evaded and went to swing at him. In response he stepped aside and, with his bare fist, struck her in the arm with enough force that she immediately dropped her sword. His hand grasped her, then pulled her in close before snapping her neck.

The one who had been struck by the gun, now recovered, darted in with her sword as he reached in with her. He feinted to the side, drawing her away before rapidly closing in. The raw force of that punch, thrown with enough speed to shatter the sound barrier, sent fragments of the broken Natalia projection flying across the tower's top. He turned, then, to the last one remaining, who was keeping her distance.

"You have more than demonstrated your might," she said. "But is such brute force the limit of what you can manage?"

She raised her blade again, and said, "Ashen Gate—Reset! Output: 216. Recall!"

Upon her saying this, the air again shimmered before her, as a new duplicate appeared. Then, another. The air around the tower shimmered. Before each mirror-image took form, Jeremiah could see himself in its reflection, as though he stood in the midst of a vast house of mirror. True to the call of the ashen gate, two hundred sixteen Natalia's stood atop the tower, each

carrying a perfect replica of the demonic sword she held. They were fragile things, but that fragility meant nothing here, for a single strike from his fist would surely end the true thing with just as much ease as the duplicates.

This time, the force came at him from all sides, and not all by means of the blade. Some, with the same ease as the original, worked to call from the gate. In the sky a cloud of ash steadily formed, from which they called down blasts of fire or lightning, and powerful winds beside. Lines of power ran along the ground, forcing him to evade as the tower's surface was turned into razor-sharp spikes upon which to impale him. But even against this threat, his countenance betrayed no fear. There was only that stubborn will which had drive him his far, and which continued to drive him to press forward. With each evasive movement, he soon launched himself into another attack, his body ripping through the air like a meteorite and bringing him to each foe. In some cases, his fist would shatter through one Natalia, and bring down a second with the follow-through.

It was a difficult battle—no, perhaps an impossible one. And yet in spite of those terrible odds, Jeremiah felt it less hopeless than the beginning. For his mind was no longer plagued by those strange flashes, as Natalia had from the start. The overwhelming power she called upon, it seemed, could not be called on at the same time as the cheat-like technique. Was it a function of her Ashen Gate? Or something else entirely? That much he could not say, only that, at least for the moment, there existed a chance. Yet to see it materialize would surely not be an easy task.

A series of blades struck through the sky, and the ground gave way beneath him, causing him to stumble and fall back. Six attackers came upon him, and he lunged forward, with his fist piercing through one. As he did, though, he found it shattered not to glass, but was instead like a thick mud, which held him tightly in place. The other attackers, from all sides, turned their blades to pierce him, ripping through his coat clothes and penetrating into his skin. Tatters of paper and cloth fell about as they did so, each bit inscribed with holy texts, and holy protection.

He coughed, and blood came out from his mouth. A normal man, surely, should be dead—and yet, though the blades had struck him, none had fully pierced his vitals. The Natalia mirrors pulled the blades back, to find none had pierce deeper than perhaps an inch. And so he said, “This time I shall be blameless regarding the Philistines if I harm them!”

The air around him began to heat up, with a pulse of flames suddenly spreading out, driving his enemy to scatter. He lowered the cloak he wore from his body, revealing a body that, though no longer in its prime, stood at the pinnacle of human power. It was muscular, incredibly strong, and covered in the scars of a hundred battles or more, all of which singly might have felled a man of lesser willpower. His long hair fell free as he took a step forward, and then another, stomping the ground and causing the very foundations of the tower to shake.

In the next moment, the flames about him began to take on new shapes. Where there were over two hundred Natalia’s atop the tower, now, darting out one at a time from below his feet, with three hundred foxes made of blazing fire, moving tightly as pairs to attack each of the duplicates. In terms of strength, they were little greater than a proper fox, and far less ferocious than any beasts of the day. Yet it was not a matter of the strength of beasts that determined this battle, which pitted them against the mirror army of vampire queens arrayed against them. It was the purest manifestation of that power which tools such as the ashen gate actualized—it was a battle of willpower. The drive to survive, and to accomplish this task, regardless of what it might cost. So did Jeremiah and Natalia clash, a horde of flaming foxes, against a horde of sword-wielding vampires.

The raging battle continued for what felt like an eternity, until at last, a lone Natalia and a lone Jeremiah remained. Both stood exhausted, and clearly marked by the slashing of blades and claws, and the fire and storm from which they could both call upon. And besides them, there was one other who could be seen—the lone remaining fox, seated by Jeremiah’s feet, which faded away like the flicker of a candle as he stepped forward.

“Do you think yourself victorious, then?” she replied.

“No,” he answered. “For it is God who grants me strength, and He who is the victor.”

With a frown, she looked to him and said, “Your faith is certainly something, but do not be so easily misled. There is no God answering your prayers, human. That you may call upon the power of a gate by another incantation is a testament to your own willpower, and the skill of your forefathers to create it. Were you to understand this, you could ascend to be far more.”

“You are not the first to say such a thing. And I tell you this, monster, though you cannot hope to understand it—such things do not matter. It is by the will of God that I serve as his right hand, and I care not the means by which he delivers his judgment. I am his Judge, and his last Prophet, and in His name I will do what I must. To maintain the Ashen Gate as you have must have mentally drained you to the last. Have you last words to speak, here, at the end?”

“Hmm...Look out, behind you!”

“What are you, five year—!?”

But the treachery was not as it seemed, for indeed, there was somebody behind him. Natalia came from behind, this time, the blade of her sword shaped into a single dagger. With one hand she grasped his hair, pulling it down, as with the other she pulled the blade to rip it apart. He pulled back with all his might, and yet unlike before, there was no great force which could tear at the power. It was only the normal might of a man, no longer carrying with him the great blessings of on high.

The Natalia who had appeared by surprise curled her lips into a wicked smile, as she held the great mass of hair in her hand. The other, to which Jeremiah had been speaking to, steadily broke apart like fragments of broken glass. She spoke to him, “You made a mistake, in closing your eyes, human. For when I first called upon the power of the gate, your third shot did not reach me. While you spent yourself playing with my mirror images, I watched, and waited, for the perfect moment when you would be vulnerable enough.”

Casually, she tossed the hair aside. The winds blowing across the tower caught it, scattering the strands which had so long been bound together.

“Ten and two thousand years, human. You stand now at the closing of an eon, watching to see how the Earth shall once again be born anew. But I was there from the beginning. I presided over the closing of the past age, and I shall do so, again, regardless of what you might do. You might think that you carry the will of a hundred men or more within you, but what of it? A single generation cannot hope to stand against the full weight of history. Can you imagine the feeling of looking to the night sky, human, and no longer seeing the night sky under which you were born? To see how those you have fought beside change, into people you can no longer recognize? To know that you, yourself, have been lost under the weight of lifetimes of memories?”

“You expect pity from me, monster, after the horrors you have inflicted upon so many lives? No, monster. I have none to share.”

“Monster. Hmm.”

She looked away from out, turning her gaze out to the horizon. “How many times can one hear such a phrase, do you think? The moment I was awakened to this state, human, I was told that I was a weapon. That though I had died, by means of the old sciences, I had been brought forth. That I, along with the other ash-generals, had in that state between life and death touched upon the Ashen Gate, and could be the instrument to bring about salvation. To persist past the point of war—to choose not to be weapons, but rulers, even if it made monsters of us. Was that so wrong?”

“Look to the ground below, and see the result for yourself,” he replied.

“I have,” she said. “I have seen it far more than you could know. The cataclysm below did not come about in a single night. Yet by the time I could see it, there was nothing left to do but wait. To wait, and to prepare for what was to come.”

At last, she turned to him again and said, “You were a fool to

think I knew not the source of your power. I am Natalia Evening-Chronicle, the Ruins Queen, once the High Archivist of the Ash Legion. There is no text remaining on this planet that I am not familiar with, nor would I, knowing of your coming, not have worked to uncover your weaknesses. The strength of Samson you have thus invoked, and by your will, gained the strength of an army, and skin so near to invulnerable that even a demonic blade could barely hope to pierce you. Yet by a woman's treachery, he was bereft of his strength, and given unto his enemies. Prepare yourself, human, to experience that same fate."

Natalia raised her blade high, and called out again, "Ashen Gate—Open! Format: End of Era Storm Call, output 9999, variant: anti-world."

The demonic sword in her hand vanished, shooting into the sky like a bolt of lightning. In the skies above, where the dark clouds of ash had gathered, it began to spread, marking the beginning of a great storm. The winds howled and towers shook, and in the air behind Natalia, the great Ashen Gate manifested. Where before it stood closed, this time, it was fully open. Darkened ash came forth from it, swirling around Natalia and stretching out past Jeremiah. Were the world not already consumed by flame, an onlooker might well think that this oncoming storm, in all of its might and majesty, marked the final coming of an apocalypse. Nor would any seeing such a marvel expect to see Jeremiah, bereft of his great strength, his mind exhausted, nevertheless holding firm.

Yet that was exactly what he did. For though the strength of the great judge of old had left him, that man, Father Jeremiah, had not declared such a title as the extent. For such a title, as might as it might seem, could only be seen as a limiter for a man of his faith. To be a judge, as he had stated, was to declare oneself as presiding over a darker, fallen age, where men inflicted the worst of horrors upon each other, and no kings righteous or cruel sat upon the throne. Whatever might be said of this age, where the world itself was on fire, it was not such an age. For though she presided over naught but ruins, and help not the divine man-

date of heaven, there existed atop this tower a final queen of the world. And it was not the duty of a judge to speak of divine justice to the king.

With an assurance granted only by the strongest of faith, Jeremiah strode forward and spoke, *“And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God.”*

Natalia, with that same confidence, lowered her hand and directed it at Jeremiah, while bringing her own incantation to a close with that final word, “Manifest!”

“And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them.”

The moment Jeremiah uttered the words, Natalia stopped, as though time itself was stopped for her. Then, across her body, a dozen cuts appeared, ripping through her clothing and skin, and causing a horrific spray of blood to shoot out in all directions. She cried out in pain, dropping down to the ground, and clutching her body. No individual wound was fatal, and nearly as soon as they were made, her vampiric regeneration began to do its work of knitting them together. But the pain, that was a very different matter. Pain unlike that which she had felt for centuries, the suffering of a hundred priests to a false god, all placed upon her in the span of a moment. Yet in spite of it all, even as she was forced to catch herself in part with her off hand, she did not allow her knees to touch the ground. For though the suffering she felt was great, her pride, even then, would not allow herself such a disgrace.

While she began to recover, the clattering of a stone against metal could be heard, as Jeremiah reached into his pants pocket and tossed a mesh bag with twelve clattering rocks. Gritting her teeth, she looked up from the stone to the man, before standing and saying, “You have interrupted the Ashen Gate? How did you manage to contrive such a thing, human?”

“Before coming to this tower, I prepared twelve stones,” he replied, “From which each of these fragments was taken. Each I placed around the base, to make this an altar. Thrice along

the way, along my ascent, I poured forth water. Each of these things I did in preparation, knowing that I would face both your power and your treachery. No god will answer your call, nor will any power come to you from the gate. For now you face the full majesty of the divine.”

With his arms extended wide, he spoke with the great might of an ancient prophet, calling forth the words, “*Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.*”

The swirl of dust overhead began to glow, and the strength of the winds below picked up, with such an intensity of howling that none like it had ever been heard upon the Old Earth for ten thousand years or more. In the skies above, a cataclysmic power grew, shaking the very pillars of heaven with the raw power of the elements—of fire and lightning, and those other things by which divine judgment was often rendered—to a magnitude far beyond even that which Natalia had contrived with her own apocalyptic incantation.

Looking up above, rather than despair, she simply chuckled, saying, “So, you would make this tower an altar, with yourself standing atop it? Your resolve is admirable, human. But let us see if you truly understand the magnitude of what you have wrought.”

The clouds above were blown away, and where the moon should have shone in the sky, there was a vast expanse of light like that of the sky. The roaring winds were joined by the crashing sounds like the sea, as though, at the base of the tower, the great deluge had returned to the Earth to consume it. Flaming spheres fell from the heavens like long tongues of fire, striking the tower which had until now been safe, with each strike blasting away at the ancient metal and stone. As the Earth itself shook, fragments from along the side fell away. In the midst of this great unraveling of man’s creation, Father Jeremiah looked to Natalia and said, “So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.”

The sound of the heavens being rent apart resounded across

the land, as from the sky above the came a great bolt of lightning. Never before had such a bolt been seen on the Old Earth, nor would such a thing likely be seen on any that might follow. Upon the tower that bolt of lightning came, and the tower, for all it strength, all the sciences that had gone into making it, was powerless to resist. For it was not mere electric power which struck its surface, but rather, it was all that such a bolt symbolized in the hearts of mankind, all the way back to those distant days when the first men, clothed only in that which they were born with upon leaving their mother's womb, looked upon those bolts from the skies above and named it the work of a divine power far exceeding their own. It was power, primordial and pure, and crafted with the sole purpose of bringing about destruction. Where it struck, the side of the tower was blasted apart, striking all the way down its core and to the vast tangle of wires and tubes around which it was built. With that single strike, that tower, which had been old even when its undying mistress still lived as a moral woman, was undone.

The two small figures which stood atop the vast tower were not spared from the destruction. As the top collapsed the two of them, man and woman, both came tumbling down along with it. None walked astride the surface of the planet below to see them, nor were there any who might help them. Along the long fall, Natalia considered her options. Had she access to her Ashen Gate, surely there was some technique which might aid her in cushioning the fall! Yet with the Gate sealed, no such technique could be called upon. Nor, like her predecessors, could she simply turn into a bat and fly away. There exist nothing which she might do save allow herself to fall, alongside that man, who had resolved to die along with her. Falling not far from her, he did so gracefully, his eyes closed, and prayers upon his lips as he spoke to the God in whom he believed.

From the top of the world they fell, accelerating, as dictated by that universal law of gravity which had remained unchanged since Newton had first contemplated such things, at nine point eight meters per second. Down to the Earth below they fell, and

she, her face below the tower cleansed of the flames and left as but smoke and ash, smiled to welcome them. What sound they made upon striking the ground would, surely, be a horrendous thing, though none could possibly hear it. For so perfect was the timing of their falls that each met the Earth at the same time, and in that moment, was confronted with what should we have been oblivion.

And yet though blackness came upon them, the mutual oblivion that might have been did not come. For Father Jeremiah, who had resolved himself to such a fate, awoke to find himself in the midst of a bed of ashes upon the ground. His body, sore and battered, remained intact, in defiance of all that might be said about human limits. As he moved, slowly, attempting to pull himself up, he looked forward to see that he was no alone in his survival. For in the midst of the ashen waste, a swirling dark cloud pulled itself together, taking the form of the all the more appropriately titled Queen of Ruins, Natalia Evening-Chronicle. She wore neither her black dress nor her battle dress, but stood clad only in the dark wisps of smoke, which preserved only the barest sense of a modesty which she herself had lost any care within the first millennia of her long life.

Jeremiah attempted to pull himself further, but found himself unable to. Though he was, by some miracle, alive, it seemed that was about all he could say. His muscles, he could tell, were largely all but destroyed, and fractures ran along each bone in his body. That he could move, or breathe, was more a matter of his mind than the crude matter of his body. But though it pained him, he nevertheless made the effort to speak, noting, "It would seem that this is the end. If you intend to see me to God, monster, then do so swiftly. For once my strength has returned, I shall bring you to an end."

In the reflection of her blood-red eyes, he could see the faintest impression of himself. His body was bloodied, battered—though he could not feel it, it seemed that, at least in some parts, his bones were sticking out. He dreaded to know what lay beneath his left arm, which he found he could not even

move, while also doubting he would ever get to learn. Yet the vampire queen who stood before him did not advance forward, instead looking down at him with a neutral expression that betrayed no hint at her pride, nor anything else beyond.

“That will be unnecessary,” she replied, “For though I had declared that I would take with your life your blood, and cast you from atop the tower above, it seems neither is an option. So utter was the destruction of my body in striking the Earth that even regeneration can render me as little more than this—a wraith of ash and dust. Broken you already are, and by a fall of your own devising. Take pride, human. You have done what none other has in ten and two thousand years.”

“Pride? I can feel no pride in this. For I, too, am now but a broken man. And you, who shall live past the point that I can return myself to life, survive still. How might I feel pride, knowing that all I have worked for has been for nothing?”

“With the tower destroyed, and the information with it, the ancient sciences will be lost. This eon, however long it might last, shall progress without their touch. In time the fires will die down, and the survivors will walk upon the surface. When the last remnants of their technology fail them, they will walk about, as their ancient ancestors did, hunting the surviving beasts of the Earth with bow and spear. It will be a hard life—harder than any that he we given them—but it will be their journey to take. And it is one I have no interest in guiding them upon.”

“A creature like you, which feeds on human blood, cannot remain passively on the sidelines. Like a predator, you will stalk them—an eternal mark of my failures.”

“Must you be so dramatic? For all you know, I plan only to stalk humans at the very end of their lives, or who are set to die anyways. I am not a glutton...”

Those words, said with a strong hint of annoyance, betrayed honest thoughts unlike any she had yet said. Though far from comforted by them, Jeremiah Stonefield, the broken man lying at the base of the tower, caught that same hint, and pondered it. No longer could be hope to meet his objective. It was a terrible

thing, and yet, in that moment, he also felt it gave him a new sort of mental freedom. The freedom to listen to his opponent, who had plummeted alongside him, and the freedom to wonder what she spoke was truth, and what was mere deception. And so, with such curiosity coming upon him, he asked her the question, "Tell me—why I am alive?"

"Is it not obvious?" she asked. "You staked this whole gambit of yours on bringing us both to a mutual destruction. But this manifestation of will, which you might call a miracle, works both ways. For so long as I survived the fall, so, too, would your body survive. Whereas this 'Samson' you called upon died in crashing a tower down upon his enemies, in a last feat of superhuman strength, your will has given you another chance. But if you should stand again? That is a separate question."

"I will," he replied, "So long as the Lord wills it. So, too, shall I mediate upon what he intends by my survival, or by your own."

"There is no higher meaning to be found in survival, human. Nor in death."

"It is by that way of thinking that the world burns around us. Man exists in this world to give glory to our creator. But we have strayed, from His laws, and from our rightful place."

"Those words are not your own," she replied. "They are words that were given to you. Human, did you not wonder why I ceased relying upon my prediction?"

"A simple answer—you could not use it while wielding that sword."

"In rapid succession, that is true. But let me ask you another question. *How far in advance do you think I could actually see?*"

That question, which hung in the air for some time, was one that he had no answer for. Nor had he given any thought to consider it. That he was still alive implied some limit, and that she was looking in his mind, that his presence was in some degree required. Yet not that it had been asked, he begun to wonder what it was she truly meant.

"The true answer, human, is not what you think. Since the moment I was brought from death, the power I have carried from

the ash is the Blood of Cassandra. And its full span is not, as you might think, a matter of seconds. It is the power to live through the events of one hundred years. For you, human, you have dedicated your entire life to destroy my kin. Yet the first time we met atop that tower, was over one hundred iterations in the past. For though my life might be measured in a mere ten and two thousand thousands years, the span of my mind measures ten and two thousand million. In spite of it all, I had no means of knowing that at the edge of that awareness, that the events leading to this grand inferno had long before been set in motion. No means could be found to prevent it. So instead, I chose a different path. I would set things into motion, such that I might be avenged.”

Looking to Jeremiah, she said, “The earliest form of you carried a different, more complete holy book. It was of the same sort—a text of faith, from back in the 3rd Eon, and from the same mythic template upon which our Ashen Gate was built. For that reason, it was a tool well-suited to dealing with our kind. When first I saw you, your willpower was apparent at once. But it was tempered by notions such as love, and mercy. So I traced back the records of your existence. I stripped bare those texts to their predecessors, of the 2nd Eon, and ensured the right information would reach you. All so that I might have you exterminate my own kin, born from the same Gate.”

In the furthers corners of her mind she could remember him. In a world where she had never moved off her throne, that Jeremiah, who had confronted her atop the tower, had shone brighter than any other. But a saintly man who would not act until the flames had burned out could not have been the weapon she needed. So she, the Evening-Chronicle, had become like the treacherous morning star and set him on a lifetime of war, waged for the sake of mankind against a legion of vampires.

“Such a preposterous thing to say...”

“The namesake of my power of blood often heard such things, I understand. To see what lies in the future, it is a curse upon the one who bears it. To have no means of changing it, a curse even greater still. So much have I seen, and so much of it futile,

that even my sense of self is as thin as this ashen body of mine. And I have tired, human, of this unending game of writing and following scripts for my own life, as a pawn of my own making. I had tired a long time ago. More than a thousand years before your birth, I was tired, and had thought it best to live atop this tower as all but a lobotomine, the years passed idly as I saw into futures that would never be my own."

In that moment, Jeremiah understood the meaning of his potential deaths. That the woman who stood before him, in her repeats, had no doubt seen a dozen ways or more to ensure his defeat. So why, by choosing to instead call upon the power of her Ashen Gate, had she opened up the possibility for things to go against her expectations? Why had she allowed herself to slip? He could not hope to fully understand the burden of ten and two thousand million years of memories, but he could understand, after such an eternity, that a certain part of her simply desired to see an end.

At this realization he laughed, and said, "You should consider faith, monster."

"A strange thing to say, I think. By what logic would make me a convert?"

"In this battle, as I have set myself before the judgment of the Lord, so too did you offer your own fate to Him—or, perhaps to your, it may be better to say to the whims of fate and chance. Have you truly not considered that He may well have guided your heart to this? That this power you claim, from this vision, is not something which has blinded you from the truth that is faith? Or that when you saw this other self of mine, who might have stood here instead of me had you not intervened, that it was His will to have you awakened, and bring about his just vengeance?"

"And you would call my words preposterous? Hah. No, human, I have no need for a faith that would make me such a pawn to the world. What I have chosen, I have chosen of my own, free will, and it is by the same will that I shall pass as a wraith along the edge of the next phase of history. Until the end of this eon, the beginning of the next, for as many times as needed. No need

have I for faith in powers from the world beyond, for I am Natalia Evening-Chronicle, the Ruins Queen, who returned from death to help slay the King of Demons which mankind had so foolishly brought into being. Should such a being as 'God' exist beyond this material world, past each of the Gates Unseen, then I should well like to meet him, and slay him all the same."

"Your words are as blasphemous as your existence. I pity you, monster. But now, at least, I do understand you. For like Cain, your bloodstained hands have cursed you to wander in suffering. Once, I had thought your destruction only a matter of protecting mankind. Now I wonder if such a thing might be a mercy upon you, more than anything else."

"Should such a thing come, it will be by the hands of another, human. For even should you seek me, you shall not find me. For the Earth is vast, and the skies above far wider still. Spend the rest of your life in search, and a thousand generations beyond that, and you will not find me. Do as your book says. Go forth, be fruitful, and multiply."

With those words, Natalia's ashen form began to break apart. Looking at herself, she said, "It seems this is the limit. I suppose I shall allow the wind to carry me, then."

No more words were said, then. Jeremiah Stonefield watched as the ash was carried away. His mind turned now to his own, broken body. In spite of his words, he was not confident that he would be able to truly pull himself up from that stone. Nor, knowing what had been said, was he sure of his own resolve to do so. But prayer, at least, he could do.

His eyes turned up to the sky above. The tower, which had once dominated the landscape, was gone. Yet the moon, that great glowing orb in the sky, remained even in its battered state as a constant companion, casting its pale light upon his face. He contemplated that beautiful sphere for some time, as well, and on the sun from which it had borrowed its light, and all the stars in the sky and those people who might remain on the Earth below. And from that sky, as well, he reflected upon a flickering light, in the sky above, which seemed to gradually grow brighter

as it drew closer. Was it a trick of his eye that he saw, descending to the ground below? An escape pod descending from orbit below, or a rescue ship sent on high to inspect what remained of the tower below? A satellite which had lost its control station, and begun a descent? Some monster of human creation, unknown to himself, on search for prey to harvest? Or was it an angel, sent from on high to bring him up?

He closed his eyes, and allowed the warm night air to blow across his face. He reflected on the life that he had lived, and on the powers that had guided it to where he was. And when at last he opened his eyes again, he smiled at what he saw.

Mahou☆OL: Hopeful Starlight!

by /a/non

I

Koboshi Riko was growing desperate to leave. She had already stayed later than she wanted at the insistence of her boss, but it was out of her good nature that she remained now. Her green eyes glazed over as she reviewed her colleague's presentation slides one last time. They didn't look any different from before, despite her coworker's insistence that she had made some significant changes since Riko had last taken a look a while ago. At least she could get ahead of tomorrow's tasks in the meantime.

Not that the quality of the slides mattered that much, anyway. *It's presentable enough for now*, she thought. She stood, smoothed out her gray pencil skirt and white blouse, and adjusted her glasses. "Mochizuki-san, I think that's enough for today. I'm sure Takahashi-san will be fine with this." She'd been working with Takahashi, the pair's supervisor, since she landed this job out of college and had a pretty good handle on his standards after seven years.

Oh god, it's been seven years... the realization was not pleasant.

"Yeah..." Mochizuki Nagisa, Riko's junior and a new employee at the company, stopped Riko's dread locomotive before it could leave the station. "I guess you're right." She turned toward Riko with a smile—her white teeth shone even brighter against her freshly-tanned skin. "Thanks again for helping me. I've had

a lot to catch up on since the honeymoon.”

Riko gritted her teeth, faking a smile. *I get it. You just got married. You wouldn't shut up about it the whole time you were engaged. Are you going to torture me with honeymoon stories now? Perhaps you'll regale me with a wonderful walk on the beach that was so romantic?*

Despite her mental tirade, Riko managed to choke up a more political response. “Sure thing, Mochizuki-san. I know it can be stressful to come back after a vacation,” she lied. It had been seven years and Riko had yet to take a break from work longer than two days (when she got sick one time). “Anyway, I’m going to head home. I’ll see you tomorrow. We can review the presentation before Takahashi-san gives it in case we missed something.”

“Oh, I’ll walk out with you!” called Nagisa as Riko turned for the door.

Please, don't, thought Riko. “Okay, I’ll wait up,” said Riko with another phony smile.

Nagisa slid her laptop into her leather bag. While she waited, Riko let down the messy her dark-brown hair had been loosely bound in. Her thick locks hung loosely over her shoulders, and she ran her fingers up the sides of her head to untangle them.

“So, did I tell you how Hawaii was?”

“Yes,” lied Riko, the facade in her usual, ‘professional’ tone of voice cracking a little at the mention of the southern islands. “And from your tan, I take it you got a lot of sun.”

Nagisa giggled. “Yeah. It was great to spend so much quality time with Haruki, too. We don’t get to see each other much since I work.”

“Mm, I’ll bet that’s hard,” said Riko with some barely-disguised contempt. Nagisa finally stood and the two made for the elevators in silence—Riko hoped her colleague had run out of things to say as she called for a ride down to the lobby.

“So,” Nagisa began, dashing those hopes, “what about you, Koboshi-san? Are you seeing anyone right now?”

Riko put on a brave face, then, but inside she was throwing a proper tantrum. “Right now, I’m just working on myself,” she

said. *I'm so, so, so lonely!* cried her heart. *I hate this job, I hate being single, I hate it! Where's my househusband to greet me with a warm bath and dinner?! Where's my construction worker husband who can carry me when I'm too tired to walk?! Where's my office husband who I can get coffee with in the morning?! I'll take anything!*

"Oh, I see," Nagisa interrupted the despair with a half-smile, playing with her blonde bob nervously when she realized she'd asked an uncomfortable question.

The ride down from the fifth floor was silent in the most uncomfortable way. The two stood about three feet apart as the muzak filled the room with tension. Nagisa's stare could burn a hole in the floor, she was so afraid to look up. Riko stared off into space as she imagined falling in love with the fireman that might rescue the two of them from the elevator if it broke down.

Tch. With my luck, he'd save Mochizuki first and the cable would snap with me inside.

"A...anyway," began Nagisa as the elevator sounded and the doors slid open, before any tragedy could befall the pair, "thanks again for today. I really appreciate the help. I've had a lot going on...not just with the marriage and all."

Riko started to say, "It's nothing," but a yawn interrupted her. "Sorry. It's gotten kind of late for me. Like I said, I'll see you later." As they stepped out the door, the two split off toward their respective destinations. Riko rented a not far from the office, but Nagisa had to commute by train.

Once the overly-enthusiastic newlywed was out of earshot, Riko let out a heavy sigh, a mixture of relief and frustration. She leaned against the nearest wall that would take her and stared up at the starless sky.

"I wish she'd figure out that no one wants to hear that much about her marriage," she grumbled to herself. Of course, the truth was just that she was jealous of Nagisa's happiness, but what good would acknowledging that do her? "Oh, it's so *hard* to be married and go on beach vacations with my husband! Yeah, right," She mocked aloud.

Through with her griping for now, she checked her watch and saw it was too late to stick around—even if she ran home to eat, she would have to go straight to her dreamless sleep and back to work in the blink of an eye. So, with a heavy heart at the thought of doing it all again tomorrow, Riko plodded toward home.

It was about halfway there that her feet started to ache, or rather that they started to reveal they pain they had been in all day, from which Riko had been distracted. She resorted to carrying her heels and walking with just her pantyhose protecting her toes, but still they cried out in pain. Her head was swimming with half-remembered tasks and numbers she'd heard throughout the day; she could barely keep track of all the dates, times, and obligations tied to them that comprised her daily duties.

The bags hanging heavy under her eyes belied a greater weight, one borne by her soul, that only grew more oppressive with each passing day. A drink or three could alleviate some of the load at night, but it only compounded the problem by morning with a haymaker of a hangover that lingered throughout the day—even now, she was fighting the last remnants of a headache. The previous day—her 29th birthday—was particularly tough on her. Takahashi scolded her for a minor mistake on an inconsequential project that ended up canceled entirely later that day, and the remarks Takahashi's direct supervisor made about her body were getting more...creative, to say the least. 29!/? *Really!/? I'm surprised they're still so firm! You really are blessed with supple skin, Koboshi-kun!* Even though she normally didn't drink on weekdays, she felt she had no choice last night, especially after another plea for grandchildren from her mother.

Tonight was looking that way too; she deeply contemplated buying a six pack from the convenience store at which she picked up a mediocre, precooked dinner and caught herself reaching for it twice, but decided against it for the sake of surviving tomorrow without a rhythmless drumbeat pounding over her every thought no matter where she tried to escape in the otherwise eerily quiet office. *It's almost like no one else wants to be there, either.*

The rest of the walk home was a barely perceptible, yet

painful and annoying blur, and soon Riko found herself at the base of the outdoor stairs which led up to her too-expensive, too-small 1K apartment. She climbed them with an effort, each step harder than the last, wearing an expression that told the world, “I don’t want to do this again tomorrow,” as plainly as if she’d spoken the words themselves aloud (which she had in this very spot, several times).

She reached for her keys, and...the pocket she usually put them in was empty.

“You’re kidding.” She walked over to the railing and held her purse out in front of her, under the street light. “Where are they!? Did I leave them in the office?” Riko grew more and more frantic as she began tossing things out of her purse and onto the ground below, hoping in vain that her keys would appear magically beneath things like makeup and hair ties which were too small to cover them. She even dumped the contents of her purse at her knees, to which she had fallen in her turmoil, but alas, nothing shiny or metal landed before her.

I know I didn’t leave them at the office...right?** Riko hated the idea of going back there in the morning as it was—to pay it two visits in a single day might just send her over the edge. Still, the empty purse spoke for itself.

She threw her head back and let out a sustained groan. A nearby stray dog howled with her.

* * *

Since she was going to be out all night anyway, Riko decided to check the ground on her way back to the office in case she saw the keys lying somewhere. It wasn’t impossible that she’d just dropped them, right? Maybe they fell out of her purse when she paid the clerk at the convenience store, or perhaps when she paid she pulled them loose and they fell out on the road home later on. She wouldn’t have noticed, lost in thoughts as she was. So, she scoured the ground near the sidewalk she took home for anything that shone against her smartphone’s flashlight, stooping

to the ground to check under benches or bushes.

About a third of the way back, she thought she found something, but it was just an empty ramune bottle some kid had tossed on the ground. *Come on*, she thought, letting a sigh speak for her as she tossed the bottle into the appropriate garbage can (which was nearby).

This went on for a long time. She would find *something*, check it out, get disappointed it wasn't her keys, die a little inside, and repeat. Halfway back to work she took a seat on a park bench to eat her dinner; upon finishing the now-cold meal she could do nothing but put her head in her hands and beg the gods and Buddha for help. They didn't respond. *Guess they gave up on me, too...*

Since it was so late, no one else was out to ask her what was wrong—not that anyone would have—but she fantasized about a nice man coming to inquire what such a pretty, young girl was doing out alone at this time of night. Yes, and he would be a locksmith, and he would get her back into her apartment...and to show her gratitude, she would invite him in for something to drink...they would fall in love immediately and get married in a month, and she could quit her job and raise their two boys and two girls, or maybe become an artist from home with just one child. Or maybe...

"Maybe I see my keys *there*," she spake, looking up from her hands and fantasies at yet another glinting, but otherwise indistinguishable in the dark, object that lied on the ground across the street. She stood, took up her phone's flashlight again, and shone it on the glimmering object—it was hard to make out hidden under a shrub, even up close, so she got down on all fours and stretched out her hand to reach it. As soon as she touched it, she could tell it wasn't anything like her keys, but she pulled it out of the bush anyway and took a look.

"Some kind of toy," she remarked, making no effort to hide her frustration as she gave the object a once-over. It was pretty well-made. Atop a six-inch long orange stick stood a yellow star, replete with all kinds of ornate decorations and a red ribbon tied

beneath its base. The star was translucent and looked like it could be made to light up, but there were no buttons on the side of the wand to turn it on.

Maybe you shake it? Riko thought, engrossing herself in the childrens' toy to distract from reality for just a moment. She waved the wand like a wizard might, and suddenly found her life thrown off the course of misery she'd been coasting on for seven years.

A white light engulfed her vision and a violent tremor sent her spiraling into unconsciousness. As she faded away, she wondered if she'd been struck by an unseen vehicle, but she awoke a few moments later with her vision returned to her.

I'm alive, at least...but where am I? She found herself surrounded by nothing but thousands of twinkling stars, standing in the void of space. There was no ground beneath her feet, yet she stood in this space of nothing; there was no air in space, yet she breathed as if there was, and that it was rich with oxygen and free of pollution; she was totally nude, yet warm as if she were beneath a kotatsu.

...

Totally nude?

"Haah?" As she looked down she was stricken with the realization that her clothes were missing from head to toe—glasses and all, though she could see as if they were still on her face. She jumped to conceal her nakedness gracelessly, crying like a duck might call when she apprehended her nudity. Her forearm made a valiant effort to cover her ample bosom, but her breasts fought hard to spill out and reveal themselves as she squirmed.

"Fear not, visitor," called a mysterious, and very loud, voice from the distance.

"Who are you? Where am I? Why am I naked?" Riko asked in rapid succession, quaking under what she now felt was a watchful eye. She grew red with shame and squatted down to hide more of herself from whatever sight might belong to that disembodied speech.

The voice rang out in a thunderous peal as if that was the only volume of which it was capable. "I am the great judge, whose duty it is to determine whether you are worthy to wield the power of the Star Wand you have found in your possession. It will be my honor to bestow the right to use its magic on you, if you are worthy. You are in the realm of the infinite space-time, awaiting judgment."

"And my clothes?!"

The voice ignored her concerns about her state of undress and continued. "There are three traits all worthy holders of the Star Wand will share, and with those three traits she can assume the identity of Hopeful Starlight.

Riko opened her mouth to ask again about why she had to be naked for this, but the voice kept going and she couldn't hope to talk over its prodigious strength. "First, she who wields the Star Wand must be a budding maiden. She must be pure of body, and she must be pure of will. These are the three criteria, and..."

He paused, then made some wordless noises as if he were contemplating something. Riko heard the sound of shuffling papers, then the voice muttered, "Hmm...no, that's not right," under its breath.

"Can I help you?!" Riko shouted to get his attention. She wasn't exactly getting *less* embarrassed with time here.

"Sorry, but there appears to be a mistake here."

"What kind of mistake?" Riko retorted, her voice shaky. All this talk of being 'judged' wasn't sitting well with her—what were the consequences of failure?

The next question only bothered her more. "Are you...thirteen years old?" inquired the voice.

"No!" she yelled; then she cried again when she realized her aggressive answer caused some of her more sensitive places to 'slip out' of the makeshift bikini she made with her arm.

"I thought not, from your appearance." *Ouch*. "Is your name Hoshino Miki?"

"No! Are you kidding?" Just how badly managed was this operation?

The voice hemmed and hawed as it replied. “Hmm...this could be a real problem. You see, what I said a few minutes ago about judging you...er, the thing is, we already *did* all the actual judging. For Hoshino Miki. She was the one who was slated to be the next Hopeful Starlight when she found the Star Wand on the side of the road after losing the ball she was playing catch with. She’s a bit of a tomboy, you see, which is a first for us, and—”

Riko interrupted his gushing about Hoshino, the tomboy Star candidate. “So can I go now? I’m obviously not Hoshino Miki and I’m not thirteen. I was just looking for my lost keys when I found the Star Wand, or whatever you called it.”

“Well, we’ll see if you are worthy for now, anyway.”

“What if I don’t want to do it?”

“What?” The voice replied with a quavering tone as if she’d told him his dog had died.

“I mean,” began Riko, “I don’t really know what all this is about. I don’t care about being granted any power and, frankly, I have enough on my plate as it is. I just grabbed the toy by accident.”

“Well...” the great judge cleared his throat. “We don’t have a stipulation for that in the intergalactic agreements, so that’s not on the table.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“We didn’t plan for anyone to turn the power down. No one has in...well, the whole time I’ve been doing this. Which is a very long time. In fact, we ensure the candidates we preselect have the psychology to accept without even considering the consequences since they tend to do the best work.”

“So, what? Am I stuck doing this?”

“Look, this is all out of order and this kind of situation is new to me too. Besides, you’re supposed to be very impressed right now. It’s kind of killing the mood, the way you’re acting, so can’t you just appreciate the moment?” he pleaded.

“No! I want to go home!”

The voice sighed. “Look. Just let me run the test. It’s only four questions and it won’t take five minutes. If you aren’t worthy,

your memory of this will be erased and you'll go back to what you were doing before. I'm sure I can do that..."

He didn't sound very confident, but the alternative might be standing naked in space forever arguing with someone she couldn't even see, so Riko agreed. "Fine." She put her hands on her hips, forgetting she was naked for a moment, then remembered and covered herself up again with a squeal.

"Okay, good. Ahem." The voice returned to its original, boisterous tone. "What is the name of the candidate in question?"

Was he reading off the paperwork they used to decide on Hoshino Miki? "Koboshi Riko," she replied. She heard it scratch something down in pencil.

"Is the candidate pure of heart, kind, and untainted by wickedness or greed?"

"How can I answer that?"

"Just try."

"I guess I'm pretty nice...?"

"Can you share a specific example of a time you were nice?"

"What is this, a job interview?"

"Yes, basically."

"I stayed late for my coworker today even though she went on and on about her stupid wedding and she's only 24 and what business does she have getting married before I do and my mom won't stop calling me to ask for grandkids and I keep having to make up worse and worse excuses about why she can't meet my boyfriend and the real answer is because he isn't real and anyway if Nagisa would just pay attention instead of talking about her 'fiance,' or husband now I guess, all day she wouldn't need to stay back so late and—"

"Alright!" The judge called, louder than before. The sheer volume of his voice shook Riko to her core and took her right back to the discomfiture she felt when she first arrived. "We'll move on for now." He cleared his throat. "Is the maiden pure of body?"

"What does *that* mean?" she asked, squirming under what felt like even more intense scrutiny than before.

“Judging by your appearance, I’m guessing no, but...well, I have to ask. Are you a virgin, Koboshi Riko?”

“That’s...none of your business at all!” she blushed.

There was a deep sigh, which seemed to surround her in this spaceless space. “Could you just answer the questions? I did not expect to still be doing this by now, and I have other matters to attend to, you know.” She could hear him tapping his foot against the infinite.

“Ugh...yes...” she said, in the tiniest voice she could manage.

“What? Speak up, please.”

“Yes! I’m a virgin.” Riko shouted, louder than she meant to.

“Really?”

“What do you mean, ‘really’?!”

“Sorry...I was just so sure you weren’t one with that body. I’m shocked, is all.” He was not doing a good job of endearing himself to her, especially as he continued, so she interrupted. “I’m getting cold here. Are we done?”

“Yes, that’s...oh, one more. How old are you?”

Considering she’d just revealed the iron grip she had on her virginity, she wasn’t as ashamed to respond this as she might have been normally. “I just turned 29 yesterday.”

“Hoof.”

“What now?”

“You’re cutting it close there...but I can smooth that over with the committee later. Anyway—great news! You have passed, and I deem you worthy of wielding the power of the Star Wand!”

“What? No, I don’t want—”

He cut her off by clearing his throat again, shaking everything around her in the process, and started reading off a script. “Koboshi Riko...it is with great honor that I bestow upon you the power of the Star Wand and all its wonder. You are a...somewhat...young maiden, pure of heart and body, and with the power I will now bestow upon you, you shall become the Hopeful Starlight of your planet, Earth. Go forth, Hopeful Starlight! Shine your rays of hope and justice on the humble blue star you call home!” He sounded like he was speed-reading to get

this over with and get back to what he was doing before she took the Wand from the ground.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Riko tried to interrupt but the voice was no longer entertaining her outbursts in the slightest. Another flash of white light took Riko’s vision from her yet again. A warmth enveloped her like a mother’s embrace, and she was overcome with an emotion she hadn’t felt in many years—hope. Her eyes flitted shut and she found herself spreading her arms automatically—in an instant, her once-nude form was covered in form-fitting white light, which in turn transformed into a frilly yellow dress whose skirt reached her mid-thigh. It and all its accessories bore a star motif, including the tops of the white thigh-high socks that covered her legs and the hem of the skirt which hugged her hips (a bit too tightly), under which were fluffy, white bloomers. The top of the dress was mostly yellow with a white undershirt beneath the slightly open bodice. The shoulder-length white gloves met the dress’s puffy shoulders at her underarms. In this form, Riko fell into a deep slumber, falling away from the infinite space and tumbling back home.

II

The usual foghorn siren of her alarm clock shook Riko awake from the deepest sleep she’d enjoyed in years. She slowly peeled her eyelids apart, but they fought hard to stay shut despite her valiant efforts.

“What a weird dream...” she thought aloud, sitting up in the bed and rubbing her eyes. “I should stop drinking so much before I go to bed, huh?” *At least I don’t have a hangover, this time.* She reached over to her clock to kill the alarm and check the time. “Damn.” Every day she vainly wished she had set her alarm for the incorrect time so she could go back to bed; every day she was disappointed that she hadn’t done so as she slithered out from between the sheets.

Straining against her desire to lie back down, she guided her feet to the tatami, stood, and stretched. It was then that she noticed she'd fallen asleep in the nude last night; normally she at least wore a pair of panties and a too-big t-shirt that reached past her bottom. *Guess I got too drunk and passed out halfway through changing.* Normally, she couldn't sleep at all without a big shirt on.

She couldn't take a shower with one on, though, as evidenced by the growing pile of dirty laundry in the corner of the bathroom she saw when she dragged herself into it. The shower's handle squeaked as she turned up the temperature—soon a cool rain sprayed onto the tile. As always, she had to let the water run for a few minutes before it got warm enough to tolerate, so she brushed her teeth in the meantime.

While she brushed, she noticed a strange, star-shaped mark on the back of her right hand. “Whasch dhish?” she asked aloud absentmindedly, mouth full of toothpaste, as she brought it closer to her face to inspect it. She'd never seen that birthmark before...and it was such an odd shape, too.

Maybe it's an impression from the sheets or something. Or, maybe I drew it on there and forgot about it, she thought, putting it out of her mind just as she spat out the foam in her mouth. She gargled, then hopped into the now-warm shower.

There was no relief quite like the hot water that rolled down her skin in waves, the pressure of the faucet massaging her shoulders and back while she stood with her hand against the tiled wall. Of course, it wasn't *all* fun; with a grimace she recognized the small, but painfully noticeable mound of fat on her lower belly that appeared suddenly when she turned 25. She poked it, puffing out her cheeks when it jiggled in taunting reply.

“Guess I need to watch what I eat,” she said, ignoring the elephant made from discarded aluminum cans in the next room over. With a sigh she got to work scrubbing herself, lathering from head to toe and rinsing with the detachable shower head (one of the few amenities the apartments offered). Riko found

herself lingering below her waist with the it for a while, but resisted the urge to...relieve herself, for now anyway. She didn't want to hear about being late from her boss, after all. "Maybe when I get home...it has been a while." She shut the water off and noticed the star-shaped mark was still plainly visible on her hand.

"That's so weird..." She rubbed it a couple of times, but it remained after a few seconds. "Did I use permanent marker? I didn't think I even *owned* a permanent marker." With a shrug Riko wrapped herself in a towel and made for her wardrobe, pulling out a matching set of underwear (as if anyone would see, she thought with an eye roll) and the first outfit she laid eyes on.

As usual, putting her bra on in the morning was a Herculean task. The hooks just *barely* reached, but she refused to buy any larger ones as a vain plea to her breasts to stop growing any more. Finally she managed to secure them, but not without more than a little grunting and straining.

"Still E-cup...still E-cup..." she panted to herself, victorious over her chest another day.

Long gone were the days of dressing extra-nice, putting on flattering makeup, and doing her hair up so she could hit it off with one of the cute guys at the office, go for a drink after work, fall in love, get married, produce a soccer team's worth of children...or maybe travel the world together and visit all sorts of places, fighting against their sheer passion to keep their hands off one another in a romantic international date spot...*ah, Paris...*

She pulled up her thigh-high stockings with a snap, which also snapped her out of her daydreaming and back to the grim reality where all her coworkers were women, married, or old divorced men with bad taste in cologne and worse breath. Groaning, Riko stood from the seat she took on her futon to get dressed; as her feet touched ground, so did a quiet thud on the other side of the bed.

"Hm?" She climbed over the bed and peeked at the floor, where she saw the magic wand toy she'd found under the bushes while she looked for her keys last night. *Oh, yeah...I meant to take*

that to the police box before coming back home after I found my keys, but I guess I forgot. Everything after she'd left the office yesterday was a blur in her memory, so she couldn't remember where she even found her keys in the first place (she'd mistakenly locked them in her apartment the previous morning without realizing).

She tossed the toy into her purse, ensured she had all her essentials—*especially* her keys—and started to set off on her commute to work.

Strangely, her usual internal tirade about how badly she wanted to do anything but go to work did not come naturally to her at the door. Normally, those thoughts thrust themselves into her consciousness without permission or invitation, but she felt fine, which was alien to her.

Maybe I'm finally getting out of that rut she thought, stepping out and letting the door close itself behind her. The weather was beautiful—the sun shone warmly on her skin; a faint breeze kissed her face; she heard some young children playing nearby over the quiet sound of the wind. She enjoyed the weather for a moment before trotting down the stairs.

Most of her commutes to work were uneventful affairs consisting almost entirely of a growing pain in her chest that cried, “go back to bed!” Strangers rarely interacted with her, and she had no reason to approach them, so she marched with eyes forward, hiding her desire to go anywhere but her destination beneath a porcelain mask of “professionalism.”

Today was already looking to be an exception—she was enjoying the peaceful ambiance and quiet serenity of the day with no thoughts of work at all until the patter of young feet approached from behind, accompanied by a pair of shrill voices.

“Come on, Yuuta! Let's hurry! I think I lost it somewhere around here!” shouted a little girl who couldn't have been much older than six as she ran past Riko.

“I *said*, I'm not helping you look for your dumb toy!” cried a boy from behind who sounded about the same age, his voice growing closer with each syllable. Hana turned toward him and pouted, slowing to a walk.

“But it’s my favorite!” she implored him with the kind of desperation an adult would reserve for dire circumstances.

“I don’t care! You said you would buy me candy, which is the only reason I came along!”

“I will buy you candy...after we find my toy!”

Riko couldn’t help eavesdropping on their little argument with a smile. She remembered that she’d found a kids’ toy yesterday—maybe that was what little Hana was referring to, she thought, so she reached into her purse to grab it.

“That’s no fair! You tricked me, Hana!” barked Yuuta, who had now caught up to Hana. “I’m going to the candy store without you!” He darted off, leaving Hana in the dust.

“Wait!”

“No!” shouted Yuuta, looking back at Hana and away from his path.

When Riko looked up from her handbag, her eyes went wide in horror. Yuuta was so desperate to get away from Hana that he was bolting right into oncoming traffic just as a delivery truck careened toward the intersection in a blur.

“Watch out!” she called, reaching forward to stop him (vainly, as she was too far away) with the same hand with which she was rummaging through her purse.

It just happened that she had grabbed hold of the Star Wand to hand it to Hana just as Yuuta threw his little tantrum. As soon as she thrust it forward, she felt the warm light from her ‘dream’ the night before envelop her entire being, inside and out.

Time seemed to stop around her. For an instant, she was nude once more—her office attire seemed to disappear into thin air. Before she could react, or get embarrassed, she found the light itself wrapping around her and transforming, piece by piece, into the same, gaudy gown she’d worn at the end of last night’s reverie.

When she blinked, she saw Yuuta running into traffic again—now, in slow motion. The truck’s horn blared uselessly. Unthinking, Riko leapt forward, clearing the panicking crowd and diving into Yuuta’s back. She scooped him up by the under-

arms and let his legs dangle like a mother cat might carry its kitten, rolled, and landed on her back on the other side of the intersection with the boy in tow. Just as she cleared the charging vehicle time seemed to return to normal.

Riko realized after an interval that she'd shut her eyes in anticipation of getting run over; when she finally opened them, she saw Yuuta's face buried in her chest. She didn't realize until the surge of adrenaline wore off that she was out of breath.

"Are you okay?" she asked in a low voice, lifting him up a bit so he could speak.

Before he could reply, Hana came running over (after making sure to look both ways before crossing) and shouted, "Yuuta! Are you okay?"

Yuuta caught himself staring down at the soft pillows he'd just been smothered in, blushed, turned to Hana, and called, "I'm fine," before scrambling to his feet.

"Are *you* okay, space lady?" Hana asked, looking down at the heavily panting Riko. It had been so long since she'd done any serious physical activity that a simple jump put her in dire straits.

"I...I think so," she managed, grunting as she helped herself to her feet. *Space lady?*

Hana smiled. "You were so cool! You saved Yuuta!"

"Yeah...thanks..." muttered the boy, eyes glued to the sidewalk.

Riko gestured to the Star Wand and asked Hana, "by the way...is this the toy you were searching for?"

Hana just shrugged. "Nope. I'm looking for a doll."

The truck driver scrambled over to the trio and bowed deeply before Riko could reply. "I'm so sorry! I didn't expect anyone to cross! Thank you for intervening!"

The crowd of onlookers was beginning to grow; Riko felt a mix of anxious to get out of here before someone from work recognized her and excited at all the positive attention.

"Uh...yeah, I...it's no trouble at all for...someone with my star power!" She flexed her bicep, then realized no one could see it under the long gloves the transformation donned her in.

“A...anyway, I’d better go! There’s more justice to be served elsewhere!”

As she turned to flee the scene, Hana grabbed the hem of her dress. “Wait! What’s your name?”

“Ko...ahem...Hopeful Starlight!” She smiled down at the girl, who beamed back up at her. “I’ll see you next time!” She flashed a peace sign, checked for anyone standing in her way, and bolted, ducking into an alleyway to lose any lingering watchers.

She pressed her back up against the brick wall and held her breath, peeking around the corner to see if anyone had followed her. From the looks of things, no one had, so she took a seat on the ground. Her legs were like jelly and cool sweat ran down her brow; she thought for sure that truck was going to be the end of her when she heard its screaming tires so close to her ear.

But still...in the end, I did save that kid. She didn’t notice, but she was smiling bigger than she had since she was in high school. She wondered if this was what it felt like to do something fulfilling for a living, instead of wasting away under the oppressive fluorescence of the office. It was scary, but...

She shook her head. *You have rent to pay, Riko*, she reasoned, forcing herself to her feet. She could deliberate about whether she wanted to do more with this power, and figure out how it all worked (figuring, for now, that last night’s dream was no illusion after all), another time. For now, she had to get to work.

The rest of the commuters that morning seemed to keep a wide berth; Riko wondered if she’d forgotten to apply deodorant, and if all her perspiration after saving Yuuta had made her stink. It wasn’t until she reached for the glass door of her office and caught her reflection therein that she realized her clothes had never changed back. By that time, though, she was already inside.

Panicking, she grabbed a flu mask from the box at the entrance. She noticed her vision was perfect without her glasses, which served to better disguise her among peers who had only ever seen her bespectacled countenance. On top of that, the lav-

ish hairstyle was unlike anything she'd ever worn to work. Unless someone looked very close, she was unrecognizable...

"Excuse me...do you have business here today?" the receptionist asked, raising a fair question given Riko's getup.

"Um..." she sputtered, trying to cook up a story to get into the office and find a place to change, her eyes everywhere but the secretary. Before answering, she saw there was an open elevator and took her chance.

"Gotta go!" She ran and, like when she saved Yuuta, was faster than she realized she could be. She was a top runner in high school (though she was forced to quit in college during her unfortunate, chest-only 'growth spurt') and was naturally quick, but even at her fastest and best-conditioned she couldn't approach such blistering speeds.

"Hey! Wait!" the secretary called after her, but Riko savagely mashed the 'door close' button inside, looking up to see if anyone pursued her. As the doors closed before her, she let out a sigh of relief—before she could get comfortable, though, she saw a figure in the reflection of the steel door behind her.

"Are you okay?" asked a familiar voice; that of Mochizuki Nagisa, the coworker with whom she'd stayed back late yesterday. One who surely knew her face well after sitting so close with her for so long, and so recently. Riko nodded the affirmative, hiding her face from Nagisa. "Are you in the right place? This isn't a cosplay convention; just a normal office." Riko stared up at the sign displaying which floor the elevator was on, nodding again to answer Nagisa's question.

*Hurry up...*she pleaded. Her antsy knees shifted back and forth as the box slowly climbed up to floor five.

"Huh...I wonder if there's some kind of event or something today. What are you here for, cosplayer-chan?" Nagisa took a step toward her, trying to get a look at her face.

"It's, uh..." Riko managed, hoping the mask and the impression she did of a cutesy girl did enough to hide her real identity. "I was asked to help with a catering event, but it seems I arrived a little early..." she turned away from Nagisa's prying eyes.

“Hmm...from where?”

Why don't you ask this many questions about work, Mochizuki-san?

“Hey, did you hear me? What kind of food are we getti—”

Mercifully, a metallic *ding* interrupted the lazy muzak. The doors slid apart and Riko wasted no time in jetting out of them, clearing them before they were even fully open although she wasn't sure yet where to go. Her sheer speed, born from a desperation to get far away from the tan blonde, broke the sound barrier with a gunshot-like snap.

“Woah! Wait!” called Nagisa, but Riko was already too far away, leaving a hurricane of dropped reports and spilled coffee in her wake as she barged into the ladies' room, finding a stall to hide in while she figured out how to get back into her usual attire.

No one else was in the bathroom, so she had a chance to catch her breath (for the second time today, at least) and assess the situation. She was dressed like an over-the-top cosplayer in the middle of work, her only disguise a thin paper mask and a mousy voice that she didn't think she could sustain for long. Dozens of people just saw—or felt—her rocket past them into this bathroom and would doubtlessly begin investigating any minute.

She held the Star Wand before her in both hands, staring intently into the translucent star on top. “Change me back!” she said, chanting like it was a spell, moving the wand back and forth to try and channel her will into it. Nothing happened.

“Um...transform!” Again, nothing. “Presto?” Still nothing, so she tried miming some kind of magical dance. She spun in a circle, tapped her feet, clicked her heels, all to no avail as she remained clad in the yellow dress. Then she heard the crowd appear at the bathroom door, and soon after the door was opened.

“What a mess she's made. I had big plans this evening, too...Are you sure she came in here?” said Nagisa, her low vocal register standing out among the other office ladies.

“I am,” replied another female coworker. “She knocked my coffee right out of my hand when she ran past me.

“Hello!?” called the former, cupping her hands around her mouth. “Are you in here, cosplayer- chan? We just need to talk

to you!”

Desperate, Riko started shaking the wand back and forth after climbing on top of the toilet to hide her feet from anyone who might peek under the stalls. *Do something!* She closed her eyes tight and clenched her teeth as she begged the rod to get her out of this mess. Nagisa knocked on the stall door next to the one Riko was hiding in. “You in there?” There was no reply.

“Come on, come on,” Riko whisper-yelled into the star. “Get me out of these clothes!”

Finally, there was a brilliant flash of light that, by some miracle, only Riko seemed to see. When she blinked, she was still squatting atop the pot, but one look at her hands told her that she was changed out of the Mahou Shoujo getup.

Nagisa’s knock came for her stall next. “Anyone here?”

“Um...” muttered Riko. “I’m still in here...” She stood to open the stall door but when her feet touched the linoleum, she realized they weren’t shod. In fact, she wasn’t wearing *any* clothes. A chill ran up her spine from her heels as they hit the cool floor. She inhaled sharply.

“Cosplayer-chan? Is that you?”

“N-no...I mean, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Riko gulped, cracking the stall door as slightly as possible. From the looks of things, only Nagisa was there; the other woman seemed to have left it to her to investigate the bathroom. Given Nagisa’s martial arts training (which, she always bragged, her husband had taught her personally), that made sense.

“Oh, it’s you, Koboshi-san! Sorry, we were just looking for...say, did you see anyone come in here after you?”

Riko shook her head. “I’ve been in this stall the whole time.”

“Tch. I guess we lost her.” Nagisa rubbed the back of her head, one eye closed, while she tried to figure out where the mysterious cosplayer could have run off to. “Well, if you see anyone wearing a star-spangled yellow dress...” she paused as she looked at Riko again. “Say, where are your clothes?”

Riko sputtered, shutting the door harder than she meant to so she could hide her sudden, extreme blush. “I’m...I just...I go to

the bathroom like this, okay?!" *What are you saying? Do you want her to think you're some pervert?!*

"Uh...huh. Well, I won't judge, but...just make sure your clothes don't get dirty, okay? And don't forget anything you might have taken off." Riko was grateful she couldn't see the expression on Nagisa's face—whether it was pity, disgust or just confusion, she was glad not to know.

After her junior walked off, Riko returned her attention to the Star Wand. "Why did you think I meant *this* when I asked you to get me out of those clothes?!" she demanded. Naturally, as an inanimate object, it did not reply verbally, but she could swear she saw it flicker a little as if it winked.

"Oh, you think you're funny?" She held the wand in one hand and pointed an accusatory finger at it with the other. "If I get fired because of you, you're going in a woodchipper! Dress me back in my office clothes!" She shook the wand again and, in a flash, her pencil skirt and thigh-highs were back. In another instant the rest of her attire had returned, including her glasses and other accessories. Just to be sure, she checked for her panties. *Present.*

"Now," she said, pointing aggressively at the wand after putting it back into her purse, "no more pranks or jokes! I don't need 'public nudist' going around the rumor mill." It was going to be bad enough with Nagisa thinking she had a weird complex about using the toilet with clothes on...

III

It was impossible not to notice the sidelong looks and intense, burning stares some of her coworkers sent her way, dressing her up in the ostentatious garb she'd worn when she burst into the office earlier that morning. There was no doubt she was secretly the prime suspect, but there was no way to prove it—she surely couldn't have hidden such an elaborate outfit inside her purse or briefcase, and her office clothes were almost painfully plain

by comparison—but that didn't stop people from considering it, even if they didn't ask her directly.

Normally, no one sent so much as a glance her way, so all attention to which she was unaccustomed gave her cause to consider leaving the office early for the day. She declined to do so, however—it would surely arouse further suspicions. Unfortunately, her only recourse was to grin and bear it for the day (probably the next several days) while acting just as flummoxed as everyone else about the identity of the woman who tore through the cubicle hallway that morning.

Eventually, without further incident, Riko found herself heading home on a detour, rather than the usual direct path she took back to her apartment most days. For one, she managed to leave while the sun was still up and wanted to try to enjoy it for once; on top of that, she didn't want anyone to recognize her on the path home while the truck incident that morning, when she sprang into action and rescued Yuuta, may have been fresh in everyone's minds.

She caught herself biting her nails absentmindedly on her extended commute, clearly still anxious about the prospect of getting caught. She shivered when she thought of the salvo of questions about what exactly she was doing dressing like a character from a children's anime and making a mess of everyone's work. That kind of thing could cost her job altogether in the worst case; even in the best she would have to endure meetings, trainings, and other compulsory, corrective action.

While she considered cutting or dyeing her hair to further distance her image from that of the mysterious cosplayer, as whom she hoped to never appear in the office again, Riko's ear picked up a crash in the distance. It sounded like a thunderclap, then stony rubble crashing into asphalt, and without consideration she started to power-walk in that direction. She realized what she was doing and stopped, digging her heels into the concrete to brake.

That isn't the way back, she thought, turning toward her apartment again. *I doubt I could do much to help even with whatever powers*

the wand gives me, anyway. Assuming it actually gives me powers in the first place. She took two steps before the screaming started—what sounded like a young girl’s cries for help—and as if possessed by some instinct she didn’t know she had, she kicked off her office shoes and sprinted full-tilt toward the source of the noise. On the way, she withdrew the Star Wand from her bag.

“Help!” cried the voice from before, clearer now that Riko was closer. “Let me go!” she plead.

A somewhat familiar voice Riko couldn’t quite place replied, “You can free yourself, Hopeful Starlight! Show me the power I know you’re capable of!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” insisted the girl, just as Riko arrived on the scene. She saw a middle-school girl, still in her sailor uniform, suspended in the air by mysterious, jet-black tendrils which sprouted from the ground and appeared to be the source of the crash earlier. They coiled and writhed about her limbs, pulling at their ends so she resembled a letter X.

“Don’t play the fool!” the other, older woman, whose attire Riko couldn’t see from behind thanks to the flowing, purple cape behind her back, seemed to be growing impatient. “I know well that you inherited the Star Wand, and I know you have already used its powers once! You could rip yourself out of this in an instant!”

Riko clutched the wand in her hands, hidden between two tall buildings. She grimaced as the tentacles pulled the girl’s limbs more tightly, slithering toward her torso an inch at a time, eliciting another gut-wrenching scream from her throat.

Before the slimy coils could reach any further, Riko decided to put to the test just how quickly Hopeful Starlight could tear this monster to pieces. She held the wand in front of her with both hands and concentrated on the star atop it. *Please, let me save this girl!*, she implored, and it responded in kind, filling her with power and changing her into the getup in which she had ripped through the office that morning.

Just like then, she sprinted toward her target, and just like

then, she left a frightful mess in her wake. With a flash of the Star Wand, which transmuted into a sword of light as soon as she considered 'cutting' with it, the slithering tendrils were sliced to ribbons, falling harmlessly onto the road below with wet, squelching slaps. The girl, who was suspended a few feet into the air, yelped as Riko caught her before she too fell against the unyielding pavement.

"Are you okay?" asked Riko, holding the other girl in a princess carry.

She nodded. "I am now..."

Riko set her down and turned her attention to the assailant. The tan-skinned woman had a vaguely recognizable voice, but she wore a mask and Riko couldn't discern her identity. The assailant looked as surprised as she did angry about this turn of events.

"Was I lied to about *that*, too?" she asked aloud, seemingly to herself. "Hoshino Miki was supposed to be the next Hopeful Starlight. That clearly isn't you," she spat.

"Leave her alone," demanded Riko. "I don't know what you're after, but it has nothing to do with this girl!"

The blonde, whose skimpy, bikini-like getup could hardly be called an outfit with how little it covered, put her gloved hands on her hips and laughed derisively. "Don't worry, Hopeful Starlight. I'm not after some powerless girl like that." She pointed to her would-be victim, Hoshino Miki, with contempt. "I'm after the power of that Star Wand you're holding. Hand it over, and I promise we won't meet again."

Somehow I doubt that, thought Riko, hoping the other party didn't recognize *her*. She felt that giving her the Star Wand would only lead to trouble, so she shook her head. "You'll have to take it from me, if you want it." Miki pumped her fist.

She clicked her tongue, disappointed. "You're lucky I used so much of my power to capture the girl." Riko noticed, then, several holes along the street that the black-clad woman must have opened in an effort to get a hold of a fleeing Miki. "There's no way I could pry it from your hands now...but rest assured, I will

reclaim that power from you, Hopeful Starlight!" She scowled, glaring daggers at Riko. "Remember the name of Lunar Eclipse!"

Riko ran at her to stop her from getting away, but the latter concealed her scantily-clad figure with her her cape, spun, and disappeared an instant. Riko swiped at the air with the Star Wand.

"Where could she have gone?" muttered Riko before deciding to survey the damage she'd done. There were about a dozen holes in the ground, each nearly a foot in diameter. Some parked cars were pierced through where the tentacles had sprouted, as well, but thankfully Riko had made it before anyone was seriously injured.

"Are you sure you're alright?" she asked, returning her attention to the grinning redhead.

"I'm great, now!" she said, oddly cheerful for someone whose life was just in danger. "Thank you so much for saving me!"

"It's...it's nothing, really," Riko said, trying to appear humble. The elation was plastered all over her face, though; it was rare for her to hear so much praise in a single day, after all. Still, her expression was unbecoming for a heroine.

"No way! I was in real danger!" Miki insisted, seemingly ignorant of Riko's reaction.

"Well...I'm glad you're okay." Coming to her senses, Riko placed a hand on Miki's shoulder. "Do you want me to take you home?"

"It's okay! Really, I'll be fine." Miki put a hand on one of her shoulders and rotated it, which apparently meant that all was well. "Thank you again!" With that she bolted down the street, leaving Riko with an outstretched hand and a confused look on her face.

"The voice wasn't kidding when it said she was a tomboy," Riko said, then shrugged. "Well, I'd better head back home myself."

Only after Miki fled did Riko realize the sheer size of the throng that had gathered. Wanting nothing more than to get away before people started asking questions, she used her new-

found speed to jet back between the two buildings from which she'd emerged to rescue Miki.

Once she'd darted between enough buildings to lose any potential pursuers, Riko held the Star Wand up and commanded it once again to change her clothes. There was a flash, and Riko double-checked to ensure that she wasn't totally naked this time. She wasn't, but...

"Where is the rest of my outfit!?" she demanded in a shouted whisper, glaring at the blinking Star Wand. It removed most of the Hopeful Starlight outfit, but it seemed like it had stopped halfway. She wore only a low-cut, sunflower-yellow bra with a star motif, matching panties (which had a childish star mark right on her ass), a garter belt and the white stockings. "Quit messing with me!"

The wand flickered as if it was winking again...then it stopped, and went totally dark.

"What? No way...it isn't battery powered or something, right?" She shook the rod as hard as she could, but nothing happened. "What am I gonna do now?!"

"Is someone in there?" called a man from the street. "Are you okay?"

Please, not like this! She saw no way to escape as his footsteps drew near...until she looked up.

"Hmm...I must be hearing things," he muttered, rubbing his bald head in confusion.

Riko had begun to scale the buildings by making footholds out of trim and grabs in the bricks, somehow avoiding any damage to the fragile cloth that covered her feet. Once she got to the top, she took a moment to orient herself, inhaling sharply. Since she'd saved Miki, the sun had set. As the stars began to shine, dim though they might have been in the urban setting, the Star Wand appeared to kick into gear again.

"Is it...star-powered?" In retrospect, that made total sense, she thought as it once again rearranged her attire. She was back in her office uniform and, given her newly heightened physical

prowess, it was a trivial effort to reach the ground below with a hop.

It wasn't until she landed that she realized things weren't going to be so simple. The Star Wand flashed again, and she found herself wearing just her blouse—*just* her blouse. Then, with another flash her clothes changed again, and again, and yet again.

With no recourse, Riko did the only thing she could think of—run home, ducking between cars and buildings all the way. She flashed from fully clothed, to Hopeful Starlight, to Hopeful Starlight in a pencil skirt, to *only* wearing a pencil skirt, and a variety of other mismatched ensembles as she slipped into and out of cover.

Miraculously, she had gone undetected so far—surely, in part, thanks to the ludicrous velocity at which she ran—and her apartment was only a climb of the stairwell away...

“Koboshi-san?” said the kindly voice of an elderly woman.

Not the landlady! “Um, yes, hello...”

“I just wanted to make sure that was you, dear. My eyesight isn't so good these days...”

The faulty magic of the Star Wand rapidly threw Riko into various states of undress before the squinting eyes of the old woman, whose diminutive stature put her right at Riko's chest.

“Y-yep, it's me!” Riko tried to play it casual, tip-toeing toward the steps between furtive glances to check for onlookers.

“You ought to come home earlier...staying at work so late will do a number on your health.”

“I'll keep it in mind, thanks!” Riko agreed before flying up the stairs, completely naked as the wand's powers fizzled out completely.

IV

She panted as she slammed the door behind her, resting her bare, sweaty back against the cool wood.

No one saw...right? She checked the peephole in the door to see if anyone came up to her apartment after her, but saw no one. Exhaling a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, Riko took up the Star Wand and examined it more closely (to distract herself from the embarrassment of being a public nudist against her will, which she spent the rest of the night trying not to think about).

"If it can run out of power, there has to be a way to charge it..." she mumbled aloud, rotating it in every possible direction to see if there was a plug or a meter—anything to give her an idea of how to restore power to the thing. *It seemed to react to the stars before, right?*

She poked her lip, and when she moved her arm she realized her chest was still bare. Then, it occurred to her that she was in dire need of a bath, thanks to sweating both from activity and anxiety. She crept into the bathroom and stepped once more into her apartment's shower (after, of course, letting the water warm up). The steamy water soothed her sore, under-worked muscles.

Muscles? Riko opened her eyes and looked more closely at her body, to which she normally paid little mind (other than irritation at her chest's seemingly endless growth spurt), and saw a sight that she hadn't since she quit swimming competitively in college—muscular definition! She didn't have shredded six-pack abs or a pair of bulging biceps, but there was a "sleekness" to her figure that was lost after years of drinking, sitting, and stress.

"Hehe~" she giggled, tracing the faint line that appeared in the middle of her torso, where yesterday sat a lump of unwelcome fat. She guessed the sudden improvement in her physique was a side-effect of the magical powers granted by the Star Wand...after all, she still hadn't technically untransformed completely. Then again, with luck, this would be a permanent change. At least, as long as she kept it up...

"But do I want to do that?" She pondered her decision aloud while the water flushed the sweat from her skin.

On the one hand, it was hard on her. Her body was sore all over—no doubt from all the high speed sprinting, jumping,

and crawling—and, she realized now, she was more mentally exhausted than she was after even the worst days at the office. Seeing people in such danger, saddled with the responsibility of saving them against her will, might be a greater burden than she could afford to bear.

Then again, Yuuta, Hana, and Miki's gratitude that day...she couldn't deny the warm feeling in her heart when they thanked her. Throughout her life, up to that point, nothing had ever felt quite so gratifying or fulfilling. Not even top-level competition in nationals gave her such a thrill as the danger of diving head-long into oncoming traffic or going toe-to-toe with a potentially dangerous enemy, either.

So, what will it be? Riko asked herself.

Still unsure, she shut the water off and emerged from the shower, wrapping a towel around her soaked hair like a swami's turban. Another towel hugged her torso tight as she strode into her living room, wherein she left the Star Wand. Its faint glow had yet to return, despite her leaving it on the windowsill to try and expose it to the stars above. Riko wondered if there was even a choice to be made here—after all, if the Wand didn't have any power, there wasn't much she could do from this point.

“What's your secret, huh?” She held it up with one hand, poking at the star symbol with the index finger of the other. “How can I charge you back up?” For a laugh, she tried to lay it on the wireless charging pad she used for her smartphone, but it was (unsurprisingly) fruitless—there didn't appear to be any plugs on it at all, and in fact the handle was made of some kind of wood, rather than the plastic typical of such toys.

She saw her clock in her peripheral vision and realized that it had gotten late: between the shower and all this experimenting (not to mention the laborious trip home), she would need to pass out right this instant to get even five hours of sleep.

With a shrug, Riko laid the Star Wand on her windowsill and flopped into bed without bothering to get into any clothes, tossing the towels into a pile on the floor. The cool sheets wrapped around her bare skin and, combined with just how taxing the day

had been, gave her the best sleep she'd enjoyed in years.

* * *

Riko awoke the following morning in an awkward (to say the least) position, face-down on her knees in what could have looked like a dogeza, but with her butt higher in the air. Luckily, no one was around to see, and she righted herself by pushing her torso up with her arms.

"Ouch..." she grunted, struggling to use any of her sore muscles after using them so much yesterday. The shower had helped, somewhat, but her body still ached from head to toe. It had been a long, long time since she'd worked her body that hard. She took inventory and confirmed that the definition that had shown up yesterday was still there.

Despite all that soreness, she felt great. Her usual morning desperation was nowhere to be seen (already greatly diminished the day before, too), and in fact, even with all the physical soreness she felt 'light,' as if she could run a mile without even breaking a sweat. Her routine passed faster than it ever had, and before she knew it she was at the door and ready to head out for the day.

"Oh, right..." she recalled the Star Wand and took it from the window, giving it a brief once-over. Its glow had returned, and in fact it was a solid light now, rather than a flickering glimmer.

"Maybe it shares a battery with *me*," she wondered aloud, scratching her head. For now, she jammed it into her purse and strolled out the door, spring in her step. *Not that I'm thrilled about work*, she thought, remembering that today would feature yet more collaboration with her newlywed colleague, Nagisa. She was feeling good now, but the incessant reminders that she was still single were surely going to sour her mood.

While she pondered whether she could put on her polite smile and continue to congratulate her younger coworker for a marriage that grew less recent by the day, she heard a patter of footsteps behind her. Fearing another kid would dive head-

long into a busy intersection like yesterday but *without* the wand seeming to work right, Riko turned to meet the runner.

Instead of a small child, though, she saw a middle school student heading her way—not just any student, but the same one she’d rescued from the mysterious woman yesterday, dressed in a white-and-blue sailor uniform, her short, red hair struggling to keep pace with her. Riko pretended she’d never seen her before and faced forward, stepping slightly to the left to make room for the running teen.

“Good morning!” Miki called, slowing to a walk as she caught up with Riko. “I can’t believe we have a similar morning commute!” Her bright smile was almost infectious, but Riko was a little concerned that she recognized her.

“Um...do I know you?” Riko asked, trying to put on the facade of the unassuming office worker. “I think you have me mistaken for someone else...”

“I couldn’t possibly,” corrected Miki. “Not after you saved me yesterday, Hopeful Starlight!” she beamed, her hazel eyes shimmering with adoration.

Riko’s own eyes shot wide open. “There’s a misunderstanding,” she tried.

“See? Look at that star mark! It’s the same one that was on Hopeful Starlight’s glove!” Miki enthusiastically took Riko’s hand and pointed at the mark.

Riko panicked and covered her wrist. “I don’t know anyone with that name...”

“Hmm...no, it’s definitely her. I would recognize that face anywhere.” She appeared to be talking to herself, rather than Riko. “She must not want people to associate her with Hopeful Starlight...” Suddenly, with a snap of her fingers, Miki chirped, “Oh! It’s a secret identity, right? *That’s* why you’re wearing those glasses! I was wondering, because it was obvious from how precisely your Hopeful Starlight Cross Cutter attack sliced those tentacles yesterday that you have perfect vision, but it makes total sense if they’re a disguise!” she gushed, looking at Riko expectantly.

Riko attempted to mollify Miki, growing increasingly nervous that the kid was going to blow her cover in front of a coworker as they drew closer to the office (and thus, to other commuters). Also, what was with that attack naming sense? "I really don't know what you're talking about. I need these to see." In truth, her vision was worse with them on now, but she was so used to wearing them she'd donned them out of habit.

"Don't worry," whispered Miki, getting a little too close to Riko. "Your secret's safe with me." Her sun-kissed cheeks reddened as she approached, masking her freckles.

"Ah...well, that's..." she trailed off. There was clearly no convincing her, and this was better than having the girl loudly ask her how Hopeful Starlight was doing.

"So, where are you headed now? Off to fight more bad guys? Maybe you're going to deliver justice to that Lunar Eclipse lady for threatening innocents?! Are you going to save a kitten from a burning building, or maybe a drowning child?!" Miki's voice grew louder with every possible scenario she imagined Riko in, stars glimmering in her blue eyes. "You're so cool, I bet you could do that without even getting in the water!"

"Work." Riko said it so plainly that it stopped Miki's wild train of thought in its tracks. "I'm just going to work for now."

"R...right," Miki stammered with a half-smile. "I guess I got carried away. Sorry." The girl rubbed the back of her head and chuckled nervously.

"No, it's fine," Riko insisted. "I just didn't want you to think I was on some kind of mission." She waved it off, but the atmosphere was a little awkward after that and the two walked together in silence for a few paces.

"So, what's your job like?" Miki asked out of the blue.

"Uh...I just do reports and paperwork for my bosses, mostly."

"Oh, that's kind of like what my parents do. They never tell me the specifics, but they're busy all the time so I know they're working hard." She smiled. "It's amazing that you can balance that kind of thing with saving people! It takes all they have to

get me something to heat up for dinner, never mind going to my kendo meets.”

Riko frowned a little; she had bitter memories of her own father missing her track events for work-related reasons. She thought about her own marriage to work and frowned more.

“...I wonder if I could do it,” Miki said quietly, looking up at the clouds as if she had something on her mind.

Riko began to realize why Miki had been the one initially chosen to be Hopeful Starlight when she saw her wistful countenance in profile. There was an almost heroic beauty to her somewhat somber expression as the faint breeze played with her hair. Riko felt pretty bad considering she’d stumbled into the power by mistake, but decided in that moment, looking at a vulnerable girl who had lost her chance to be the hope the world needed, to do what she could as long as the power was hers. She put a reassuring hand on Miki’s shoulder.

“I’m sure you could. You seem like a strong girl.” She smiled, meeting Miki’s blue eyes with her greens.

“Th-thanks,” Miki managed, suddenly clearing her throat in exaggerated fashion. “Anyway, I gotta turn here to get to school.” Seeming to Riko like she’d perked up, Miki split off behind her and started jogging toward school.

“It’s Koboshi Riko, by the way!” she called after the teen, waving her off with a smile. The rest of the walk to work went by in a blur.

V

“Koboshi-san?” Nagisa sat across from Riko in a meeting room, the latter of whom had lost herself in thoughts about the previous day and about her newfound duty as Hopeful Starlight, as nebulous as it was to “shine rays of hope and justice” onto the world. As a result, very little work was done that day.

She stirred when Nagisa waved to her. “Sorry, I was just

thinking about something. What did you say?"

"Well, I was asking what you thought about this line..."

Riko tried to let herself get absorbed in her work for a while. She knew she was going to have to stay back with Nagisa regardless, but she wanted to get as much done during working hours as possible so she could get home early.

Whittling the hours away with talks of margins, performance indicators and client satisfaction, Riko found herself strangely energized for work well into the long day; normally, by lunch time she was taking 30-second naps at her desk against her will and contemplating 'falling ill.'

She watched the sun set out of the office window, the scenery below bathed in an orange glow. Soon after, most of the office had filed out to go home (or, out for drinks) for the evening.

Nagisa held her head in her hands, her blonde hair peeking through her fingers. "I just don't get it..." she muttered, squeezing her eyes closed tight.

"What is it, Mochizuki-san?" Riko asked, walking from the windows to Nagisa's side of the table they'd been sharing for most of the day. It was now dark outside, the sun only a memory as the crescent moon and stars revealed themselves with a glint.

"I just can't figure it out!" Nagisa propped herself up on her palm, elbow on the table. Riko noticed some bags forming under her eyes and worried that work was starting to get to her—or, perhaps, her marriage was on the rocks already. "Take a look at my screen. Maybe you'll be able to explain what I'm missing."

Riko walked over, her heels tapping softly against the thin carpet.

"Why do you get to have that power, when I had it taken from me...?" By the time Riko realized what she'd just read on Nagisa's screen, the latter had sprung from her seat and grabbed her by the wrists, shoving her against the white wall behind her. The fluorescent lights went out as Riko's elbow hit the switch.

"I had a feeling it was you, the other day, tearing through the office like a fool," spat Nagisa, a familiar venom lacing her words.

“What did you do, Koboshi, to get that power?”

“I, I don’t know what you’re saying! Please let me go!” Riko was panicking—despite her slim figure, Nagisa was *strong*, and Riko couldn’t push herself free, lacking the strength without the Star Wand’s help.

“Don’t act stupid, you sow,” Nagisa cursed. “I saw the star-shaped mark on the back of your hand this morning. I *know* you’re Hopeful Starlight. I can’t believe I didn’t realize as soon as I saw the ‘cosplayer’ in the elevator with me. I didn’t want to believe it was you when you cut down my tentacles yesterday, but the mark confirms it.” Her grip tightened around Riko’s slim wrists. “Now, *how* did you obtain the Star Wand’s power?” Nagisa’s voice grew more febrile and frantic with every word, her breathing ragged as she easily smothered Riko’s resistance.

“I just found it!” admitted Riko, hoping Nagisa would let her go when she did. “It was lying in the bushes on my way home from work. When I touched it, I—”

“I know what happened,” Nagisa retorted. “The same thing that happened to me when I first found it ten years ago. You were taken into space, judged, and granted the power. Right?”

Riko swallowed the lump forming in her throat. She’d never been so afraid. “Yes.”

“Give it back to me, then,” demanded her junior, whose sclera practically glowed in the dark room. “Or I’ll take it by force.”

Riko trembled, unsure of what to do. If she told Nagisa the wand was in the purse at her desk, there was no doubt she would beat her there. But...

“I didn’t bring it to work!” she lied.

“What?! What would you have done if there was trouble, then?”

“The wand stopped working yesterday. I thought it was just a one-time thing.”

“Stopped working? What are you—”

Just then, Nagisa’s cell phone started to ring, the screen’s illumination showing through her skirt pocket. Distracted for an instant, she released her grip on Riko’s wrists just slightly; with

a bit of room to breathe, Riko took her chance to butt heads with Nagisa—literally, this time, rather than the usual, ‘professional’ rancor when they disagreed about work. Her forehead struck her assailant in the nose.

“Ow! What the hell!?” Instinctively, Nagisa clutched her face in her hands. “That hurt!”

Riko was already out of the room, and in a second she was carrying her purse out of the office. She blitzed toward the door, leaving behind a cursing Nagisa as she fell into the elevator.

“Haah...haah...” she panted, sitting on the floor of the lift as it took her down to the lobby. As soon as it chimed to announce its arrival she dove out and charged through the exit. It took a few blocks of running before she realized that Nagisa hadn’t pursued her, at least not obviously. That made her more nervous, but she decided to slow down for now. *I think that phone call saved me.*

That, or she’s got other plans for me. Riko started running again and didn’t stop until she made it inside and locked the door behind her.

Once she’d overcome the initial anxiety of hunted prey before a hungry predator, Riko realized she had behaved as just that—a hapless victim. How ‘*Hopeful Starlight*’ of me, she thought derisively.

Riko changed into evening wear, contemplating how to handle running into Nagisa on Monday if nothing happened over the weekend. Upon inspection, the unused Star Wand shone a little less brightly than it had that morning—perhaps its power really was tied to her own vitality somehow. Riko stared at the star on top, brow furrowed, after finally removing her glasses so she could see clearly. *Would I have had the courage to take Nagisa on if I’d used this back there? And, would that have been wise? Would that even help?*

She set it down and made for the fridge, bending over at the waist to grab a can of beer, her one true friend in the seven years she’d watched melt away. She recalled what Nagisa had said earlier, about having had the power ‘taken’ from her and ‘given’ to Riko, and considered how she might act if her solitary comfort,

or source of hope, was taken from her. *If I lose the Star Wand, will I turn out like Nagisa?* Riko shivered at the thought of attacking people...she was especially concerned about fitting into Lunar Eclipse's attire, or lack thereof.

The beer opened with a loud pop, There was a desperation in Nagisa's voice to get the power back, despite the strength and magical abilities she clearly still possessed. Riko wondered if it was part of the deal that went unmentioned when the cosmic judge conferred the Star Wand on her. Then again, Nagisa was disgruntled that the power was lost to her at all—taken from her, as she put it. If she didn't give it up willingly, then how?

She rubbed her chin. *What were the requirements again? A maiden...I met that criteria, so she surely does. Pure of heart...not anymore, but I think that happened after she lost the wand. What was the last one again? Pure of body...?*

"Oh." As soon as she recalled the final stipulation, it was obvious—Nagisa lost the power of Hopeful Starlight on her wedding night when she lost her virginity to her new husband, Haruki.

Riko took another drink. "So she's all up in a huff because she lost her power in exchange for a husband, huh? But she's obviously so happy with him. I guess it's hard on her. Still, to lose control of yourself like that..." She wondered, as the alcohol sent her to sleep, how she might bring Nagisa back to her senses—if she even could.

VI

Riko stirred, the steady rapping at her door serving as her alarm clock for the day. It was Sunday, her day off, so she was a bit disappointed to awaken so early (and, she realized with a grimace, with such a painful hangover). She sat herself upright and yawned loudly, stretching her sore back while the morning sun bathed her in gentle light.

The knocking at her door grew more intense, and the interval between sets of knocks reduced with each strike. Her eyes went wide and she stopped herself from answering; fearing that Nagisa had found her home and sought to threaten her over the Star Wand again, Riko kept silent and shuffled to the peephole to see who was knocking.

“Koboshi-san! Are you home?!” called a familiar voice, muffled by the door.

“C-coming,” said Riko timidly, propping the door open and poking her aching head out to find Miki standing there, panting as if she’d run all the way here. What was she doing *here*? “Hoshino-san? Aren’t you off school today?”

“Koboshi-san! You’re awake! Good,” said Miki, looking a little relieved. “You have to come quick! Lunar Eclipse is up to something terrible!”

Riko wore her disapproval plainly on her face. *You had to act up on our day off, Nagisa?*

“Hurry! There’s no time to waste!” Before Riko could even say anything, Miki had grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the half-open door.

“Wait!” she managed to grab hold of a railing and stop Miki from pulling her along before they descended the stairs. “I’m not dressed, and I don’t have the Star Wand with me. Give me a sec—”

Miki, whose tank-top t-shirt exposed her surprisingly muscular shoulders to the warm summer sun, didn’t let Riko finish her sentence before charging into the apartment. “I’ll go get it,” she said, rummaging around before the other could begin to protest.

“Hold on—” Riko started, but before she could even complete her sentence Miki had returned with the Wand in hand, tossed it to her, and started pulling her down the stairs again.

“It’s not far from here, luckily. It looks like she’s planning to do something to a day-care center!” Miki, who had obviously run all the way to Riko’s apartment, was visibly sweating.

“How do you know what she’s doing?” Riko managed, falling behind a little despite Miki literally carrying her forward as she tried to prevent too much bouncing or unwanted pantie exposure.

“She made a big deal of announcing it,” Miki replied, “every news station must be showing what she’s up to!” The girl produced her smartphone from her shorts pocket and handed it to Riko. It was a live broadcast from a news station’s YouTube channel, where Riko could see Nagisa in the Lunar Eclipse “outfit” hovering over a group of cowering children, daycare employees standing guard around them in a tight circle.

“Well? Are you coming to save them, Hopeful Starlight? Or will you let me have my way?”

Surrounding the huddle of would-be victims were a half-dozen green piles of sludge that squirmed toward them. They...didn’t look terribly threatening, with their speed and general appearance. “If you don’t hurry, my slimes will trap the children inside, where they’ll be stuck forever!” Lunar Eclipse threw her head in derisive laughter.

“See? It’s really bad!” Miki said, eyes forward.

Riko wasn’t so sure...the slimes were moving awfully slowly. It would be a long time before they actually reached the kids. Hours, even. She had a feeling that Nagisa was doing this to call her out, not for the sake of encasing children in slime prisons. What would she even gain from that?

Of course, she couldn’t do *nothing* about it, but there was really no hurry—not like the kind Miki appeared to be in, anyway. She’d like to get dressed first—her white shirt was starting to become more translucent than she was comfortable with; her navel was easily visible as it stuck to her skin. She had a feeling she couldn’t convince Miki, though, and the daycare center wasn’t far anyway, so she did her best to keep pace with the tomboy holding her wrist.

Riko’s stomach was cramping from exercising so hard without a warmup, and her unshod feet ached from pounding the hard pavement. On top of that, her hangover was killing her. She

bent over and put her hands on her bare knees to support herself, breathing hard. She thought she might lose last night's dinner if she didn't catch her breath.

"Oho, you finally made it!" called Lunar Eclipse from above, looking down on the children and now Riko and Miki like so many insects. "I was wondering if you really believed in your justice, Hopeful Starlight!" She laughed her sinister laugh again, blonde hair tousled by the high wind.

"Hold...hold on..." Riko held up a hand to stop the conversation while she steadied her raspy breath. "I need a second."

"What? Was waking up so early on your day off inconvenient for you?" mocked Nagisa with a wry smile.

"Go...to hell," managed Riko.

"I guess you really were worried about these children, weren't you? So worried, that you fell right into my trap!"

Miki gasped in audible surprise. "A trap?!"

"Hang on," Riko interrupted again.

Nagisa tapped her foot impatiently against the firmament beneath her feet, arms crossed in front of her chest. "Are you caught up now, auntie? I'd like to hurry up and thrash you so I can take back what is rightfully mine."

Before Riko, who was learning just how much less physically capable was without the direct influence of the Star Wand on her physiology, could act, Nagisa snapped her gloved fingers. On cue, the slimes vaulted toward Riko, creating limbs from their gelatinous form and 'walking' over to her with a single, giant step, combining into a single, massive, humanoid slime once they reached her.

The slime monster towered over Riko, who grit her teeth in anticipation as it reared back a massive, gooey fist. She took up her wand and concentrated on the star atop it, holding it before her in both hands.

"Watch out!" cried Miki, helpless to stop the strike before it connected with Riko with a sickening thud. She watched Riko get absorbed by the opaque, dark-green slime with terror in her eyes.

Nagisa laughed as the Star Wand fell to the ground. "I've won! That was even easier than I thought...what a pitiful display." She floated toward the fallen star with delightful anticipation in her eyes, licking her lips.

Miki tried to get to it first, but she was too slow—Nagisa took up the wand and held it before her like a gift bequeathed to a queen by a kneeling servant.

"Finally! I've missed you!" She held it like Riko had, and concentrated on the tip...but nothing happened. "Is it out of power? Impossible...it's glowing, so..."

In horror, she turned toward a sudden, thunderous squelching sound. The slime monster she'd summoned went from standing triumphantly over a defeated enemy to a pair of detached legs standing over nothing in an instant, and the resultant explosion covered everything nearby in a thin, green film. Where its torso had been, nothing remained...except Koboshi Riko, clad in the star-spangled robes of Hopeful Starlight.

"What?! Impossible!" Nagisa vainly tried to activate the Star Wand and take away Riko's power, but it was too late—as swift as a rocket, Riko arrived in front of Nagisa's panicking face before the latter could so even blink, never mind flee. She tried to turn and run, but Riko caught her by the wrist, looking down with a mixture of contempt and pity.

"Let me go!" Nagisa demanded, pulling futilely against Riko's iron grip.

"That's what you should do," retorted Riko.

"What?"

"Why haven't you let it go?"

"What are you talking about?! Unhand me!"

"I'm talking about all this!" Riko gestured with her free hand to the scene around them. "You've resorted to ambushes and surprise attacks, for what? Power? Why?"

"Shut up! I said, release me!" She tried pushing against Riko with her feet to no avail.

"How do you expect to bring hope to the world like this, Nagisa!?"

After another moment of thrashing about in vain, Nagisa stopped, blinking as if she realized something. She righted herself, and the wrist Riko held went limp.

"...it's not fair." she managed. "Why do you get to skirt the rules, huh?!"

Riko raised an eyebrow. "Skirt the rules?"

"You're...a virgin? At your age? And anyway, aren't you in your thirties? I thought—"

Before she could finish her sentence, Riko's palm struck home, knocking her unconscious. Even without the news cameras, everyone in the area would have heard that slap.

* * *

"I lost it because I got married...I thought I was ready to lose it. I knew what would happen, but...there was an accident not long after I got back from my honeymoon. I couldn't stop it, but I *know* I could have if I'd still had the Star Wand. When the reality of my decision hit home...it was like a shadow blotted out the hope in my heart." Nagisa, who had yet to revert to her normal attire, tearfully recounted her motivations after she came to, hands bound by Riko's magic. The news helicopters and cameras were still hovering nearby; she had only been unconscious for a few minutes.

Riko nodded, sympathetic. "I know what it's like to lose something like that...to be unable to do something that used to be second-nature. It was hard, right? Especially after you'd had the Wand for so long." She was squatting next to Nagisa, who on her knees in the grass.

Nagisa nodded. "I guess...I got carried away."

"Carried away!?! You could have—"

"It's alright, Miki." Riko stayed the hotheaded teen with a wave of her hand. "I know how you feel, but anger isn't going to help anyone right now. Besides, she's punishing herself more than we ever could." Miki relented, but her fists were still clenched tight.

“I just thought I might be able to redeem myself if I could save one more person. To do that, I need the wand...” She peered at the tool, clutched in Riko’s hand. “Give it back!” In a last, desperate gambit she tried to shove Riko with her shoulder, but the other saw it coming and dodged effortlessly. Nagisa fell into the dirt face first, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Riko sighed, disappointed. “It’s over, Nagisa. You have to let go. Your life hasn’t ended; it’s just getting started.” She knelt down and rubbed her crying kouhai’s back.

“I know, but...”

“Let it go. You can do it...” She helped Nagisa to her feet and wiped the dirt off her face before releasing the magical shackles that bound her.

“I’m...” she glanced at Miki before averting her eyes in shame. “I’m sorry.”

With that, there was a brilliant flash of light, not unlike that which Riko saw when she transformed into Hopeful Starlight for the first time. After the glow settled and their vision returned to normal, they saw that Nagisa was no longer clad in the Lunar Eclipse “outfit” she’d worn just a few moments ago. In fact...

“I’m so sorry!” she dropped into a dogeza. “I promise, I didn’t want to hurt anyone!”

“Um...Mochizuki-san?” Riko managed, suddenly very nervous.

“Please!” Nagisa’s eyes were clenched shut as she lowered her bow further.

“That’s...” Miki tried to block the cameras by holding her arms out to her sides.

“Don’t hold back! I’ve done something terrible!”

“That may be so, but you’re naked right now!” Riko exploded, louder than she meant to.

Nagisa’s eyes shot open. She looked under herself and saw that, indeed, her entire body was exposed, including the untanned bottom she was sticking into the air. She let out a girlish scream and shifting into a sitting position, easily covering

her modest chest with one arm and her nether regions with the other.

“How humiliating...first I make a fool of myself in front of the entire country, and now this!”

Riko thought it best to get the naked girl away from the news cameras and, in a flash, scooped both her and Miki up to carry them off. Even with two girls in tow, she was too fast for the helicopters to track after a couple of evasive maneuvers.

They arrived at Riko’s apartment a few seconds later, Nagisa still naked as the day she was born. Riko set her down in front of her door along with Miki and ushered the two inside.

“Here,” Riko said, tossing Nagisa a towel after changing back into normal clothes. “I doubt my clothes will fit you, but you can at least cover yourself...”

“Th...thanks,” Nagisa managed, still red as a beet.

“What’s Haruki’s number? I’ll call him to pick you up.”

“What? Aren’t you going to have me arrested or something?”

“No way. I’m not finishing Takahashi’s project on my own. Besides, I think *this* is punishment enough.” She held her smartphone, tuned in to the same news broadcast as Miki’s was earlier, up to Nagisa’s face. The latter’s eyes went wide in a mixture of shock and horror as STREAKER AT A DAY CARE CENTER*PARENTS BEWARE flashed across the screen along with a crystal clear shot of the instant her clothes disappeared. Miki, who peeked at the screen over her shoulder, stifled a laugh.

“I’m finished...” Nagisa slumped onto Riko’s tatami floor. “Everyone will know that’s me.”

“Not after the tan wears off. It could be a lot worse; at least no one can see your face.” Riko shrugged before calling Haruki to let him know that Nagisa had come over to her place for something work-related and spilled coffee on her clothes, ruining them. Once the call ended, Nagisa spoke up.

“I just don’t get it...I could have hurt someone. Why aren’t you aren’t going to tell him?”

“Because,” Riko smiled, “you need him right now. I’m sure you’ll tell him some day, right?”

Nagisa stared at her reflection in the glass of water Riko had brought her. “Okay. I will.” Without realizing it, she smiled.

“It’s a promise, then.”

* * *

Haruki arrived soon after, collecting the towel-clad Nagisa and driving her back home. He happened to be the type to not watch the news, so he didn’t know about her nudism. (She ended up telling him not long after, but he just thought it was funny; Riko learned later from Nagisa, with whom she ended up becoming good friends, that he teased her about it all the time).

Riko and Miki were left alone in the apartment after that.

“Well, I guess I’d better go,” Miki said, breaking the silence that had formed while Riko tried to figure out the right way to approach the conversation she wanted to have with her.

“Wait.”

“Hm? What is it, Koboshi-san?”

“Take this.” She held the handle of the Star Wand out to Miki.

“What? Why?” She reached slowly for it, but didn’t grab it yet. “It’s yours, isn’t it?”

Riko smiled. “Right now it is. But it was supposed to be yours. After seeing everything you did today, I’m sure of it—you are far more cut out to be a hero than I am.”

“Supposed to be mine?”

Riko nodded. “I just happened to find it on the ground, but it was meant for you. Nagisa knew that, somehow, and that’s why she came after you before.”

“I don’t know...I don’t think I could do what you do.”

“You can,” Riko declared, smiling sadly. A part of her didn’t want to let it go...but she knew if she held onto it too fiercely, she would end up another Lunar Eclipse.

Miki, with some trepidation at first, finally took a firm grip on the wand. “Okay. I accept.”

A whirlwind whipped up inside the apartment as a torrent of magic flooded Miki’s body. A moment later, there was a blind-

ing flash of light; just like Riko, her clothes disappeared for a moment before the Hopeful Starlight ensemble replaced them.

Riko felt the magic leave her through her fingertips; she could actually see it flowing into Miki. She expected the mental and physical changes she'd enjoyed the last few days to leave along with it; she envisaged her daily despair over her dead-end job and lack of romantic prospects to promptly replace the optimism that had coursed through her since she found the wand.

But they didn't. Despite the absence of the Starlight within her, Riko was still Hopeful.

Epilogue

Hoshino Miki's nightly patrol as Hopeful Starlight was, as usual, uneventful. When she first learned of the existence of real mahou shoujo, she had a different picture in her mind than the reality—generally, her duties were mundane and rather easy to take care of. Seldom did a grand villain like Lunar Eclipse, or even a weak monster, threaten the people.

Still, she liked helping people with little things. Holding elders' arms to guide them across the street, resolving fights between children, rescuing abandoned animals, even returning lost items to the police station...all these were enough to spread a little hope in the world. That was her mission, after all, and she intended to see it through as long as she could.

Even so, tonight was *especially* quiet. "Maybe I'll pack it in early."

Just as she turned toward home, however, a rumbling in the distance reminded her to keep vigilant, even when things were easy.

"An earthquake?" she asked herself aloud as she bounded over buildings with prodigious jumps toward the source of the din. Dozens of voices cried out from that direction as the ground thrashed.

At the scene in mere seconds thanks to her great speed, Miki found more damage than the relatively mild vibrations would have suggested. There was a split in the foundation beneath a grocery store; the building itself was in two, as if a bullet train had run through its front door.

A horde of people were clustered in large groups on either end of the broken structure, away from the split, but Miki saw a single straggler near the fracture—a woman, from the looks of it, who was dangling over the edge as it sunk further.

Did she faint? What's she still doing there? Miki thought to herself, already rushing toward the fracture in the fault. As she approached, squinting to keep the billowing concrete dust out of her eyes, she realized that the woman was holding on to something, though she couldn't make out what.

"I'm coming!" she called, "hold on!"

The woman pulled as hard as she could manage, now righting herself and offering both hands to the dangling...*that's a kid!* Miki realized as her vision cleared and she saw a little boy desperately hanging onto the woman's hands.

She sprang forward, jumping like an Olympian toward the newly formed cliff in the tile floor. The woman and child strained to hold on to one another as the building continued to shift in the aftershocks, tilting downward now into the crevice below. The woman slid against the store's linoleum floor, digging the toes of her shoes as hard as she could into the slick surface to no avail... She slipped off, finally, and cried out her son Hiro's name as she fell into the pit below. Miki grabbed the woman by the ankles, barely catching her, and heaved; with a single pull the pair were out of immediate danger and back on the relative safety of the dusty floor. Miki took one of them under each of her arms and leapt back up to the parking lot, which was still stable.

The store was still full of people, so she didn't have much time. "Are you alright?"

"Thank you, Hoshino-san," said the woman. Miki's eyes went wide—getting exposed as Hopeful Starlight would disrupt her day-to-day life as Hoshino Miki dramatically. Did this person

recognize her? “Or, should I say Hopeful Starlight? I wouldn’t want to blow your cover,” said Koboshi Riko, holding tightly onto her young son’s hand. The panic left, then came relief, then nostalgia as Miki laid eyes on her old friend for the first time since she bestowed the power of the Star Wand on her.

“Thank you, lady!” said the boy with a toothy grin.

Miki wanted badly to stay and chat with her hero, but a scream from the still-crumbling store reminded her why Riko gave her the power in the first place. So, as always in situations like this, she just nodded, smiled, and dove back into the fray.

Riko waved Miki off with a smile, and turned back to her own duties. “I guess we’ll have to get some take out for dinner. What do you think your papa would want?”

THE END

Afterword

Even though I really liked the idea for this story, I have had a hell of a time writing it. Every time I sat down I found myself going in a totally different direction, and as a result things are a bit messy here. I tried hard to clean it up and make it somewhat coherent, but only time will tell whether I have been successful in that endeavor or not.

It started out much less serious (as serious as this story could be in the first place), with Riko “enjoying” much more accidental nudity and bringing Nagisa to her senses by bonking her on the head. She also didn’t do it out of a desire to save her—she was just pissed off that her Sunday was ruined. Maybe that would be better for some, but it left a bad taste in my mouth to make a total joke out of the theme here (the tarot card The Star, which stands for hope in the face of despair). I tried to incorporate the

tarot theme into Nagisa as well (acting as The Moon, which is a card that represents being consumed by fear and anxiety) as an added bonus, but I don't know if that came through.

I also tried to make something more than “hehe, boobies” out of the ENF scenes—the idea is that the clothes Riko, Nagisa, and later Miki wear reflect their inner selves, and that Riko's rapid-fire changes represent a subconscious uncertainty that comes to the fore later on in the story, but I think that's a bit of a stretch to interpret as such (and I'm the author). If you find it a bit smutty or in bad taste, I don't disagree, but I also like naked girls too much to cut it out.

There was a brief moment where Miki was romantically interested in Riko after she was saved by her, but I decided to cut that out because it never went anywhere and never could go anywhere with my planned motherhood ending for our heroine. I don't think there are any leftover traces of that dropped plot line in the story, but if there are, sorry it doesn't go anywhere.

Nagisa was originally not even meant to be a relevant character and just served to highlight Riko's single OL despair. I ended up deciding to make her less desperate after getting the Star Wand, so that didn't work...rather, it didn't make sense for her to still be in despair after getting the Wand, at least not in my conception of its metaphysics, so I changed that around. In the end, I think Riko saving Nagisa is what gave her the hope to continue even after she lost the magically-induced optimism (which didn't even work that well on her, given her personality throughout the story) from the wand.

In any case, I hope it was fun to read. Frustrating as it got to be at times, I enjoyed writing it.

Thank you for reading my story.

—Anon

Dead Mileage/Living Memories

by /a/non

Iwaizumi (o.okm)

Do you remember your childhood dream?

Perhaps you might have wanted to be a professional baseball player, the star of the team, to be worshipped by the crowd.

Or you might have wanted to become a great inventor, one to solve society's problems with eureka's that nobody else have thought of.

As for me, my dream wasn't that grand. I have, at the age of six, decided that I wanted to be a train driver for my local train line.

I don't really remember what made me make up my mind back then. After all, it has been twenty four years since, and with each passing year more and more details escape my memory.

What I can say for sure, is that I have not let my younger self down. After graduating from high school, I sent in my application to the train company, and was hired immediately. After several months of training, I was put on the driver's roster.

The first few years on the job were smooth running for me, however even back then the troubles with ridership were beginning to surface. Our train line was originally built to service the coal mine in Iwaizumi, and passenger service was only added later on. The coal mine has long shuttered before I entered the

company, and with the town thinning out, the number of riders have slowly dwindled over the years.

When I first started out I could count several dozen passengers each way, yet now I would be lucky to find the same numbers across the entire shift.

Among the general public, there was a suspicion that the announcement to shutter our operations would come anytime soon, yet year after year went by and they were surprised to find us still around.

“My good friend entrusted this train line to me,” the president would cry while adjusting his round glasses, light bouncing off his balding crown, whenever he was asked about the sustainability of the line, “and I will do anything to keep it afloat!” Those not in the know would think the president was holding the company together through sheer willpower, yet people on the ground like us were more aware of what was going on.

We didn’t have a cute calico cat hanging around our stations to put on a pedestal to draw in tourists, nor did our president have a second business to help bring in revenue with. Naturally, with no additional income, our expenditures had to decrease.

First it was the wage freezes and the pay cuts. “We need to save as much money as we can to keep this running,” said the president. He halved his salary as well, a much larger decrease than any of us. Nobody could complain since he led by example, but several of the staff who had extra mouths to feed really could not afford the decrement, and tendered their resignations soon after.

Next, we heard from the maintenance team that preventive works have been reduced to the bare minimum. If a fault did not impact safety and operations, it was left unfixed. That was also around the time when I noticed the rides started becoming bumpier.

Lastly, the timetable has been changed to reduce the number of journeys made each day. What used to be a train coming by every hour was now an hour and a half, or even two hours. It was understandable, as less trips meant less need for maintenance,

and our ridership numbers did not justify the need for the previous frequency. Of course, there were a few grumbles at first, but interestingly there was no noticeable additional drop in passengers from that change.

This more laxed maintenance scheduling also gave us leeway for when sudden corrective works were needed, which were slowly increasing as the time spent on preventive works were decreasing.

Today was one of those days.

“Hey Taniya, you’re here, huh,” the president popped in to the staff break room. “Are you feeling better now?”

I looked up from the electric stove in front of me. The warm orange glow of the stove was also visible from the top of the president’s head.

“Yes, thank you. Sorry for the trouble,” I said, my words slightly muffled behind the surgical mask.

“I know you’re feeling feverish today and ought to rest more,” the president continued, “but Sugiwarara just ended his shift and reported that the heater in the Five-Four is out. Can I get you to bring the Five-Four down to the Moshi Yard? I’ll get someone else to bring the Four-Zero back up. You can take the rest of the day off and rest.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Really sorry to trouble you like this, but you know how it is with Sugiwarara,” the president added sheepishly. “Clocking out on time is non-negotiable with him.”

I nodded, got up from my seat, and put on my coat. Stepping outside, a blast of cold air caused me to flinch slightly.

“Oh and also, please take this with you,” the president said, handing over a box of single-use hand warmers. “It’s probably going to be cold inside the train, so please be careful.”

“Thank you.”

I made my way towards the platform where the train was waiting for me. It had snowed last night, and the ground was covered in a sheet of white, contrasting against the gray sky. Footprints dotted the paths that people had taken between the

station building and the platform, breaking up what would have otherwise been a pristine surface.

I took a good look at the train parked next to the platform. A red accent line cut across the length of the single railcar, boldly marking the otherwise silver body, making it stand out in the snow.

A closer look, however, would reveal years of wear that were never touched up. Scratches to the paint job, slight dents in the steel, caked up mud at the skirtings. A far cry from when the train first made its debut.

In a way, both of us are the same, huh. Battered by the waves of time, our youth and optimism gave way long ago; now we're just fighting to survive and trying to get through the day.

I entered the driver's cabin.

The temperature inside the cabin was slightly warmer than outside, but only slightly, most likely due to the lack of wind indoors. During normal operations, the heater below the passenger seats would have made it much more comfortable. I broke open a hand warmer and stuck it inside my coat.

"Fluid levels OK, check. Brakes working, check. Passenger doors all closed. Signage changed to "Out Of Service". Clear vision ahead, check." After doing the dozen routine checks that needs to be done when taking over control, I placed my hand on the throttle and pushed it forward.

The diesel engine, which had been making a low humming sound while on standby, roared into life. A small jerk shook my body as the train started moving.

The streets of Iwaizumi quickly gave way to the pine forest as the train made its way down the tracks. Trees and snow in front of me, on both sides, as far as the eye can see. Suddenly, a chill passed through my body, not from the cold, but from the realization that I was all alone.

It's not my first time doing an empty train run in the winter; I should have been used to it by now. Yet today, the sight of nothing but trees and snow inexplicably made my heart sink. Perhaps it

was also due to the cold I was nursing, for the dull headache that I had earlier was starting to get ever so louder.

My thoughts turned to the train line. How many more winters can I drive this train through? The constant shaking of the car did not give a good prognosis. When we close down, these tracks will definitely be slowly reclaimed by the mountains. Although the sounds of this train currently punctuate the air, in the near future there will only be silence.

Silence, trees, and snow.

A wave of melancholy crashed against my heart, knowing what has been, what is, and what it cannot be.

I felt myself sinking, sinking, sinking—

“Hey, Taniya,” I heard a knock on the door, pulling me back to the present.

What? Who’s there? There shouldn’t have been anyone else on this train besides myself.

I took a quick glance out the door of the driver’s cabin. On the other side of the glass was a petite, red haired girl in a long beige coat. Other than a small side ponytail, her straight locks rested downwards, as if they hardly carried any weight. Her eyes were like topaz, sparkling even as the sky remained overcast outside.

“Can I come in?”

I hit the brakes.

As the train slid to a halt, my mind began to race. I didn’t see anyone else in the train when I came in; how did she show up here?

“Ta~ni~ya~!” she protested, her hand leaning against the front-facing window. “I almost fell over, you know!”

I opened the door.

“Sorry, but how did you get in here?” I asked. “And, who are you?”

I can’t put my finger on where I’ve met her before, but the sight of her had a sense of familiarity to it. At least, I have the feeling she’s not a criminal out to hijack this train or anything.

“Wow, that’s pretty cold,” she said, lightly patting invisible dust off her coat. “I’ve come to find you after so long, and this is the way you respond?”

I racked my brains trying to recall where we’ve met. The ongoing headache did not help.

“It’s me, Kiha Itsuyo,” she said, doing a little bow. “It’s been a while.”

Still bowing, she lifted her head and looked at me. “So, mind if I come in? It’s getting chilly in the passenger section.”

Well, it’s not like this is an actual train service and I have to be prim and professional; I can cut myself some slack, right?

“Fine, but don’t touch anything,” I said. Kiha cheered and trotted into the driver’s cabin. I reached into my bag and took out the box of hand warmers.

“You said you were cold, didn’t you? Would you like one?”

“That would be great, thank you so much.” Kiha nodded, drew one from the box and stuck it under her coat.

Putting away the box, I placed my hand on the throttle and started the train back up. “I need to have my eyes on the track in front just so you know,” I said, “so I apologize if I can’t make eye contact.”

“No, that’s alright,” she said. “Just being here and talking to you makes me happy enough.”

The trees on both sides of the snowscape slowly picked up speed.

“So, you haven’t told me how you ended up on this train yet.”

“When I woke up in the passenger section, you were already pulling out from the station.”

“Was it? I didn’t see you on the way to the front of the train.” Well, there was always the possibility that I might have just overlooked her presence. “Anyway, we’re already on the way to Horono, so how about I drop you off there when we arrive. The next train back to Iwaizumi won’t be here for another hour and a half though, so I’d suggest you take the bus back instead.”

“Chasing me away already?” Kiha’s sounded a bit down. “I hardly get to see you, and the one time I actually get to hang out with you you shoo me off.”

“Sorry, sorry. I’m heading to the train yard though, and it’d be hard to explain to the people there why you were stowed away on the same ride.”

“You’ll have to make a stop by Moshi Port before reversing into the yard, right? I can disappear myself there.”

“That works for me,” I nodded.

The tracks made a bend to the left, and right after making the turn we headed straight into a tunnel. Everything turned dark save for the headlamps illuminating the path right in front of us. It was a rather short tunnel, and so within moments the daylight resumed again.

“Hey Kiha,” I said, “I’m terribly sorry, but I don’t really remember where we’ve met. Can you give me a hint?”

Were we classmates at school? Neighbors? Or perhaps, even distant relatives?

“Hmm, why don’t you make a guess? If you get it right I’ll give you a hug.”

I don’t really need a hug from her, but I fired off the first three possibilities that came to mind earlier anyway. “Bzzt~” Kiha readily denied all three of them.

Suddenly, something else came to mind.

“Say, there’s this manga that I’ve been reading. It’s about four high school girls forming a band together, and there’s a girl in it that looks just like you, and has a similar sounding name to yours. You won’t happen to be named after her, would you?”

“You could have at least asked if she was named after me instead!” Kiha protested with a hint of amusement. “But that sure sounds interesting. I don’t really read manga myself, so I didn’t know about that.”

“Jokes about that character aside, I’m sure we’ve known each other previously, but it’s just that I can’t think of where at the moment. Maybe my head’s going blank from this ongoing headache that I’m having.”

“A headache? Are you okay?”

“To tell the truth, not really. I think I might be developing a cold. Yet, we are so short staffed at the moment that they had no choice but to call me—”

I felt a soft, cool touch on my forehead. Kiha’s back of the hand was petite, barely reaching out of the sleeve of her coat.

“It’s rather hot,” she said, slowly pulling her hand away.

“I figured,” I said, touching my forehead and searching for that residual coolness. “When I reach the train yard I’m getting a ride home and calling in sick for the next few days, scheduling be damned.”

“Is the staffing situation that bad...?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” I began, “This company’s been in the red for the last seven years. We had to cut wages to stay afloat, and of course most people won’t work for mere peanuts. Right now it’s just me, Sugiwarara, Izaki, and a few others left. Izaki knows he has a lot of bargaining power by staying, just not in wages, and had somehow gotten himself a salaryman’s working hours. Morning to evenings on weekdays, and Saturday mornings only. Kasugano and Mito took up his example and demanded the same, so between the three of them they have the prime shifts, and the rest of us get the nights and weekends. As for Sugiwarara, although he doesn’t mind the leftover shift slots, he strictly enforces his working hours. He hasn’t done a minute of overtime in years.”

I gave a small sigh. “Perhaps I should have been more selfish as well, or I wouldn’t be pushed around like I am right now.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Huh?” I was supposed to keep my eyes in front, but Kiha’s reply made me reflexively look at her.

“I think you can be a little bit selfish too, as a treat,” she said, flashing a playful smile.

“It’s a bit late for that,” I started, “all the good shift timings are already taken and it’s hard to get them to give it up.”

“There are other ways to be selfish, you know.” Kiha’s smile slowly grew larger. “How about we go on a date right now?”

“That came out of nowhere,” I said nonchalantly. “Besides, I have to bring this train to the yard.”

“Yes you do,” she said, “but you don’t have to do so immediately, right? We can make stops at each station and take it easy. Look, Horono is coming up.”

Indeed, the presence of the various markings and signage on the side of the tracks indicate that we are approaching Horono Station. I reduced the speed on the throttle as we made our approach.

Back in the coal hauling days, the trains went straight from Iwaizumi to Moshi Port to unload the coal, and then straight back to Iwaizumi for the next load. As the number of loads moved every day were not too frequent, the train line only had a single track between the two stations. When the decision was made to start moving passengers as well, the number of trains on the line had to increase, and this necessitated the trains to be able to pass by each other while on the same track. To make this possible, both Horono and Omoto Stations were built as passing loops with side platforms, so that both trains going the opposite directions would stop at the station at the same time, and then depart the other way.

Well, that was back in the day when the train frequency required such arrangements; we’ve since went back to having a single train on the track during normal operations. But as the train slowly made the small bend into the right side platform, I found Kiha’s suggestion to be feasible. Parking the train at the station platform would not hinder the replacement train’s path coming up to Iwaizumi.

Now then, should I take up Kiha’s suggestion, or should I pass through the station and keep going?

I thought of my current situation at the train company, of the low pay, of the staffing shortage that required me to be clocked in even when I was nursing a cold. Even though all of these were not really anyone’s fault in particular, over time the circumstances have stiffened and closed in on me, gradually applying a pressure that now manifested as the dull headache around my temples.

I thought of the silence I had felt in the woods earlier, of being alone while struggling to save the train line from the streams of entropy, of knowing the futility of doing so. Yet, even though I know it's only a matter of time before we have to inevitably close down, I still want to keep this train running as long as I can. But at the same time, the fatigue and loneliness are slowly taking their toll on me over the years.

I then looked at Kiha who was looking out the front cheerfully, almost like she might be humming a tune if I listened carefully enough. I still don't know where I met her previously, but she did say she came all the way to find me, so perhaps it would be good for us to spend some more time together.

Besides, her saying it's okay for me to be selfish made me happy, even if it was for a bit.

I turned the throttle to the braking position, and tore off the surgical mask covering my face.

"Horono. Horono. The doors on the right side will open."

Horono (11.6km)

Beep, ka-clunk.

There was a vending machine in the small station building right next to the platform. The person who invented the hot drink option for vending machines have my utmost gratitude.

"I bought potato potage and shiruko, which one do you want?" I said, walking over to Kiha, who was sitting on a row of blue plastic chairs.

"Shiruko, please!"

I handed the maroon can over to her. She took it, her small hands barely sticking out of her coat sleeves.

"Thank you, Taniya." She held it to her face. "It's so warm~"

I sat down next to her and opened the can of potato potage. A creamy smell wafted through the air. Slowly sipping the hot soup, I felt it warm up my insides.

“A hot drink on a cold day is the best, isn’t it?” Kiha said, also sipping her shiruko.

“You know, it wouldn’t be as cold if we sat inside the train instead,” I said. Being an unmanned station, the building was a minimal construction meant to keep out the wind in winter, but it was otherwise unheated. Compared to the driver’s cabin in the train which we had occupied for the last twenty minutes, the empty waiting area definitely had a much lower temperature.

“You have no sense of aesthetics, Taniya,” Kiha said, wagging her index finger while holding the can on the same hand. “Look how beautiful the view is.”

I looked up. There was no electric lighting inside the station building during the day, and hence the only light came from outside through the window. The warm white rays streamed into the dimly lit space, gently lapping on the both of us and sparkled the dust fairies in the air. Outside the window, the rear end of our train could be seen, and further out was a field of white backdropped by a similarly white mountain ridge, with no other building in sight. From the tenebrism of the light shining on us against the relative dimness of the rest of the station building interior came a sense of silence, though reminiscent of what I would see when passing through the woods when I drove the train down the line, had a sense of calm that I had not encountered before.

“You’re right,” I said, “it’s really pretty. I’ve passed through this station countless times in my years of being a train driver, yet I have never stopped and witnessed this view before.”

I looked at Kiha next to me. Her face basked in the warm glow as she held the can to her lips.

“Thank you for insisting we come in,” I added. “Is this one of your favorite spots?”

“Actually, this is my first time coming here too.” Kiha said, lowering the can to her lap.

“I’m surprised. I thought that surely you knew this place previously.”

“Well like you, I’ve been busy for quite a number of years.”

Makes sense, since I've not seen her all this while.

"But, you know? That one photography contest? The one with the winners displayed in the train?"

"Ah, that one!" I remembered.

Around seven to eight years ago, our company held a photography contest.

"Memories along the railroad" was the name the president came up with; it was pretty self-explanatory. The plan was to encourage more people to take our train in search of the perfect shot on or around the train line. As results go, there was no noticeable increase to the ridership during the year the contest was held, which if you think about it made sense, as photographers taking the train one or two times weren't really comparable to regular riders taking it every day.

Still, the contest somehow managed to draw in rather impressive entries. I don't really remember any of them, but I do vaguely remember that they all looked really good.

That is, until Kiha reminded me of this one.

"The one that got third prize, was it?" I said. "I think it was of this very station building. I don't remember what the photographer titled it, though."

"'A Chance Encounter,'" Kiha said, "by this one Ishimura Yume."

"That's not a very memorable title," I remarked.

"I remembered it," Kiha said, "and all the other entries as well. They really livened up the train interior when they were displayed."

"What was the one that got the top prize, by the way?" I asked out of curiosity.

"It was the one of the lighthouse at Moshi Port with the train and station staff in the foreground. 'Professionalism' by Takahara Senzou."

I remember now. The one which the president bumped to first place during the closed-doors judging meeting; this was when there was still hair on his head. "It makes our train company look good," he said, adjusting his glasses. Only the staff

present at that meeting knew that this transpired, which was a good thing, for it would have made for a big scandal if it leaked out.

“What did you think of that one? I felt it was just alright.”

“I loved it!” Kiha said enthusiastically. “The light beam from the lighthouse sweeping right behind the train made for a very dramatic composition. The choice of focal length also made the train look larger than life.”

I was surprised by the show of energy. “Art sure is subjective, huh,” I said, emptying my can of potato potage.

I wasn’t sure if it was the warmth from the canned soup, the ambience of the station building, or the conversations with Kiha, but I found my headache had subsided somewhat.

I got up from the plastic chair.

“Since we’re here already, do you want to take a look around the area? I’ve not been anywhere beyond the platform before.”

“I’d love to,” Kiha smiled, “I’ve not had the chance to explore this place either, even though I pass by the station all the time myself.”

I took her empty can with mine and binned both of them.

“You said that you pass by this station regularly, but I really don’t recall seeing you on the train,” I said.

There was a small path outside the station that linked to the main road. At the intersection was a single signpost indicating the presence of a bus stop. Though I called it a main road, it was really just a small one that was barely wide enough to allow for two vehicles to pass each other by.

We were slowly, somewhat aimlessly, walking down the road. On the side of the road closest to the station was a sheet of pure white. In warmer weather they would be rice fields, but for now the snow has blanketed the land and lulled it into winter sleep. The other side had a handful of houses and sheds, equally quiet as the fields they were watching over.

"I see you all the time though," Kiha said, walking by my side. "Maybe you're just too focused on your job to notice."

"No, I'm pretty sure I'd notice that red hair of yours. Unless you dyed it recently?"

Kiha smiled cheekily without giving an answer.

"No, really, I still haven't figured out where we've met. Yet at the same time, I'm pretty sure I know you from somewhere. I'm really sorry about this."

"Ah, there's a smaller road ahead," Kiha pointed straight ahead. We made a turn in.

"So, it'd really help me if you could help jog my memory. Could you please, please give me a hint?"

"No~pe," Kiha teased. "Figure it out yourself."

She took a few quick steps forward and then turned around. Distinct rays of sunlight peered through from above the clouds right behind her, almost as if shining a backlight behind her head.

"How about this, we could play Twenty Questions. You get to ask me twenty 'yes or no' questions about myself, and figure it out by the time we reach Moshi Port. If you get it right, I'll give you a hug."

Again with offering the hug. "You really want to hug me, huh?"

"Yep. Nineteen questions left."

"That didn't count!" I protested.

Kiha broke out in laughter. "Fine, fine," she rubbed her eye gently, "I'll give you this one for free, but just this once."

I couldn't help but smile too after this small bout of teasing. How long has it been since I interacted with someone like this?

We resumed our walk. Even just walking and having a chat together like this felt incredibly nostalgic.

"It feels like, we've known each other since childhood." I mused. "Yes or no?"

"Whose childhood are you referring to?"

"Mine, I suppose."

"Then, yes. Nineteen questions left."

Kiha has just hinted that we were childhood friends. Yet at the same time, we weren't classmates, nor neighbors, nor distant relatives, based off our earlier exchange. It felt like the scope narrowed, but at the same time not too much.

"Wait a minute, why did you have to ask 'whose childhood was it'? Don't tell me, you're actually older than me?"

"Nope! Eighteen questions left." Kiha appeared smug. It appears that I have been tricked out of yet another question.

"So how old are you this year?"

"Isn't it rude to ask a maiden her age? Besides, that's not a 'yes or no' question."

"What, I can't ask open-ended questions outside of the twenty questions? What if I wanted to know how you've been the past few years?"

Kiha stopped walking. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yeah."

Silence.

"Kiha?" I stopped and turned around to find her trembling slightly.

"It's been hard," she said, her face contorting in an attempt to keep tears from coming out.

"I've been working almost every day without rest, and it's been getting to me. I really love what I do and everyone involved, but lately I've been thinking otherwise."

So she's in a similar situation as me, huh.

"Sometimes at night I ask myself, is it worth it to keep going?" she continued. "Maybe I should just give up. I've been falling sick more frequently as well from being overworked. There was a small voice at the back of my head which said, maybe the next one would finally end it all and give me release from all of this."

A tear rolled down Kiha's cheek.

"While I thought about such things, I suddenly thought of you. And then, I thought of wanting to meet you. So here I am."

I looked at Kiha, who was trying her best to hold it in, said nothing, and slowly stepped towards her.

“I know it’s a bit late to say this, but sorry if I troubled you by showing up suddenly like this, but—”

Before Kiha could finish her sentence, I gently scooped the back of her head and brought her to my bosom.

“It’s okay,” I said, stroking her silky red hair. “It must have been difficult for you.”

Kiha softened up, and the wells of tears burst forth.

Her quiet sobs were lost in the silent snow.

After what seemed like half an hour, Kiha finally calmed down.

“Feeling better now?” I asked.

Kiha looked up at me and rubbed her eyes. “Yes, thank you. And, sorry for my selfish venting.”

“No worries,” I said. “Like you said earlier, it’s okay be a bit selfish, as a treat. Keeping it bottled up isn’t good for your health either.”

“Taniya, you’re really nice,” she said, looking away. Her ears seemed a bit more pink than usual.

“Even though I still don’t really know why you thought of me. What did I do to make you come look for me?”

“Ah, about that!” Kiha pushed me back lightly.

“You’ve already gotten your hug from me ahead of time, so you really, really, have to figure out who I am now, got it?”

“Wait, that didn’t count, did it? I was just trying to console you...”

“Those are two separate things!”

“All right, all right. But before that, let’s continue walking. I need to warm myself up again after all that standing around earlier.”

We made our way down the small road once more. Almost right away we reached its end, where it made a T-junction with another road, with its own set of houses and sheds. Without any particular deliberation, we turned left and kept going.

“You said you’ve been working almost everyday, isn’t there anybody else that could cover for you?” I asked.

“There’s only the two of us that could do it,” Kiha said. “They can’t afford to get a third, from what I’ve heard.”

“My company is already bad enough, but it seems like you have it way worse. Why don’t you quit and find another job?”

“Why don’t you quit yours?” Kiha threw the question back at me.

“I wonder that myself,” I said. “Just like you, I’ve been increasingly wondering whether it’s worth it to stay on this job, if I should just put in my notice.”

I looked at Kiha, who was looking down at her feet.

“I understand, even though the pay is bad and the scheduling leaves much to be desired, in the end they’re not really bad people, and we all know we are just trying to keep the company running for as long as we can. But it’d be great if someone could just give me a clear sign, if it’s all worth it at the end of the day.”

“...I’d prefer it if you continued being a train driver,” Kiha said.

“Why is that?”

“If you quit, I won’t be able to see you on the train anymore.”

“Is that so.” I looked up to the cloud-covered sky, which has once again completely concealed the sun’s rays. “In better times, we would probably just be a normally functioning train line, and I wouldn’t be thinking about these things. But I’ll take your comment into consideration.”

Kiha’s face lightened slightly.

“Anyway, I already have an idea what the answer would be, but I’d just like a confirmation: our reunion since childhood was due to my working as a train driver.”

“Yes,” Kiha finally smiled again. “Seventeen questions left.”

It seems like shifting the topic back onto the guessing game would cheer her up, so I decided to keep going.

“If there was a reunion, that means there was a period of time where we were unable to meet. Was it because you moved away to another town or something like that?”

“Nope. Sixteen questions.”

“So you’ve always been in Iwaizumi all this while?”

“Yes. Fifteen questions.”

That’s rather odd. Iwaizumi’s not a very big town, and if she has been here all the time, I should have seen her around town. But then again, she did say she was working almost everyday, so perhaps our schedules just never lined up. Wait, she also said she sees me all the time...?

“I’m getting more and more confounded,” I said, rubbing the ridge of my nose. “You said you see me all the time. Is this only when I’m on the train?”

“Yes. Fourteen questions.”

“Just wondering, when do you usually take the train and which are your stops?”

“Ah, there’s a shrine up ahead!” Kiha abruptly changed the subject. Clearly it was a question she wasn’t intending to answer.

We approached the torii gate. It was a small wooden one, and the paint was cracked in several places. A flight of stone steps could be seen behind it.

“Hmm, it’s a Kumano shrine,” I remarked, looking at the sign. “Since we’re here already, how about we go in and pray for a bit?”

“Sure,” Kiha said.

We took a bow in front of the gate, and started climbing the stone steps behind it.

Pine trees stood on both sides of the stone steps, hiding them from the road outside. Although the trees were crowned with a layer of snow, the steps had no snow on them at all. It was not like it was swept clean either; a thin layer of shed pine needles rested on the steps.

“I never knew there was a shrine here,” Kiha said, “do you think they sell omamori here?”

“Probably not,” I said. “I don’t think this is a big enough shrine to have a sales booth.”

Sure enough, when we reached the top of the steps, we found ourselves the only two people there.

There was a modest main building with the usual offering box and bell rope. Glass panels obscured the inner sanctum from our view. Behind the building was what seemed to be a storage shed. The structures had a few rough edges here and there, but overall it seemed like someone was maintaining it.

“Hey Taniya,” Kiha spoke.

“What is it?”

“Do you think you could spare me some coin? I don’t have any on me.”

I handed Kiha a 10-yen coin.

“Thank you.” She took it and promptly tossed it into the offering box. I took out another 10-yen coin and threw it in as well.

We held the rope together and gave it a good shake. The bell attached to it made a muffled clanging sound, breaking the silence of the woods.

We clapped our hands in prayer.

O Izanagi-sama, please give me the wisdom to figure out what’s up with this girl beside me.

I bowed once more and opened my eyes. Kiha was still praying.

The light from the sun broke through the clouds once again, and shone upon Kiha like a spotlight within the forest. The warm, gentle glow that I had witnessed in the station building had enveloped her once more, making her seem almost...

“Kiha,” I called out once she had finished her prayer.

“Yes, Taniya?”

“This might seem out of nowhere, but you’re not exactly human, are you?”

“What makes you think so?”

“I can’t really put my finger on any single point, but it’s just a wild guess of mine.”

Kiha smiled, the glow around her slowly intensifying.

“Yes. Thirteen questions left.”

Omoto (17.3km)

Unlike from Iwaizumi to Horono where the tracks passed through the mountains, the stretch of railway between Horono and Omoto closely followed the path of the Omoto River. From the window on the left, the winding path of the river darted frequently in and out of view. The setting winter sun was behind us by now, casting a small shadow in front of our train that it kept chasing but could never reach.

Kiha was standing next to me in the driver's cabin. Even though my eyes were on the tracks ahead, I could almost see her gazing softly upon me.

"So, am I having a fever dream right now, and are you just a product of my imagination?" I asked.

"What makes you think that?" Kiha asked, lightly tapping a finger on her cheek.

"For one, I don't remember us walking back to Horono Station. Yet somehow, I find myself already driving the train towards Omoto."

Kiha nodded.

"Another point is that even though you said you aren't human, but I seem oddly calm after hearing it."

"Well, yes to the first part about the fever dream, but no to the second," Kiha said. "Should I count that as two questions? But the first question wasn't really about me, so I'll give it to you for free then." She gave a big smile. "Twelve questions left~"

"So what exactly are you? Did you die from overwork and now linger in the world as a ghost?"

"Nope. Eleven questions."

"Or more broadly, did you die with any regrets and come back as a ghost?"

"No! Ten questions."

"That's reassuring," I said. "At least I know you're not coming for me for revenge over something I did to you previously."

"...Did you do something I should know about?" Kiha pouted.

“No?” I wasn’t too sure myself. “Or at least, not that I know of.”

“To me, Taniya didn’t do anything wrong,” Kiha said, putting her hands on her cheeks. Her petite fingers barely made it out of her sleeves, making her seem smaller than she already was. “If you did, I wouldn’t have come to find you.”

“If you’re not here for revenge,” I said, rubbing my chin, “then can I say you’re here to repay gratitude instead?”

Kiha blushed. “Yes. Nine questions.”

“Are you a crane?”

“No! Eight questions! Please use them more carefully.”

“Come to think of it, when exactly did this fever dream take hold? Was it when I met you right after leaving Iwaizumi?”

“Yes, it was around that time.”

“That long ago? I even got to explore Horono and its surroundings in this dream; it’s like I’m Giovanni on the Galatic Railroad,” I joked.

“Oh, I know that one!” Kiha perked up upon hearing the name.

“Well, it’s a classic by now,” I said, “especially since the author was from Iwate, everyone has read it in school at some point. Have you read it before?”

“...No. Seven questions left.”

“...But I saw an exhibit about it on the train once!” she added.

“Oh?” I remember we had a Miyazawa Kenji exhibit in our trains around six years ago to commemorate the 120th anniversary of his birth. I didn’t really understand why we were doing it, as his hometown wasn’t anywhere near our train line in the first place. “Will anyone even read this?” was my thought when I put up the extremely text-heavy posters above the luggage racks. But it seemed like at least one person did read it after all.

“That exhibit? I was the one in charge of it,” I said.

“You were?” Kiha covered her mouth with her hand, though it looked more like she was covering it with her coat sleeve. “I found it quite well researched, thank you for your effort.”

“...Thank you for reading it.” I wasn’t expecting that six years later, someone would comment on a one-off thing I was assigned to do that wasn’t even part of my job description.

“So, if I’m Giovanni, does that make you Campanella?” I pondered.

“You’re trying really hard to make me a ghost, aren’t you?” Kiha protested.

“Sorry, sorry,” I chuckled. “I was thinking more along the lines of you being the childhood friend that I get to go on a whimsical train journey with.”

Kiha looked down and lightly tugged my coat.

“But in the end Giovanni and Campanella are separated forever, aren’t they?” she said softly. “I don’t want that.”

“Well, Giovanni does tell Campanella that they’ll always be together,” I added, attempting to salvage my increasingly inapt comparison.

“And in the next moment, he wakes up,” Kiha said flatly.

I looked at Kiha, who continued holding on to my coat.

Silence fell in the driver’s cabin; only the sound of the train on the rails reverberated throughout.

While I was thinking of what to say next, the bridge cutting across Omoto River showed up in front of the tracks. It was a steel truss bridge that crossed the river where it made a sharp bend, and right after exiting the bridge was the Omoto Town limits. As the train went onto the bridge, everything seemed to desaturate slightly, making the view look like it came out of an old photo.

“Omoto. Omoto. The doors on the right side will open,” I found myself speaking into the microphone as I pulled into the station.

The next moment, I felt something was odd. Why did I make the announcement on the microphone?

I said the same lines when we were arriving at Horono earlier, but it was just between Kiha and I. Yet for Omoto, I reverted to my usual work mode. Was it a force of habit?

The answer came soon enough. Kiha let go of my coat, turned around, and pulled up the window at the back of the driver's cabin.

There was a long line of passengers on the other side of the window planning to alight.

I froze up. Wait, since when...?

"Thank you," Kiha said, taking the numbered ticket and fare from an old lady at the front of the line, who then slowly trotted out of the train.

I looked at the old lady's back as she stepped out the door onto the platform, then at the rest of the people in the line. She seemed quite normal enough, as were the others. At least, they didn't seem like ghosts that descended upon the train all of a sudden.

"Thank you." Kiha continued to receive the numbered tickets and fare from the alighting passengers, and depositing them into the fare box in the driver's cabin.

Wait a minute. I turned back to the doors. Instead of being closed by default and requiring a button press to operate like in the usual winter weather configuration, the doors were all left wide open. The platform outside was free of snow, and a nearby tree was in full bloom, contrasting the rapidly darkening twilight sky. Instead of the biting winter wind, a cool spring breeze wafted through the doors instead.

I gave a light shrug. We had just established that this was a fever dream of mine, so I guess it wasn't surprising if things like passengers appearing out of nowhere or a sudden seasonal change happened at some point.

Still, this was a sight that I've never seen in my years of being with the train company. Besides the visible line of passengers waiting to alight, there were a few other people still on the seats in the train. It was a stark difference from the almost empty train that I see every day.

The line slowly thinned as Kiha tended to it. Before long, we had reached the last two alighting passengers—a young woman with a small child, who was throwing a tantrum. "I don't want to

get off the train!" he wailed, trying to pull his mother back to the seats.

"Shhh, you're making a commotion!" The young woman was struggling with trying to hold her child in place while she fumbled with her purse trying to make the exact fare. "I'm terribly sorry," she said, smiling weakly at Kiha. "This is his first time riding the train, you see."

"Ara," Kiha said, popping her head through the window and bending down to get closer to the boy. "You really like the train, huh?"

"Yes, it's so cool and fast!" The boy gave a big grin, a complete 180 from the bawling mess he was a moment earlier. "And the train is so cool, with the blazing red stripe on the shiny metal!"

"Thank you," Kiha said, her ears turning pink.

"We'll be taking the train back home after this too," the young woman said, "so won't you behave for now?"

"I want to see the last stop of this train! I don't want to get off here!"

"Your grandmother is waiting for us for dinner!"

"I don't wanna I don't wanna!"

The mother seemed like she might burst out any minute when Kiha spoke up.

"Hey there, what's your name?" Kiha asked the little boy.

"...Soutarou."

"Soutarou-kun, would you listen to big sis here for a minute?"

The boy nodded.

"We will always be on these railroad tracks and won't be going anywhere. The railroad tracks aren't moving anywhere either, so you don't have to worry about the last stop running away."

The two of them looked into each others' eyes.

"Would you be a good boy and listen to your mother for now?" Kiha continued, "You can always ride with us to the end of the line next time. We'll be waiting for your return."

"...Promise?" The boy asked reluctantly.

“Pinky promise,” Kiha said, holding out her pinky finger. The boy extended his own pinky and lightly tugged Kiha’s three times.

“I’ll be back!” The boy ran out of the train onto the platform, turned around, and waved at us. Kiha smiled and waved back.

“Again, I’m sorry,” the mother said, putting the coins into Kiha’s hands, “and thank you.” Saying which, she promptly alighted the train as well, but not before bowing to the rest of the passengers on the train at the door.

Seeing that nobody else was boarding or alighting, I pressed the door close button.

“The train is moving out. Please be careful,” I announced into the microphone and placed my hand on the throttle.

The train picked up speed smoothly without any of the jerking that I was used to, which came as a pleasant surprise. We cruised smoothly through Omoto Town, which was bustling with activity in a volume that I have never seen. People were going about their day on the cleanly tiled streets with a sense of purpose and a spring in their step. Stores dotted along the sides, each of them occupied and open for business.

Suddenly, a gust went through the driver’s cabin sending a chill down my neck. After the wind went away as quickly as it came, I felt the train once again starting to shake while moving down the tracks. Looking out again, the scenery from just a moment earlier was nowhere to be found. Snow covered the empty streets, lit only by the streetlights, as if setting a stage for a dirge for all the shuttered stores in the background. Taking a quick glance behind, I confirmed that the rest of the train was once again empty as it had always been.

I turned to Kiha, who was looking at her pinky finger, her ears and cheek still pink.

“Was that from your memory?” I asked.

“Not exactly,” she said, “some things went a different way than I remembered it. Could it be yours?”

“I have no idea, I don’t remember anything from that day, actually. What I know was from my mother constantly reminding

me about it over the years.”

My mother would sometimes tell relatives and friends the story of my taking the train for the first time, of how I fell in love with the train there and then, and how I really wanted to take it to the terminus at the first time and refused to alight. Of course, she would never leave out the part where she gave me a spanking after we’ve reached home, but also how that day was the start of many, many recreational train rides until I entered elementary school. “We bought the monthly ticket and ended up squeezing every last drop of value out of it,” she would laugh as she recounted that year where she would take me to ride the trains for fun, instead of going to the park or the playground. “Soutarou really loves our train line, it’s no wonder he ended up working with it.”

Even though I no longer remember the event itself, what my mother said about my love for the train line was definitely real.

That must be why I settled on this train company first thing out of school, why I continued sticking around with it, even though the circumstances have been getting harsher over the years. And although I had forgotten it for a time, I now remember the reason to keep going.

“Kiha,” I said.

“What is it, Taniya?”

“I’ve decided, I’m going to continue being a train driver here no matter what. I really love this train and this train company, and I’ll stick with it until the end.”

As I confidently made my proclamation to Kiha, she first widened her eyes and blushed even harder, before finally melting into a gentle smile.

“That’s good to hear,” she said, “I’ll get to continue to see you, huh. Maybe I will perservere for a while longer myself.”

Suddenly, a question popped into my mind.

“So, are you the ghost of a train conductor that used to work with us?” I asked.

“No! You out of all people should know that we’ve never had conductors. Six questions left.”

“Really? But you really looked the part just now, it’s almost like the position was made for you.”

“That’s because you were blanking out earlier so I had to step in to help! Also, what’s with your insistence to try to make me a ghost? You’ve been doing it ever since we left Horono!”

“Besides,” she added, “that’s not how I remembered that day either. I was just looking on silently and had no hand in what happened.”

“Still, you looked really cute handling the passengers just now,” I said in a small voice.

Kiha blushed again and shook her head lightly, her soft crimson hair momentarily floating in the air.

“S-so were you,” she retorted. “Sou-ta-rou-kun.”

I felt my cheeks flush as well, but I quickly regained my composure and volleyed back. “If you call me like that, it really sounds like you’re older than me, you know.”

“Wait, not like that,” Kiha protested.

Our laughter filled the driver’s cabin as we continued our way down to the final stop, with only the tracks right in front of us lit by the yellow headlights of the train.

Moshi Port (20.6km)

As we pulled into Moshi Port Station, Kiha spoke.

“Taniya, can you take me down to the lighthouse before you return to the train yard?”

“Sure,” I said. “Come to think of it, it’s been a while since I’ve been there.”

“Thank you,” Kiha fidgeted slightly. “I’ve never gotten the chance to see it up close myself, so I thought it would be nice if I could do so tonight.”

After applying the brakes and coming to a clean stop, I did the usual checks, and disembarked the train with Kiha.

A warm orange glow from the sodium lamps lit the station platform, the light dancing off the layer of snow on the ground, but it was otherwise pitch-dark outside. In the distance, a beam of light from the lighthouse slowly covered a horizontal arc.

“Moshi Port Station’s always this empty after night falls, isn’t it? It feels quite otherworldly,” Kiha turned around and smiled at me.

Just then, the white beam from the lighthouse swept across our direction, lighting up Kiha from her back.

It lasted but a split second, but the image lingered in my mind for a long while.

The white light wasn’t too bright due to the distance of the lighthouse from the station, and so while it gave Kiha a white glow around her, it did not obscure her features with a strong shadow. At the same time, the light from both the lighthouse and platform lamps bounced off the silver body of the train right beside her, lighting her face up from another angle and making her smiling visage even more pronounced.

I had a realization—this was the exact same scene that Takahara Senzou captured in his prize-winning photograph. Although I had always dismissed its winning the contest as the result of favoritism from our president, but this was the first time that I thought, maybe others did feel something from that photo, in the same way that I am now feeling something welling up from within me, just by seeing Kiha smiling in front of me with the lighthouse in the background.

“Taniya?” Kiha called out, snapping me back to the present.

“Sorry, I was mesmerized by your smile,” I said.

Kiha quickly looked to the side, her cheeks rapidly turning hot. “S-shall we go now?” she said. I nodded.

We made our way to the station exit, where it connected with a footpath going in opposite directions.

“The path going left leads to the main road,” I explained, “it’s lit by streetlamps, but it’s a large detour to reach the lighthouse. Let’s go this way instead—it’s a much shorter path to the lighthouse, it’s just that there’s no lighting along the way.”

“That seems pretty dangerous,” Kiha noted, “Will we be okay?”

“I brought along the emergency flashlight from the driver’s cabin,” I said, pulling it out from my coat pocket. “Look.”

With a slide on the switch of the flashlight, it cast a localized daylight onto the snow-covered path in front of us.

“This path is unpaved underneath all the snow, so let’s take it slowly,” I said.

Just then, I felt Kiha’s arms wrapping around mine. I turned to see her hugging my left arm tightly.

“..To prevent slipping,” she said in a small voice.

The two of us trod cautiously along the snowy path. With the flashlight in hand, I made a sweeping motion back and forth across the ground in front of us, making sure we weren’t walking into a bush. As the path meandered along the coastline, the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks gave a clear audible rhythm to the obsidian night sky. On a whim, I pointed the flashlight onto the waters down below, illuminating the white seafoam circling below with each incoming wave.

Kiha let go of my arm, went around my back, and clutched my right arm instead.

“Sorry, it’s a bit scary being so close to the cliff,” Kiha said.

“It’s okay, I understand,” I said. There was a row of small bushes at the side of the path to mark the boundary and to prevent anyone from stepping over and getting dangerously close to the cliff edge, but they were low enough that it seemed like if the wind just happened to be a bit stronger, those bushes would not prevent you from falling over them and onto the rocks below.

“But maybe it was a bad idea to use this path at night after all,” I continued, “should we turn back and take the road instead?”

“I don’t dislike it,” Kiha said. “Walking down this path makes my heart race, it’s a sensation that I’ve never felt before.”

I stopped and focused inwards, and found my heart beating rapidly as well. Was it from our walking in near darkness, or was it from Kiha hugging my arm so close to herself? Maybe it was a bit of both.

“All right, let’s keep going then.”

The rest of the walk was mostly silent as we focused on the ground in front of us, with only the sound of the waves accompanying our journey. As we continued down the snowy path, the lighthouse in the distance, which was previously the size of my index finger when we had just left the station, gradually grew larger as we got closer to our destination.

Before long, we had hit the paved road once more. The amber glow of the street lamps greeted our arrival as we stepped out of the bushes. Right across the road in front of us was Moshi Port, where a small number of small fishing boats were tied down to the concrete slipway. On the other side of the port, the lighthouse was standing stoically at the tip of the breakwater, keeping watch over the night sky.

“The port was emptier than I expected,” Kiha noted.

“I’ve heard that it was more bustling back in the day,” I said. “There used to be two docks to load dry bulk carriers up with coal. Coal that we freighted, of course.” Those docks have long since been dismantled without any remaining trace. “The only ones left using this port are the small fishing boats you see here.”

We looked at the boats as we passed them by on the way to the breakwater. They all looked well worn, with many years of age behind them, but still carefully maintained by their owners. Many of them had no snow on them, hinting at their recent use.

“I’ve not seen a lot of fishermen on the train though,” Kiha said, lightly touching her lips with her finger.

“They tend to set out to sea in the middle of the night,” I said, “so they would usually come to the port using their own trucks. Not to mention, they need to use the truck to haul their catch to the market too.”

“That makes sense,” Kiha said, “it’s no wonder the train empties out at Omoto.”

“We’ve considered closing Moshi Port Station multiple times before, but our train yard is situated here anyway, so there’s not really any benefit in doing so.”

Suddenly, Kiha giggled.

“Hmm?” I asked.

“Oh, I was just thinking,” she said cheerfully, “about how you were so adamant about riding all the way to the end of the line that time when you were a child. So, what was your reaction when you saw Moshi Port being this bleak for the first time?”

“As I said before, I don’t remember. Maybe I should ask my mother some time. But I do recall riding the entire line many times, so I guess having nothing much here wasn’t a deal breaker for me.”

“It’s more about the journey than the destination for you, huh?”

“Could be.”

Reaching the foot of the breakwater, we climbed the steps up to the top of the concrete bar and approached the lighthouse. It was a towering structure, painted red on the outside, with a metal door closing off the entrance. Looking up, the rotating lamp could be seen much more clearly inside the lantern room, as some of the light from the beam reflected off the glass panes and illuminated the space within.

“This lighthouse has also been here for decades,” I remarked.

Originally erected to guide large ships around the port, its gargantuan size now feels out of place in a space occupied only by fishing boats.

“It must have witnessed a lot,” Kiha said.

I looked at Kiha, her warm gaze, and her soft, crimson red hair contrasting even against the red paint of the lighthouse.

And then, I gave a light pat on her head.

“Same goes for you, isn’t it? Watching over us over all these years.”

Kiha turned and looked at me. “Wait, the way you’re saying it, do you mean...?”

I looked at Kiha straight in her brilliant topaz eyes.

“Are you our diesel locomotive, the KiHa Type 54?”

Kiha’s eyes rounded, an extra dash of glimmer rolled in her irises. Then, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around my waist.

“Congratulations, you’ve got it with five questions to spare.”

She held me in embrace for what seemed like several minutes. We said nothing throughout, merely sharing in each other’s warmth for the entire duration.

Eventually, she looked up at me.

“When did you realize it?” she asked.

“At Moshi Port Station,” I said. “You looked just like in that photo from the photo contest.”

“You mean Takahara Senzou’s ‘Professionalism’?”

“Yes, but instead of the station staff, you reminded me more of the train itself somehow. That’s when it clicked.”

“That doesn’t make too much sense,” Kiha laughed. I gave a small chuckle as well.

“In that moment,” I added, “I thought you were really, really beautiful. It was the same feeling I’ve had when I saw you for the first time when I was six.”

Hearing that, Kiha blushed, hid her face in my chest, and gave a light squeeze with her arms.

“You know, that’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said about me,” Kiha said, her face still buried within my coat. “Everyone just saw me as a machine to work with; it was completely transactional. But you were the only one, back in that day, to see me as something more.”

“Even though your vocabulary only had ‘cool’ and ‘fast’ back then,” she teased, looking up at me.

“You can add ‘beautiful’ and ‘lovable’ to that list,” I said. “And ‘smart’, and ‘kind’, and...”

“Okay, okay, you can stop,” Kiha said, pulling her head back from my chest. “Any more, and I’ll be too flustered to think straight.”

“...And ‘cheerful’, and ‘pleasant’, and...”

Kiha made an amusing noise as she lightly thumped my chest with both fists in protest.

After the pinkness in Kiha's ears subsided, she took both my hands and spoke.

"Thank you, Taniya. For appreciating me, and coming back to meet me as a driver."

I gave her petite, almost-hidden-in-her-coat-sleeves hands a small squeeze.

"Thank you as well, Kiha. For coming to see me as well, and for being my childhood love."

Kiha looked away into the ocean, the heat returning to her ears and cheeks. I turned to the same direction she was looking. The black water surface, dimly lit by the scattering light from the lighthouse's beam, constantly fluxed and contoured down below.

"Say, would we be able to meet like this again?" I asked.

I could feel a bit more weight coming from Kiha's hands.

"We were only able to have this time together because of my fever dream," I said. "Does that mean once I recover from my cold, I won't be able to talk to you like this anymore?"

"...I don't know."

"I've been praying for the chance to meet you," she said, "and it's an absolute miracle that I got this moment to spend with you. But it could be that when tomorrow comes, I go back to being just a train again, and we won't be able to talk like this anymore." Her lips started to quiver.

"Then, I'll pray as well," I said.

Kiha turned and looked at me with wide eyes.

"If your prayers were answered when you were going about it alone, surely it will be too when it's the both of us doing it, right?" I said.

A smile bubbled up on Kiha's face, and she nodded with conviction.

"Yes!"

Even as we hoped that we would meet again, at the same time we tried to make the most out of the present.

We sat down onto the concrete floor of the breakwater, the lighthouse behind us, looking into the ocean.

And then, we talked. About our past, about the present, about everything, about nothing in particular.

And as we talked, I silently prayed that the night lasts just a little longer.

Moshi Train Yard (19.8km)

The bright electrical lighting always took a moment to get used to when entering the train yard at night. Even though there was light coming from the headlights on the way to the train yard, its brightness was hardly comparable to the wash from the floodlights set outside the corrugated steel shed.

I slowly put on the brakes and parked the train into the shed, and started to do the closing checks.

“Hey, Taniya,” a voice came from outside the driver’s cabin.

I opened the door of the cabin.

“Ah, Isobe,” I greeted the maintenance crew member. “Good work today.”

“Same to you,” he said. “How are you feeling now? It’s only been a week since we found you barely conscious with a high fever at Moshi Port Station, are you sure you don’t need to take a longer break?”

“Thanks for asking, but I’m okay now.”

“It was strange though,” he continued, “the president called in that day to say that the Five-Four was coming in for us to fix the heater, but when we found you the heat was running just fine.”

“Yeah, it happens sometimes I guess,” I said. “Anyway, I’ve still got to do the checks. It’ll take a while, so you can go ahead and close up first.”

“You’ve been doing the closing shift the past few days too, did someone change the scheduling?”

“Well, I put in the request for it, actually. Just felt like a change of pace.”

“Alright then, as long as you’re fine with it. Let me know when you’re done, I’ll be in the office as usual.” Isobe alighted and made his way towards the side door of the shed.

I kept my eyes on him until his figure was no longer visible.

Looking around to make sure there was nobody else around, I put my hand on the door handle of the driver’s cabin.

“Hey, Kiha,” I said, closing the door and turning around.

In the driver’s seat was that petite, red haired girl, in a long beige coat, with topaz eyes.

“Hey, Taniya. How was your day?”