

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 ta-

ble 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 gamble 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, yelped, 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 sur-

prising 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.