

Space Janitor 3

by /a/non

Cast of Characters

Yamanaka Touma (山中 斗真) 28

Head of the Yamanaka family, chief engineer of the Argive, and pilot of the Cassandra. He's highly proficient at shipboard operations, but he's lazy and prefers to work alone. He has a friendly, laid back attitude, but gets boisterous whenever there's a chance to look cool.

Yamanaka Hoshiko (山中 星子) 26

Captain of the Argive and manager of the Yamanaka estate. She radiates a mystic aura of sternness and command, and those around her often regard her as a sort of superhuman. In reality she has some insecurities and tends to unravel when nobody is relying on her.

Yamanaka Noriko (山中 法子) 24

Executive officer of the Argive and graduate student. She's Hoshiko's faithful assistant in all things and tends not to see her older sister's flaws. She's strict and irritable with everyone else though, especially Touma and Tanikawa. She has a laid back, affectionate side too, but she doesn't want her little sisters to see it.

Yamanaka Komori (山中 子守) 22

Chief weapons officer of the Argive. Supposedly has a job of some sort, but she acts like a NEET. Between her short stature

and status as the middle sister, she's unused to attention and is happy to be a shut-in. Unfortunately her qualities of level-headedness and leadership are beginning to come to light, and people are starting to rely on her.

Yamanaka Miko (山中 巫女) 19

Owner of the Argive. Because she was born with low gravity syndrome, she can't survive Earth's gravity and has to live on the Argive full-time. She's thin and frail, but strives to be a pillar of kindness for her siblings to lean on. Between her ghostly appearance and boundless goodwill, those around her often get the impression of an ethereal, otherworldly being. In reality she's a normal girl who's prone to boredom and loneliness.

Yamanaka Yukari (山中 裕佳梨) 16

Assistant weapons operator of the Argive and first year high school student. As the youngest sibling, she's always felt childish. Thus she strives (childishly) to showcase her capability and maturity whenever she can.

Tanikawa Daichi (谷川 大地) 28

Custodial engineer of the Argive. Dropped out of high school to escape a bad home and proceeded to spend the next ten years as a squalid loser. He likes to think of himself as a gambler, but in reality he's just a janitor who sometimes wastes all his money on mahjong.

Morishita Tarou (森下 太郎) 59

The uncle who raised Tanikawa and officer of the Daisangen Group. He's a ruthless man who won't hesitate to backstab any-

one if it gets the job done, and he'll enjoy doing it. Likes yakiniku on his days off.

The Beautiful Ones (美シ物)

The aliens who drove Touma into a corner, kidnapped Noriko, and pushed Miko to the edge. They prioritize beauty above all else, going to extremes that are usually incomprehensible to human minds.

I

"This whole trip I've had nothing to do," complained Yukari, "and now all of the sudden I'm super busy! Nee-chan made me get up and take my middle school final exams the instant we got signal this morning, and now I've gotta spend all afternoon taking high school entrance exams. Nee-chan's gonna give me that not-mad-but-disappointed look if I can't get into the same school she went to..."

"We have signal now?" I asked, "I mean, uh, aren't you glad you spent all that time studying?"

"Yeah, we're gonna land tonight," she said, ignoring my tactful self-correction.

We reached the janitor closet—for the last time, it struck me—and I put away my cart while Yukari walked on muttering some sort of gibberish that might have been either English or math. As for me, I went down to my quarters. Once there, I retrieved my phone from my locker and opened a certain app. There was something I wanted to do.

There was signal all right, but it wasn't very steady here. I took a deep breath, gathered my resolve, and stuck my head into the passageway. The coast was clear. I did want to do this, but I didn't want to be seen. The logical place to go was the mess deck.

Once I got there and seated myself at my little TV tray in the corner, I pulled out my phone and tried again. This time it worked. Soon I was greeted by the homepage of the popular gacha— I mean mahjong game Tenpai Spirit. Yes, I meant mahjong game. It's a mahjong game, it just happens to have a gacha. Servers aren't free, you know.

Without hesitation I clicked ranked match and 4 player south. Then the game began. I'd been ready to clack some tiles—even digital ones if I had to—for weeks.

Right away I won east one with a quick tanyao. One thousand points. Not much, but I was sure I'd seized the flow. Next was east two, my dealer turn. Again, I thought I'd go for a fast hand, but I was still one away from tenpai when the player to my left called riichi.

I figured I was in danger whether I dealt in or not and chose to push, but he quickly called tsumo. I, as dealer, paid for half of it.

When east three began I was in last place. I wasn't worried about it though; it was still a pretty close game and I had six rounds to catch up. This time when someone called riichi, I folded right away. My hand wasn't close enough to risk dealing in, and after this I'd still have five more rounds to catch up. East three ended with another tsumo. I was falling farther behind.

Though there was still east four and then the entire south round, I resolved to be a bit more aggressive. Early in the next round, however, someone called pon on the chun and two sou tiles. No souzu in his discards, the whole suit suddenly felt way too dangerous. It would slow down my hand a little, but I would have to hold on to my sou tiles. Then, halfway through the round, the guy across from me called riichi and I drew a middle tile that was both useless to me and incredibly dangerous. With a grimace, I gave up on the round and defended with all my might. In the end, someone else dealt in and was sent down below me.

When the south rounds began I was in third place, but the game wasn't so close anymore. First place had pulled way ahead, and even second seemed almost out of my reach. Still, I had the entire second half of the game to catch up. I could—Ron. I dealt in. Fourth place was in hidden tenpai less than ten discards into the round. It wasn't a big hand, but it sent me right back down to last.

"What a bastard!"

But with three rounds left, and my second dealer turn upon me, even I could at least avoid last place. I resolved to play recklessly, I resolved to—

Ron. Another ridiculously fast win for the guy in third. This

time, the guy in second dealt in. Rather than drag second down to my level, this only pulled third out of it.

When south three began, my frayed nerves recovered somewhat when I saw I'd been dealt three hatsu. Then I saw that hatsu was the dora, and I knew it wasn't over yet. I just needed to play fast and I could take third place. Even though I knew that, however, the tiles I needed just weren't coming fast enough. I had only just reached open tenpai when two riichis hit the table one after another.

"Hey, I'm already in last. What do I have to lose?"

But with my very next draw, my heart wavered. It was two sou. Looking at everyone's discards, there were no two sou on the table. I felt a presentiment of death.

"H-hey, just because you're in last doesn't mean you'll magically be more lucky. I can't afford to fall even farther behind. Besides, there's still a little time. Maybe I'll have better luck later."

I stupidly tore apart my hand and defended. In the end, not only did everyone drop the tile that would have given me the win, but nobody was waiting on two sou.

South four. All last. My starting hand had the potential to be big. Big enough to take second. There was no hope of being lucky later. It was now or never, do or die, my last chance. I pushed frantically, and as far as I could tell so did everybody else. A scary looking open hand? I pushed. A riichi? I pushed. A second riichi? I pushed. At last, I had the option to riichi myself.

The tile I needed to drop was dangerous. I knew it was dangerous. It wouldn't have been surprising at all if someone was waiting on it.

"Sometimes you just gotta believe."

I felt that same presentiment of death, but so what? The timer on my turn was running out.

"Sometimes you just gotta have faith!"

I dropped it. There was a pause. One second. Two seconds. Three. Somebody emoted.

"Wait—"

Ron. My score was sent to the negative. I lost 150 rank points.

I feel like I'm always telling you not to worry about the mahjong jargon, but every time I describe a game I just use more and more of it.

Maybe it seems a little over dramatic to sit around in a numb stupor over a game of net mahjong. But with the anxieties about returning to Earth hanging right over my head, the game seemed to represent the story of my life. I'd play it safe until I fell way behind and then, realizing I was about to lose, I'd take some insane gamble and crash even harder. Again and again, I'd put too much faith in my own vague feelings and fleeting whims and it was getting me nowhere fast.

"Huh? You're this bummed out over a game of net mahjong?"

I flinched. Noriko was leaning over the table and staring at the results of the game. Somehow she'd snuck up on me.

"N-no."

I made to put the thing away, but she snatched it up and grimaced.

"You really did get destroyed though. Wait, silver room? You're only in the silver room?"

"Listen, I've been in and out of the gold room a few times. Besides, what do you know about it?"

Noriko froze and a streak of scarlet colored her face.

"I may have," she mumbled, "a slight...gacha habit..."

Now I froze. It took me a few seconds to come up with a reply.

"You know, it's really more of a mahjong game than a gacha game..."

Somehow or other that comment must have cheered her up, because her usual scowl returned to her face as she tapped my forehead with the phone before setting it down.

"I can't believe someone like you tried to play real mahjong for real money," she huffed, "Promise me you won't go to any mahjong parlors until you're at least in the jade room."

"How many promises are you gonna squeeze out of me? What rank are you, anyway?"

"I'm...also in the silver room. But I mostly just play for the, um...gacha. I mean, um, I'm a functioning member of society

and I've never tried to gamble real money on it. Someone's gonna cut off your fingers or something. Come on, promise!"

"All right, all right. No real mahjong til I'm...luckier."

"You mean better."

"Don't push it, lady."

"Fine, fine. I'm satisfied," her smug expression turned to something more eager, "Hey, you'll be at the train station next week, right?"

"That's another promise you squeezed out of me, isn't it?"

"So that's a yes?"

"Yeah."

"Good, that's all I came here for. I need to go do some last minute calculations for the landing. Later."

She pulled a smart about-face and left the mess deck. There was the sound of her shutting the door behind her, the sound of her heels clicking sharply down the passageway, and then that constant hum of machinery that passes for silence on a spaceship.

I liked the Yamanakas. I really did. I was even beginning to realize that I liked Noriko. Compared to the cold, almost hostile person she'd been when I met her, I now saw she was hiding a likable side, a warm side, and even a somewhat vulnerable side. I felt like it would be nice to get to know her even more. I felt like it would be nice to remain friends with her family.

But how much could I trust my own feelings? Or hers, for that matter. Or any of theirs. Wouldn't it be better for someone like me to disappear back into my own world? The timer on my one little adventure was running out, and I still didn't know what to do after it ended.

II

The Captain thanked me for my work, handed me a cred stick, and sent me ashore with the rest of the crew. Then she boarded the Argive and flew it back into space. We stood and watched until its blinking safety lights disappeared behind a cloud of night-time smog.

“Well, she’ll be gone for a few hours,” said Touma, “No need to wait, she’ll meet us at home.”

“Did you have to make her wear the cape?” asked Noriko.

“The captain wears the captain’s cape,” replied Touma with a shrug, “And speaking of the Captain...”

He turned.

“You, littlest little sister.”

“Huh?” asked Komori.

“Not you. Yukari-chan!”

Without warning, he scooped up Yukari in a big bear hug, whereupon she began to squirm like a cat in the arms of a toddler.

“Nii-chan...” she whined.

“Your big sister said you have more exams tomorrow, and she told me to make sure you go to bed at a decent hour.” Yukari went limp.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Come on, I’ll give you a ride in the Cassandra. Anyone else want a lift? There’s room for one more if we squeeze a little. Komori?”

He gave Komori a look I couldn’t decipher, but she declined the offer. I’m not sure why he didn’t offer Noriko a ride, but he bade us good night, packed Yukari into the little vessel, and joined the sky traffic above.

And then there were three. A weird silence broke out, and I was just on the verge of making some excuse to leave when Noriko spoke up.

"You guys wanna go somewhere? Or something?"

"Where to?" asked Komori.

"I don't know. What's open this late?"

They both looked at me.

"I don't know," I said with a shrug, "There's gotta be something."

We spent a few minutes looking up places nearby, and we were really starting to warm up to the idea of doing something when a green groundcar came to a stop in front of the space pier. We didn't pay it too much mind until we saw the two men who stepped out. One of them was tall and lanky and bald, with round glasses, round cheeks, and an odd little smile.

The man following him was my uncle Morishita.

* * *

"Are you sure you have everything you need?"

"Yes, Onee-sama."

"We got the food deliveries set up, right?"

"Yes, Onee-sama."

"And we vetted the repair workers?"

"Yes, Onee-sama."

"And you've got everyone's contact information?"

"Yes, Onee-sama."

"And...you won't be lonely, will you?"

Hoshiko cast a meaningful gaze at Miko, but the younger sister's smile didn't falter for an instant.

"It's always a little lonely after a mission, isn't it?"

"Miko..."

"Even for you, right?"

Hoshiko felt her eyes grow hard, as though her body didn't want to answer the question.

"True enough," she conceded.

"So don't worry about me," Miko hesitated, "But don't rely on me either. At least for a while."

"What?"

"I want to do something...for myself."

Hoshiko wanted to ask for details. In particular, she wanted to ask if Miko and the Argive would stay in Earth's orbit for long after the repairs were done. But no. Hoshiko trusted her little sister. Whenever she was needed, she would be there. That much she could believe in.

"I see," was all the Captain said.

"So if anyone down on Earth feels lonely, it's up to you to help, okay?"

"Of course. Wait." Hoshiko frowned, "You're talking about Tanikawa again."

"Yes."

"Why? Isn't it fine to let him go? He's not exactly a space-farer."

"Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"Noriko-nee made him promise to be at the train station when she leaves."

"What? Why? That's bizarre. No, wait, hang on. Asking an unreliable guy like that to make promises is—hang on, no. Why would she do that?"

"Why indeed? I think she'll be hurt if he's not there though."

"Wha—how—she might get a—before me?!"

"You're always so focused on work, Onee-sama."

"Well, I'm not drawing any conclusions just yet. I need more information first."

"Of course."

"Um, wait. No, I—"

"Onee-sama, I'm awfully tired and I'd like to turn off the gravity soon."

"Why don't I stay on the space dock and help oversee the repairs?"

"Don't you always complain that issues with the estate always pile up while you're away?"

"All right. Fine. I'm leaving. Good night."

"Good night, Onee-sama."

Hoshiko turned, saw something on her shoulder, and paused.

"Ah, do you want the cape?"

"No."

"All right. I'll...see you then."

"I love you too, Onee-sama."

Hoshiko stepped into the space dock passageway and closed the door behind her. She stared at the door to the Argive for a while, just watching the still, silent slab of metal. Yes, it was lonely. It was always lonely right after a mission.

"Whatever you're planning, I believe in you," whispered Hoshiko, "I'm proud to be your sister."

And it was true. Hoshiko had always known, in an abstract sort of way, that Miko must have dealt with loneliness. She'd never fully realized just how crushing that loneliness could be or how hard Miko worked to support her family in spite of it. If she was planning to do something for her own sake for once, good. Whatever she was after, she deserved it.

There were footsteps in the passageway.

"Ah, Yamanaka Hoshiko-san, if I'm not mistaken."

Hoshiko turned and saw a lanky, bald man with round glasses, round cheeks, and an odd little smile.

"Yes," she said, "Hatsunori Soutarou-san, right? From the, um..."

"Ryuuiisou Group."

"Oh, of course. Komori's boss. Sorry, it's been a long few weeks."

"Not at all. I know how these things go."

"Are you heading out on business now, Hatsunori-san?"

"No, I'm just coming back. There was some pressing business on Mars."

"I see. And how is business? Are you satisfied with Komori's work?"

"Satisfied with Komori-san's work? Yes, very, very. Except for the small matter of the recent unexpected absence, of course."

"My apologies. It was a family emergency."

"So I've been given to understand. I hear you had a little spat with our competitors from Daisangen."

"You could say that."

"And even...an encounter with those mysterious ladies from the asteroid field."

"Hatsunori-san, governments don't like it when we talk about aliens this close to Earth."

"Aha, true enough. Good policy, that. Very."

"Do you know how long it is until the next shuttle to Earth?"

"About two hours. Say, Yamanaka-san, if you'd care to join me for coffee while we wait, I believe we'd have the whole cafe to ourselves. There's hardly anyone up here at this time of night, you know."

At the mention of coffee, Hoshiko realized just how tired she was.

"Very well," she said.

"Wonderful," said Hatsunori, his odd little grin breaking out into a toothy smile, "I assure you, Yamanaka-san, you afford me the very greatest pleasure."

* * *

Throughout the course of my life, I've been in a lot of fights. To be honest, it's not really accurate to say I've won most of them. Frankly I'm not sure if it's accurate to say I've won any of them. So when I tell you that I readied myself for a fight against my uncle and the bald stranger, you can safely assume I looked ridiculous.

"Don't flatter yourself, kid, I'm not here to see you," said Morishita dismissively, "Haven't you ever heard of the Naginawa Conventions?"

"The...what?" I asked.

"What happens in space stays in space," said Noriko, "Relax, Tanikawa."

"It'd be total anarchy if every corporation with a grudge tried to settle it on Earth," said Morishita with a roll of his eyes, "Don't you know anything, you retard?"

"Not that we don't have the occasional spat down here," said the bald stranger with a chuckle.

"Hey, all's fair in war and finance. Anyway, I'm just trying to talk Sou-kun here into signing a deal. He's the one who wants to see you people."

"Specifically," said the stranger, "I wanted to see Yamanaka-san. Er, Yamanaka Komori-san, that is."

Instantly, Komori folded into a ninety degree bow.

"Ah, crap," she muttered, "I'm in trouble. My apologies, Hatsunori-san!"

"Not a bit of it," said the stranger called Hatsunori, "Emergencies happen, after all."

"Th-thanks!"

"However, I came here to tell you to be at the office bright and early tomorrow morning."

"Huh? Wasn't it a remote position?"

"Come, come, you vanished without warning for nearly a month. There has to be some consequence."

"Yes..."

"Also, we just got a batch of new team members. As their senpai, it's your duty to take responsibility and show them the ropes."

"Yes....."

"Glad to hear it. Now, I believe that's all I needed to do here. Morishita-san, isn't this young man a relative of yours? Why don't I leave you with him?"

"Huh? Sou-kun, wait--"

But Hatsunori vanished into the green car and peeled away from the space port.

"Bastard," grumbled my uncle, then, turning to me, "Hey, Dai-chan, let's get yakiniku."

"No," I flatly refused.

"Ah, Dai-chan, if you treat me so coldly I'll have to write out a thousand copies of the sutra on the great love of parents."

"You tried to kill me, like, last week."

"Well, at least there's no making a sap outta you. Whatever."

With that, Morishita thrust his hands into his pockets and strolled off into the night.

After the pier had been silent for a few minutes, Noriko coughed.

"Are we still going somewhere?" she asked.

I voiced my consent, but Komori broke out in a plaintive whine.

"Onee-chan, I have work tomorrow. Walk home with me."

"Huh? Walk home yourself."

"In this town? At this hour? I could get robbed, or kidnapped, or—"

"If you're scared to walk home alone just say so."

"Noriko-nee, the Captain won't forgive you if some sketchy guy comes along and—"

"All right, all right. Fine, let's go."

"Cool," said Komori, shamelessly dropping the helpless little sister act at once.

"Tanikawa, do you wanna come over?" asked Noriko.

I wouldn't have minded visiting a restaurant or something, but actually going to their house felt like too much.

"No thanks. I'd better make sure I still have a place to sleep tonight."

"You're homeless?!"

"No, no, no. I mean, probably not. That's what I want to check. You know, rent payments and all that."

"Oh, I see. Well, if you can't go home," Noriko dug around in a pocket, retrieved a card, and handed it to me, "That's the Captain's card. It has our address on it."

"Thanks, I'll keep it in mind."

"Noriko-oneechama..." Komori began to tug at Noriko's sleeve.

“Just because you’re still short doesn’t mean you’re still cute,” grumbled Noriko, “See you, Tanikawa.”

“Yep. See you.”

The two of them walked off bickering about something. I checked the time and sighed. Just one more thing to do before this long, pointless voyage could truly come to an end.

III

The street was dark and lonely, but the mahjong parlor held it back with an aura of warm light and the smell of tobacco smoke. Before going in, I stopped at the ATM outside and converted the cred stick from the Captain into cash.

"Excuse me," I said to a staff member once I entered, "Is Tsuizaki-san in?"

The man in question must have heard his name from across the room, because I found out he was indeed in when he looked up and bellowed at me.

"Tanikawa! You've got some nerve, showing yourself around here again!"

Tsuizaki Danji, the man who sent me to space with that ill-fated tanyao and the true instigator of this whole narrative, was seated at a table with a glass of something in his hand and a hidden pinfu tenpai in front of him. Distracted players at other tables glared at me, so I hurried over while retrieving cash from my pocket.

"No, no no, no nerve at all, not me, no way. Just, uh, the cash I owed you. It was about this much, right?"

Tsuizaki took the cash, counted it, and shoved it in his pocket. Then he grinned at the other players.

"What'd I tell ya? Didn't I tell ya he'd pay up eventually? Not such a bad guy, eh, always loses big but he's not such a bad guy, eh?"

Based on how slurred his speech was, I'm not sure how much of his babbling he actually meant. Most likely he just felt magnanimous because he was once again in the lead.

"Yeah yeah," said the nervously fidgeting player to his right, "Just drop your friggin tile already."

Tsuizaki dropped a chun. That same nervous player called

pon on it. That call probably got him to tenpai, because he was brimming with confidence as he dropped the 9 man.

"Ron!" called Tsuizaki.

The nervous player slumped.

"Hidden tenpai with such a good wait...Ah, that's too dirty, Tsuizaki."

"Oh, quit complaining. It's a cheap hand, isn't it?"

The players began to prepare for the next round and I began to leave, but Tsuizaki stopped me.

"Hey, this hanchan's almost done. Why don't you stick around for the next one?"

I felt at my remaining cash and thought about it.

"No thanks, I'd better go."

"No hard feelings, right? I wasn't gonna do anything really bad back then, just beat you up a little. On principle, you know?"

"I know how it goes. I lose all the time."

"Oh, you're just sick of losing then? Guess you'll be giving up on the hobby then. That's too bad."

"I don't know about that--"

"Ah, in that case it must be a girl. Happens all the time. You get an old lady and next thing you know you're banned from gambling. Now that's a damn shame."

Noriko had wrung another promise out of me earlier that day, but to be honest I hadn't really thought about it. When you're full of energy and feeling lucky there's nothing better than sitting down for a hanchan, but just then I was tired and the walk to the parlor had left me feeling weird somehow. I just didn't feel like playing.

All things considered, Noriko had no right to demand I give up my hobbies, no matter how good she thought her intentions were. I'd probably soon fall out of contact with Noriko and in a year's time we'd be perfect strangers again. When that happened, why would it matter if I'd made a promise to stop playing mahjong?

But that wasn't quite what I'd promised.

"Hit the nail on the head, huh?" asked Tsuizaki.

"Tsuizaki," I said, looking him in the eye, "I want to be better at the game before I face you again. I'll come back here when I can win."

The old gambler grinned.

"Is that how it is?" he asked, "Well that's no shame at all."

We shook hands and parted on good terms. Then I made my way to my tenement building and was relieved to find that I did indeed still have a place to sleep.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking my apartment was a disaster zone, with beer cans and trash all over the place. Well you're wrong. I'll have you know I kept the place spotless.

No, wait, hang on, that'll give you the wrong idea too. Now you must be thinking it would be pretty funny if a guy like me had a surprisingly homely trait like "neat freak," or if the guy who's embarrassed to be a janitor actually had a burning passion for cleaning. Wrong on both counts. I'm not an especially neat person or anything. It's just that the room was so tiny. Like, "utility closet with some tatami laid out" small. It even had the same deep sink you find in janitor closets and rough plywood shelves you might keep cleaning tools on. If you let clutter build up in a space that small it'll be unlivable, that's all.

So don't get the wrong idea when I tell you the first thing I did was spend an hour dusting off every horizontal surface in the room. Anyone would have done the same thing, a month's worth of dust is not fun to look at. Once that was done I took the overdue rent notification off the door, put it in an envelope with some cash, and dropped it off in the box outside the landlady's office.

With that, there was nothing left to do. I crawled into my futon and let the long voyage finally come to an end. For better or worse, I was home.

IV

Hoshiko awoke to polite knocking on her bedroom door. She sat up, smoothed her pajamas, and placed her hands in her lap in a dignified manner.

"Come in," she called.

In walked Hashitame Kaori, the maid.

"Good morning, mistress."

"Good morning, Kaori," Hoshiko glanced at the window, from which beams of sunlight shone warmly across the room, "Did you let me sleep in later than usual?"

"You came in so late I just couldn't bear to wake you, mistress."

"I was supposed to tell Komori she was promoted. She'll be surprised when she gets to the office."

"Hatsunori-san already told her, mistress. I distinctly heard Komori-ojousama complaining about it at breakfast."

"Really? I wonder when he found time to call her."

Komori was a harder worker than she liked to pretend. Hoshiko was reasonably faithful that her middle sister would make her proud soon.

"Will you take your breakfast now, mistress?"

"Yes, please."

Kaori bowed and began to make a graceful exit, but tripped on her skirts and seemed to get tangled up in them somehow. Hoshiko hurriedly jumped out of bed and helped the maid to her feet. Though Kaori was already thirty one, she hadn't changed much from the clutzy high school girl Hoshiko's mother had hired fifteen years ago. If she was something like a part of the family, she was more of a younger sister than an older one.

"Kaori, did you spend all day yesterday scouring this place from top to bottom?"

“Yes!”

“And then you stayed up all night waiting for me to get home?”

“Yes!”

“You look exhausted. Take the rest of the day off.”

“But, mistress, I—”

“It’s no use. I won’t let you run yourself ragged. I can handle my own breakfast.”

“Ah, even though I’m supposed to be the one taking care of you...All right, thank you, mistress.”

Kaori wasn’t the most reliable maid in the world, but she tried to be. She was earnest, hard working, and—above all—a reminder of a happier time. Still, she no longer had the manic energy of a teenager. Maybe it was time to hire a second servant.

“She’d like being a senpai,” mused Hoshiko as she stepped into her slippers and went downstairs.

Going down three grand flights of stairs, through the grand entrance hall which boasted portraits of three generations of spacefaring ancestors, and past the grand dining hall with seating for several dozen, Hoshiko strolled into the simple family kitchen and found Yukari studying at the table.

“Morning, Nee-chan,” Yukari muttered abstractedly while taking notes.

“Good morning, Yukari. Wasn’t Touma supposed to take you to your entrance exams?”

Yukari checked the time.

“N-not yet. I still have a little time!”

With that, she began to write faster.

“You’ll do fine, Yukari,” said Hoshiko, “I believe in you.” And it was true. Even in just the past month, Yukari had matured at a pace that bewildered her oldest sister. Or maybe she’d already grown before the mission and Hoshiko hadn’t noticed until Tanikawa pointed it out.

At the thought of the janitor, Hoshiko halted her train of thought. That was a problem she’d have to deal with, but not before breakfast.

"Thanks, Nee-chan," Yukari said, absently, without looking up from her books.

Hoshiko quickly made and ate a simple, nutritionally balanced breakfast. When she stood up to rinse her plate, Touma barged in.

"Yukari-chan!" he yelled, "Ready to go?"

Yukari slumped in her seat.

"Yes."

"Touma," interjected Hoshiko, "You're not taking her dressed like that, are you?"

Touma was dressed in a pair of baggy, filthy, oil-splattered coveralls.

"Good morning, Hoshiko-chan. I was just working on the Cassandra," said Touma as he unzipped his coveralls with no hesitation, fortunately revealing a clean business casual outfit underneath, "Anything you want to say to our cute baby sister before she's officially a high school girl? They grade those entrance exams instantly nowadays, she'll be in before we get home."

Touma folded his coveralls and looked around expectantly, probably hoping Kaori was around to toss them to. Hoshiko held out her hand and took them.

"I've already said it," said Hoshiko, "I believe in her."

"Ah, that's classic! As for me, I don't know what to say, so I'll just gobble her up!"

Touma proceeded to scoop Yukari out of her chair and make pretend gobbling noises, the way one might with a very small child.

"Nii-chan! I'm not a little kid anymore!" protested Yukari.

"Someone has to be the baby," reasoned Touma, "It can't be Hoshiko."

Touma was rarely home. He'd missed seeing a great deal of Yukari's growth. Most of his memories of Yukari really were from when she was a baby. He was no doubt imagining some scene just like this from over a decade ago right now.

The eldest Yamanaka sibling was such a natural genius with all things related to spaceships that Hoshiko really couldn't blame him for leaving the management of the estate to her. He was so much like a copy of their father, it would have been a shame if he couldn't be a full time spacefarer. In spite of the recent trouble he'd gotten everyone into, Hoshiko was proud of him. She believed he could really make a name and a fortune for himself somewhere among the stars. Still, she wished he'd visit home more often.

"I won't forgive you if she's disqualified for being late," said Hoshiko.

"Can't have that," said Touma, "Let's get out of here, Yukari-chan."

"At least put me down!"

And so the two of them left the kitchen.

Hoshiko then returned to her room, brushed her teeth, and put on a t-shirt and shorts. Her next stop was up one flight of grand stairs, the Yamanaka family's extensive home gym.

"Good morning, Captain."

Noriko was pedaling an exercise bike at a low speed while staring at her phone. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed the mind-bending sight of graduate level math. Yukari wasn't the only one going back to school.

"Good morning, Noriko."

Noriko grunted and continued to look at the numbers. Hoshiko set about her exercise in the proper way: beginning with stretches, going through a short but intense strength routine, and following it up with a cooldown on the bike next to Noriko. Even though about forty minutes had passed by the time Hoshiko was seated next to her, the younger sister hadn't altered her pace or expression at all.

Hoshiko began to pedal. Over the next twenty minutes, Hoshiko realized something. Noriko wasn't looking at her study materials at all, she was just staring into space. Either she was only pretending to study or, more likely, she was trying to study but couldn't focus.

Hoshiko decided that now was as good a time as any to deal with the Noriko problem. She set her bike to the lowest setting and began her offensive.

"You've been at this for over an hour," said Hoshiko, "It's amazing you're not tired yet."

"Hm? Oh, I'm going pretty slow so it's fine."

Noriko set the phone down in the bike's cupholder and shook her head.

"It's always weird right after a mission," said Noriko, "It's like, um..."

"Like there's more distance between us?"

"Yeah."

"Even though there's not."

"Captain?"

"We're not underway, Noriko. I'm just Hoshiko right now."

"Hoshiko-san."

"You're already the most educated member of the family. When you finish that eight year degree I'll have to call you sensei or something, right?"

"I don't know about that."

"I'm just saying you don't have to be formal with me. We're sisters, and I respect you a lot."

"I respect you too...Onee-chan. A lot."

"Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Why do you believe in me so much?"

"That's—Why shouldn't I?"

"You've seen me at some pretty weak moments."

"It's not weak to be sad because you just watched your parents blow themselves up."

Hoshiko didn't know how to respond. Apparently that was what Noriko thought of when Hoshiko brought up weak moments. The conversation wasn't heading in the direction she wanted.

"Onee-chan," said Noriko, "I can't look at you without being aware...that I owe you a lot."

"You don't owe me anything though."

"You were only Yukari's age when you took over the family's business affairs. You've worked hard to make sure the rest of us could follow our dreams. And that's on top of all the work you've done to keep us all working together as a crew. I mean, how many families out there are just like Tanikawa's, where they let ten years go by without so much as saying hello?"

Hoshiko realized that the perfect moment was not going to arrive, and that this was as good a point as any to make her move.

"So you've got Tanikawa on your mind?"

Noriko's legs froze as a jolt ran through her body.

"Huh? What? Um, what's this all of the sudden? Did I look distracted or something earlier?"

"I just heard you invited him to be at the train station is all."

"Well, I-maybe. I did. And?"

"And you trust him? Even though he's...kind of a loser?"

"I mean, he's not, well he kind of is, but...maybe that's sort of why I trust him? It's like...I can show him my bad habits without feeling ashamed?"

"That sounds like he makes you a worse person."

"No, well, maybe that's not the right way to put it. Um..."

"So you trust him to come for you?"

"Well, he came for me before, on the alien ship. In retrospect it was kind of...cool? He said he believed in me, and, um, nobody ever told me that before--"

"I never told you that?!"

"I never doubted you believed in me, Captain! I'm sure it was just the situation, or something...Ah, you're getting the wrong idea! I'm completely giving you the wrong idea!"

Hoshiko was indeed getting an idea. An unsettling idea. What could make a smart, sensible girl like Noriko put any kind of faith into such an obvious loser? She couldn't be...in lo- like hi- have fee-

She couldn't finish the thought, but concluded that there was a possibility her sister was suffering from a certain condition

which was notorious for impairing the judgment of smart, sensible girls.

"I'm sorry, it's none of my business," said Hoshiko, standing up, "If you'll excuse me, I'm sure there's a mountain of paper-work waiting in my study."

"Okay. I'd better wrap up too."

Hoshiko had gathered enough intel to begin the next phase of her work on Noriko and the janitor. From here she would have to determine what steps were necessary to protect her sister's feelings.

V

Komori had something on her mind. Perhaps it was a trivial question, but it was something she wanted to consider seriously as she took her next step in life.

“Now that I have underlings,” she mused, “Can I do that thing where you use ‘kun’ with them even though they’re girls?”

That sort of thing always looked cool in anime and movies. She imagined it would give her a sort of cool big sister aura.

“Hang on, I am a big sister. Couldn’t I try that with Yukari?”

Komori stood up, faced an imaginary Yukari, and gave a casual wave.

“Yo, Yu-kun!”

Shirotako Yuusaku, the only male under Komori’s supervision, chose that exact moment to enter her office. The two of them froze. Then, averting his gaze, Shirotako held out a stack of papers.

“I have those files for you, Yamanaka-senpai!”

“Oh. Thanks.”

The new hire handed over the files and hurried out of the office. Komori pondered. Was that cool? It wasn’t quite what she’d wanted to test since Shirotako wasn’t a girl, but it was still pretty casual for a business environment, right?

“Yeah, it was cool. I think I’m gonna start doing that.”

Moving onto the next matter of business, Komori wondered whether or not she could get her kouhai to call her ‘Aneki.’ After all, if she was going for the cool big sister feel, she might as well go all in.

“It’s like ‘Nee-chan’ but more business-y, right?”

Komori imagined her eldest sister and prepared to try it out.

“Oy, Aneki!”

Kawashima Kako, Komori's immediate supervisor, chose that exact moment to enter the office. They both froze. Then, pushing up her glasses, Kawashima held out a hand.

"I'm here for those files."

"Oh. Here they are."

Komori handed over the stack of papers.

"Thanks..."

There was a pause. Kawashima put on a perfect poker face before continuing:

"Yamanaka-kun."

The manager turned on her heel and strode out. Komori was struck speechless.

"That was cool!" she gasped, "That was totally cool. All right, I'm definitely gonna do this."

Komori wasn't sure what exactly she was supposed to do differently now except that she was supposed to do it at the office, but she was beginning to warm up to the idea of having more responsibility. Feeling the urge to show her determination to work hard, she sat down at her computer and enthusiastically pretended to do the same busywork she always pretended to do. She was in the middle of running her fifth diagnostic on the company network when the door to her office opened once again.

"Ah, good morning, Hatsunori-san."

"Good morning, Yamanaka-san. How's the new position? Do you have any questions?"

"Um. Nope, everything's fine, boss."

"I'm glad to hear it. And I'm glad to see you back safe and sound from your trip as well. I heard it was quite exciting."

"Sometimes."

"I heard there was a little run in with our competitors from Daisangen."

"Yeah. We kinda blew up their spaceship."

"Ha ha! Morishita-san didn't tell me that."

"I see."

Komori didn't like talking to Hatsunori even at the best of times. Not that she had any real complaints, he just had an over-

whelming presence. It didn't help that he was the sort of person who never seemed to blink. Right now, though his manner was as mild as ever, he seemed especially intense.

"I heard there was even a little run in with...aliens?"

"I guess."

"You didn't have to touch them, did you? Ha ha, that would be gross, right?"

"No."

"Did anyone touch them?"

* * *

Miko was, for the first time she could remember, nervous. She'd never gone out to meet a friend before. Or was it presumptuous to consider someone she'd only just contacted last night a friend? Miko didn't often come to the space dock's cafe since it was a bit far from her low gravity chamber, but with all the work crews on the Argive actually inviting company over seemed impossible.

"Yamanaka-san?"

A bubbly, pink-haired girl appeared in the entrance. Miko turned, saw her, and jumped. She was tall! But on standing to greet the newcomer, Miko saw they were actually about the same height. Of course. That was why they were meeting.

"Soto-san?" she replied.

Soto saw Miko and ran over with a huge smile. Then she held out her hand.

"Call me Jun-chan."

Miko's apprehensions melted away the instant she shook Jun's hand.

"I'm Miko."

They sat down.

"Wow!" said Jun, "To think there was someone else with low gravity syndrome at this same space dock at the same time as me! What are the odds?"

Miko was aware of how sober her own smile must have seemed as she set her bag on the table and retrieved the files she'd printed.

"Not very high, but maybe higher than you think," she said, laying out the files on the table, "There's about thirty of us in orbit right now."

Jun picked up the files and flipped through them with wide eyes.

"Miko-chan, you did all this research just last night? You're amazing!"

"Not really. I was scrambling to get these done right up to the last minute."

Jun was about to respond, but her eyes fell on a certain profile and grew even wider.

"Eh, there are boys our age up here? Miko-chan, are we gonna make friends with them?"

"Jun-chan," said Miko, "I want to make friends with them all."

"That's...I've never really known anyone outside my family before. I would have never thought of this."

"Me neither. It wasn't until a little while ago that I met some people who taught me that I don't have to be alone if I don't want to."

The Beautiful Ones, who showed her that a world where she belonged was possible. Tanikawa, who told her it wasn't selfish to want that. She'd done her best to help Tanikawa in return, but his world was almost as distant to her as the Beautiful Ones'. As for those aliens, Miko imagined she could almost feel something of their presence in her forehead, as if that contact had left something behind. It was a little eerie, but she could usually ignore it.

"I want to help," said Jun, "I'll get us smoothies and then let's get to work."

Jun ran off to the counter and began to place an order. Miko was looking over her papers again when an unfamiliar figure stopped by her table.

"Ah, you must be Yamanaka-san."

"Hm? Yes. I'm afraid I don't know your name."

"Hatsunori. I met your sister last night."

"I see. Are you staying on the space dock then?"

"No, no. I'm heading back out soon. Pressing business on Mars, you see."

"I see."

"You see?"

"Yes."

Hatsunori conspicuously glanced at his watch and made an exaggerated shrug.

"Well, I'd better head out then."

Then, without warning, he reached out and mussed Miko's bangs with his hand. She distinctly felt the heel of his clammy palm make contact with her forehead. Upon withdrawing his hand, he chuckled and walked away without another word. Miko was speechless, and stared in the direction he went until Jun returned with those smoothies.

Miko recovered her mood quickly enough as the two of them worked out a plan for contacting everyone on the list, but she couldn't help periodically rubbing her forehead. Something felt off about it.

It was as though Hatsunori had taken something.

* * *

Noriko let the hot water hit her in the forehead and dribble down her face until it stopped tasting like salt. What an odd conversation with the Captain just now. First there was all that about the Captain herself, and then all that about Tanikawa? And all that about trust? Believing?

What exactly was she trusting Tanikawa with? To show up at the train station on a weekend? Why not? It wasn't exactly the fate of the world.

And yet...why? He wasn't family. And what about afterwards? It wasn't like they'd be taking regular smoke breaks together after she left town. The more she thought about it, the

more it seemed like a strange impulse to ask for that. What exactly had she been hoping to get?

Her heart was beating weirdly hard. Must be the hot water. Better finish up and get out.

Just then, she felt something cold on her upper arm. It fell on her bare skin with a light slap and squirmed disgustingly for the briefest moment. She flinched and spun around to face whatever was behind her, but saw nothing. Now the water was running from the back of her head down to her face as she stood in a fighting posture and scanned the room until her breathing slowed to normal.

She felt it again, this time on the other arm, and she spun around so hard she slipped on the floor and landed hard on her back. It was several seconds before she was able to breathe again, but by the time she sat up nothing else had happened.

For a moment, she thought she saw something green under the door, but when she blinked it was gone. Her glasses were with her clothes, and she wasn't sure if she'd actually seen anything. Probably not.

Noriko looked at her arms where she'd felt the strange coolness, but there was no sign of anything. It was probably just that the air had felt cold after the hot water. Or maybe it was because those were the spots where the aliens had grabbed her as they tried to carry her into the mothership. She'd felt a little unclean there since then, but that was probably just her imagination.

In any case, everything seemed fine now, so Noriko finished washing as quickly as she could. She wanted to get back to her studies.

* * *

Hatsunori looked at his palm and chuckled.

"I suppose I should let you get back to work, Yamanaka-san. Please continue to do your best."

"Yes, sir."

Hatsunori left, and Komori breathed a sigh of relief. Now, onto the next order of business: could she get away with putting games on her work computer?

VI

I went to my building's smoking area that morning, but the people I usually met there were gone. Apparently they'd moved out while I was away.

Life after a spaceship is weird. Walking down a crowded street is enough to make you feel like the last man on Earth, and buying a cup of coffee is downright surreal. The whole experience felt so strange, in fact, that when I saw Yamanaka Hoshiko seated at an outdoor cafe wearing a baggy trenchcoat, sporting Groucho Marx glasses, and staring at me I didn't see anything particularly odd in it. I simply waved and walked over to her.

"You failed," she said curtly.

"Failed what?"

"Can't you see I'm wearing a disguise?"

"Come on, you didn't expect that to fool me, did you?"

"If you had any decency, you would have pretended to be fooled."

"What is this strange standard you're holding me to?"

"Since you've already ruined everything, you might as well sit down."

"No, wait, hang on. Were you trying to spy on me?"

I said that, but I did sit down. Even though the Captain's true eyebrows were covered by the bushy false ones on her glasses, her gaze seemed as cold as ice. Had something happened? I thought we'd parted on pretty good terms the other day.

"Just think of it as an employee performance review. Tell me, what is your disposition toward my crew?"

"Hang on, can I ask you something?"

"If you must."

"I've been asked several times if I plan on staying with your crew."

"Yes?"

"What does that actually mean?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean what am I supposed to be doing right now? When we're not in space?"

"Whatever you need to do."

"Whatever I need to do?"

"Yes. Just live your life."

"And then?"

"In a year or two I might call to invite you on another mission."

"That's all?"

"What else?"

"In that case, sure. If you called me in a year or two, I'd probably come. The pay is good and I get along with everyone."

"In short, your disposition toward my crew is that you 'get along?' "

"Yeah."

"In other words, you 'get along' with my family?"

"I think so."

"Which is to say you 'get along' with my little sisters?"

"I guess."

"You guess?"

"I think so."

"You think so?"

"Yeah."

"I see."

The Captain nodded as though she were taking mental notes.

"And are there any..." she went on, her glare taking on a hawk-like quality, "of my little sisters you get along with particularly well?"

"Uh—"

"For example, just as an example, perhaps, Noriko? Would you say you get along with my little sister Noriko?"

Wearing a terrifying expression beneath the comical fake nose and glasses, this is what the Captain asked me.

Can I be honest with you? Can I be really, really honest with you? I think I mentioned something to this effect earlier, but just in case it seems I'm keeping up a pretense with you, let me be clear: I am not some clueless sixteen year old boy from a romcom manga. I was, by this point, neither ignorant of nor in denial of my feelings for Noriko. I liked her. I even thought that if I made those feelings known to her she would, at the very least, not hate it.

But I mean, come on. Someone like me? With someone like her? We might as well have been from different planets. When would I ever get the chance to talk with her outside of that strange, coincidental, once-in-a-lifetime adventure? Two years from now? In that time, she'd find someone else. Someone richer, smarter, more refined. In short, a better match for her.

"Well?" pressed the Captain.

Yes, and on top of all the above difficulties, Yamanaka Hoshiko, the most intense woman I have ever known in my life, was letting me know with all the crafty subtlety of a brick that she suspected and disapproved. So, though I'll drop the act with you, please try to understand my situation when I tell you that I kept it up with her.

"We get along," I said.

"You get...along."

"Yeah."

"Very well, that's enough on that subject. The next thing I want to see is your home."

"What?!"

"A professional janitor should have a clean home. How can I trust your work if your home is a mess?"

"You've seen my work on your ship! How can you not trust it?"

"Ah, so you take pride in your work after all. That's a point in your favor."

"Don't say that like it's a compliment!"

I was becoming exasperated when we were interrupted by a passerby.

"Ah, there you are. I've been looking for you since this morning."

I figured one of the Captain's business contacts had arrived and, with that excuse in mind, prepared to leave. But it was my shoulder the newcomer's hand fell on.

"You're Morishita-san's relative, right? That fellow who tackled four aliens?"

I had to crane my neck to see that the new arrival was that Hatsunori guy who was with my uncle last night.

"Uh, yeah."

"And this must be a friend of yours," he said, gesturing at the Captain, "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

The Captain, still wearing her cheap novelty disguise, nodded in silence.

"No, that's—"

But one look at the Captain's deadpan stare behind those stupid glasses dissuaded me from speaking.

"This morning I was saying that our third floor needed a new custodian, and your friend Yamanaka recommended you in the strongest terms," said Hatsunori.

"You mean Komori?"

"Yes. How would you like to come work for the Ryuuuisou Group?"

This conversation seemed sudden and unnatural, and on top of that his hand was still on my shoulder. I was about to shake it off and decline when the Captain spoke up in a ridiculously fake gruff voice.

"That sounds like a great idea. He'll take it immediately."

"Wow, really?" said Hatsunori, "That's wonderful. Could you have him swing by in an hour or two?"

"Now hang on a—"

"Like my life depends on it," said the Captain.

"Fantastic. I'll see you then."

Komori's creepy boss then proceeded to actually pat me on the cheek and vanish around a street corner before I fully comprehended what had happened. The Captain, still wearing those damn glasses, nodded sagely.

"What the hell did you just do?" I demanded.

"I seized an unexpected opportunity. Now I can have Komori keep an eye on you."

"Keep an eye— What do you need an eye on me for?"

"To make sure I can trust you."

"Trust me with what?!"

"Tanikawa, let me ask you again:"

The Captain glared at me. She slowly reached up, pulled off the novelty glasses, and slammed them on the table.

"What are your intentions with my sister?!"

"Noriko?"

"Yes!"

"Nothing, we just get along."

"Why did she invite you to see her off at the train station?"

"I don't know."

"And what's going to happen after that?"

I shrugged.

"I'll go back to my normal life."

The Captain stared at me and stood up.

"I feel like you're both lying to me."

"Both?"

I must have looked way too interested, because she scowled at that.

"It doesn't matter. You should get ready for your job interview."

"I hope you realize I'm shameless enough to not show up to that."

"Please? As a favor? Komori would be a NEET if I'd let her. I'm worried she'll slack off too much and get in trouble."

"Really? After all that, you expect me to believe you trust me to keep an eye on your sister?"

The Captain sighed.

“You’re not exactly a bad guy. You’re not bad at your job. You’re not totally useless in a pinch. But you’re so inconsistent and flighty. You haven’t held a job for more than a year in the past decade. How do you even do that in this economy?”

“Please don’t audit my employment history.”

“Noriko is from a respectable family. My family. And you...I could respect you a lot more if you’d stop running away from everything. It’s like you don’t have any faith in yourself or anyone else.”

“Captain...”

“We’re not underway. I’m just Hoshiko down here.”

The Captain—Hoshiko—scanned a credstick on the table and walked away before I could figure out how to respond to that.

“Crap.”

My uncle was wrong. There is someone who can make a sap out of me. There was no getting out of going to Ryuuiisou now.

VII

The Ryuuiisou building was a huge tower all covered with mirror-like panes of green glass. There was someone I was supposed to meet in the lobby, but I didn't see her until she called out to me.

"Yo, Dai-kun!"

I wouldn't have known that this strange nickname was meant for me if I hadn't recognized the voice. Bewildered, I scanned the lobby for its source until I found it by looking down.

"Dai-kun?" I asked.

"Since you're gonna be the janitor on my floor, I get to be your boss," said Komori proudly, "You can call me Aneki from now on."

"You're, like, six years younger than me."

We continued to talk as we boarded the elevator.

"Fine, fine. I wanna keep things casual with my team though, so none of that 'Yamanaka-san' stuff. Just call me Komori."

"I already do."

"Perfect. Ah, Tanikawa, my rose colored life as a young professional is just getting started. I could really get into this!"

"Get into what?"

"Now that you're here, I can really kick back without worrying about my office becoming a mess."

"Please don't let your office get as bad as the weapons control room."

"Oh, I can have you bring me snacks too!"

"What exactly are you a 'professional' at again?"

"Anyway, the bossman said he wanted to see you right away, so I'm taking you there first."

"You mean Hatsunori?"

"Yeah."

The elevator stopped, the doors opened, and we stepped out.

"What's his deal anyway?" I asked, "He's a little off somehow."

"I think he just looks like that. What, are you nervous or something?"

"No way. I'm only here because your sister talked me into it."

"What?! I bet she told you to keep an eye on me or something."

"Yeah, but she gave me the impression she wanted you to keep an eye on me."

"Ugh. We'll teach her to have a little faith in us, won't we?"

"Will we?"

We arrived at a door bearing a plaque with the name of Hatsunori Soutarou. Beneath the plaque was a sticker depicting a completed mahjong hand consisting of three hatsu and every souzu except for one, five, seven, and nine. Ryuuiisou. One of the rarest hands in the game.

Komori knocked, and we entered.

Hatsunori was pacing in front of a desk, staring at his palm. He looked up and grinned that odd grin of his.

"Ah, you're here, you're here! That's wonderful, wonderful! Come in, sit down. Sit down, both of you! It's time to begin, isn't it?"

Faced with this bizarre, jittery behavior, Komori and I both froze. Hatsunori let loose a strange growl.

"Ah, forget it."

With that, he rushed at me and grabbed my face.

"Where is it, where is it?"

Stunned, I cast a sidelong glance at Komori, who was frozen like a deer in headlights.

"Where...is...that...psychic...residue?!"

And when the heel of his palm bumped the tip of my nose, I felt something go out of me. He stumbled backwards and stared at his palm, which was now glowing green, in delight.

"This should be enough, this should be enough!" he cried,

"With the knowledge of the Beautiful Ones, and without their stupid hangups about beauty, my people can...my people can...!"

When Hatsunori began laughing maniacally and sprouting green tendrils from his face, I realized it was probably time to go. I grabbed Komori's hand, and my touch must have shook her out of her stupor because she started screaming. Five of the tendrils took on Hatsunori's face and began to sprout arms amidst flashes of sickly green light.

"Ah," sighed the Hatsunoris, "I couldn't handle it after all..."

I started to run, but another flash of green light seemed to stab directly into my eyes. By the time I could see again, I was somewhere else entirely.

* * *

When Tanikawa vanished, Komori realized it was probably time to go. With all the speed her short legs could muster, she ran out of the office ahead of a dozen carbon copies of Hatsunori, all tinted a poisonous green.

"Oh, my boss is an alien," groaned Komori, "Gah, how did I not notice that? Nee-chan's gonna think it's my fault our janitor got sucked into his face. Eek!"

Another Hatsunori appeared in front of her. She skidded to a halt and leapt for the nearest side door.

"You're getting pudgy, Komori," nagged the imaginary Hoshiko of her memories, "You have got to start exercising."

"That's right," agreed a phantom Noriko, "In a firefight, being able to run can make all the difference between winning and getting killed."

"It's fine, isn't it?" Komori had once naively argued, "I do all my fighting from the weapons control room anyway."

"I'm an idiot!" shrieked the real Komori of the present world.

The side door led to a stairwell. Well, at least it was all downhill. Not that that was much help three flights down when she was out of breath and she could hear the horde of aliens getting closer.

Then, she saw it. Standing ajar on the landing was the door to a janitor closet. Komori gratefully dragged herself in, shut the

door, and squatted down against it. Waiting there in the dark, wheezing as quietly as she could, she waited for the sound of running feet to pass. Once everything was quiet, she pulled out a phone and dialed a number.

* * *

There was indeed a mountain of paperwork waiting in Hoshiko's study. She was in the middle of working on it when her phone rang. Clicking her tongue in annoyance, she picked it up.

"What do you want?"

"Onee-sama..." squeaked a quiet voice.

"Who is this? Komori?"

"Yes."

"What do you want? I'm busy."

"Can you come pick me up from work? I'm in trouble."

"You got yourself in trouble already?!"

"Yes..."

"I can't believe you! Is Tanikawa there?"

"Tanikawa is gone."

"He got fired?!"

"Not exactly. You see—"

The call suddenly ended. Hoshiko glared at her phone. Did Komori just hang up on her? How irritating!

* * *

Komori felt tears welling in her eyes as she held the phone over her head and waved it around trying to find a signal.

"Are the aliens really jamming phone signals? I can't believe this! Gah, I was so nervous I couldn't explain anything..."

Komori reached into her pocket and retrieved a small, black object.

"Ah, I really didn't think I'd need this."

A needle pistol. Way, way less illegal than Noriko's laser guns, but unfortunately it had limited ammo. Still, if it could get

her out the front door, she'd be home free. Unless the aliens were already invading the outside world of course. No, the Ministry of Alien Control would never allow that. Agh, but the Ministry was a really secretive, shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later type of organization that didn't officially exist.

"Crap, escaping all these Hatsunoris just to run into those guys would be bad."

Maybe it was for the best that the aliens were jamming the phone signal. Agents might have swarmed this place by now if she'd gotten the chance to mention aliens over the phone.

"Right, well. As long as they get here after I escape, it'll be fine, right?"

Komori stuck her head out of the closet and slowly looked all around. Then she crept out onto the landing and scuttled down the stairs as quietly as she could.

VIII

Orange sand and red rocks underfoot. Pitch black sky and bright white stars overhead.

“Oh man, where am I?” I muttered to myself, “Mars?”

“No, I’d recognize some of the stars if this was Mars. I don’t think I’m in the solar system right now,” muttered another voice.

“I see,” I replied, “Wait.”

I looked to my left and saw Noriko staring at me. Hair down, shorts and a tank top. Can you blame me for staring back a little?

“Excuse me,” said a third voice, “Would you say this place has about the same gravity as Earth?”

“It wouldn’t have a breathable atmosphere otherwise. Why?” said Noriko.

“No reason,” said Miko, who promptly collapsed to the ground.

Noriko shrieked and ran to Miko’s side. I ran over too, though I didn’t know enough about Miko’s condition to do much more than look worried.

“Tanikawa, carry her,” commanded Noriko, “Get her off that rough ground.”

“Yeah. Good idea.”

Noriko ran off a short distance, looking around distractedly. Hurriedly, I stuck one hand under Miko’s knees and another under her shoulder blades. I was about to hoist her up when she whispered to me.

“Wait, Tanikawa, not like that.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Noriko is right there.”

“What? Can you not worry about stupid things when we’re worried about your health?”

"I don't feel so bad, just a little too heavy to stand right now. I'd be more comfortable on your back anyway."

"All right, fine."

I offered my back and helped her up. Once her arms were clasped around my neck I stood up, leaned forward as far as I reasonably could, and supported her thighs with my hands.

She was so light I could hardly believe it. Could this sickly girl really be feeling just fine?

Noriko turned from scanning the horizon and frowned at us.

"How did you two get here?" she demanded.

"Same way you did?" I guessed.

"I was just studying," she said, "Then there was this flash of green light and I was here."

"I was chatting with a friend," said Miko, "Or, actually she'd just stepped away for a moment when there was this flash of green light. Then I was here."

"You have friends?" I asked.

"You say that like you're not one of them."

"Well that's, um, not what I meant—"

"I'm just joking. Let's just say I'm working on making friends with some people who live in orbit."

"I'm really happy to hear that, Miko," interrupted Noriko, "But what was Tanikawa doing when he got here? Was there the same green flash?"

"Oh yeah," I said, "Well, you know Hatsunori? Komori's boss? He was sprouting a lot of green tendrils from his face, and then there was a flash of green light and then I was here."

"Did it not occur to you to mention that earlier?" asked Noriko with a scowl, "That's obviously got something to do with why we're here."

"I met a Hatsunori today," said Miko, "I had no idea Komori knew him. Actually, how could he have gotten to Earth so fast?"

"I thought I saw something green today," said Noriko, rubbing at her bicep, "I wanted to believe it was just my imagination."

A cloud of what must have been thick, black dust slid away overhead, revealing a harsh ball of green fire in the sky. At once,

the three of us became tinted green while the ground underfoot turned various shades of dull black, brown, and grey.

"I've never seen a star with so much copper in it," said Noriko as she shielded her eyes from the glare, "Are we even in our own galaxy?"

"Please don't say such scary things," I said.

Noriko grimaced.

"First thing's first, we need to get Miko back to space," she said.

"That's easier said than done, isn't it?" asked Miko.

"Maybe there's a city somewhere?" Noriko said, "I could probably get us a spaceship if there are any..."

As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but rocky wasteland. Noriko slumped.

"Miko, would it help if we could find a pool of water or something?" I asked, "So you could float there and rest a bit?"

"Maybe."

"We'll start with that then," decided Noriko, "You don't get this much oxygen without plants and algae, and you don't get plants and algae without water. Besides, we'll need water to drink too."

"You make it sound like we'll be here for a while," I said

"Let's not think about that right now," said Noriko.

Miko's breath in my ear took on a strange, nervous quality. Noriko, who had been looking at her sister with a worried expression, looked away. There was a pause.

"Um," I said, "Miko, how long will you...be okay for?"

Miko hesitated.

"A day or two."

I understood why Noriko couldn't look Miko in the eye. Something heavy and slimy twisted in my stomach as I thought about it.

"Well, we'd better get a move on then," I said, walking off in a random direction.

"Not that way," said Noriko, "Look, that way. There's something shimmering over there, it might be water."

“Yes, ma’am, right away, ma’am.”

Mechanically, I pivoted and walked in the direction Noriko had indicated. She sighed.

“Can you please calm down? I can’t do this on my own.”

“Yeah, just give me a few minutes,” I said, continuing to march like a toy robot.

“Oh, you’re so stupid.”

“I’ve never really been stranded on another planet before, you know.”

Miko’s breathing became steadier and more even as her weight, slight though it was, settled more fully onto my back. She was asleep. Could she really be that tired already? Spying the shimmer in the distance for myself, I picked up the pace.

* * *

Komori hesitated. This was the last landing in the stairwell. This was the door to the ground floor. She stared at the needle pistol in her hand.

“How hard could it be? I shot loads of aliens, like, a month ago, right? Same thing, just shoot them before they shoot me. Simple.”

Except that she’d have to manage her own evasive actions. And there was no armored hull between her and the enemy’s fire.

“Just run to the door, just run to the door, just run to the door.”

Hardly daring to breathe, she cracked open the door and peered out.

“Urgh—!”

That was her team! Her team was all bound up with green chains and being herded somewhere by the green Hatsunoris.

Shirotako’s eyes met hers. She prayed he wouldn’t call out to her, and thankfully he didn’t. Instead, his pleading eyes seemed to say:

“Please, Senpai, escape, and live on for the rest of us!”

Or at least that’s what she hoped he was trying to say, because she waited for the lobby to empty before making her move. She

ran for the exit as fast as her legs could carry her, but when she saw what was coming through the door she skidded to a halt so hard she fell onto her butt.

“Hey, aren’t you one of the Yamanakas? The one that works here, right? Man, what a lucky break. This kinda thing will be way easier with a hostage.”

Morishita Tarou plucked the needle pistol from Komori’s hand and picked her up by the back of her shirt collar. Komori squirmed in a manner strikingly like a fussy cat as she protested.

“Um, Morishita-san, w-we should go. I can explain, um please, let’s talk about this outside, m-maybe while driving away—”

“Won’t sign my deal, will you?” bellowed Morishita into the lobby, wielding Komori in one hand and a giant laser pistol in the other, “Well consider this a hostile takeover!”

Three aliens poked their heads into the lobby. Morishita grunted.

“Whoah, these Ryuuuisou bastards, they’re all green!”

“Run, run, run run run run run,” babbled Komori.

The aliens raised their weapons. Morishita dove to the side as the entrance shattered behind him. As he began to scramble back toward the entrance, Komori was grateful he didn’t seem to have the presence of mind to drop her. Even if her face did get smushed into the floor once or twice. Her relief died out, however, when more aliens ran into view outside and began firing into the building. Morishita ended up dashing up the same stairwell Komori had just come from.

“You brought armed goons to this, right?” asked Komori, hopefully.

“Um,” Morishita hesitated, “No.”

“Huh?! Even if there weren’t any aliens here, why would you try this sort of thing all by yourself?”

“The higher-ups think I’m getting too old for this kind of work. I gotta prove I still got it.”

“Isn’t that an insane gamble?”

"You'll never get anywhere in this world if you don't believe in yourself. Hey, what the hell am I carrying you for? Run for yourself, you brat!"

"Eek!"

Morishita pressed the needle pistol back into Komori's hand and dropped her on the stairs behind him. After a brief scramble to stay on her feet, she caught up and saw Morishita glaring at his phone.

"They're jamming this place?"

"Yeah."

"You work here, where would they be jamming it from?"

"Um, Hatsunori's office, maybe?"

"And where is that?"

"It's, um—"

Komori wheezed as a cramp broke out in her side. Morishita made a disgusted grunt as he reached back and picked her up by the back of her collar again.

"What the hell are you doing, running out of breath before an old bastard like me? Take me to that office!"

Dangling limply from the Daisangen thug's meaty fist, Komori meekly gave him the directions he wanted.

When they reached the right floor, he set her back down and readied his gun. Komori thought she readied hers too, but her hands were kind of numb. Morishita gave a countdown, burst through the door, and charged into the hall with a blind barrage of laser bolts. Komori ran after, saw an alien coming up from the side, and nailed it in the face. Then things started happening really fast.

IX

Another dust cloud covered the sun. The shimmering spot in the sand vanished as we got close to it. It was a mirage. Noriko looked like she was in pain before her knees hit the ground.

"Ah," said Miko, "Your feet."

Noriko looked over her shoulder at her bruised, bleeding soles and grimaced.

"I didn't have time to grab shoes when that green light came."

"Tanikawa, can you set me down next to her? And give me your shirt."

"Oh. Yeah, good idea."

"No," said Noriko, "I appreciate the thought, but your shirt is all sweaty and dusty. I'll just have to deal with it."

"You want my boots?" I offered.

"Those are way too big. Besides, you're carrying Miko."

"We should rest at least," offered Miko.

"I don't want to. We're on a time limit here," grumbled Noriko, "But there might not be any sense in going anywhere until we know where we're going."

Something green flickered in the corner of my eye, but when I turned to look at it there was nothing.

"What is it?" asked Miko.

"Nothing."

"No," she said, "There's something green. See?"

"Huh?" asked Noriko, looking up.

The green thing resolved into the form of Hatsunori Soutarou.

He flickered from green to pale to...

"Is that Komori shooting aliens?" I asked.

"Huh?!" asked Noriko.

"No, nevermind. I'm seeing things."

"We're all seeing things. Isn't that Komori's boss?"

Eventually Hatsunori settled on a sort of sickly translucence. His blank gaze was fixed on nothing in particular, but his finger was pointing in a very definite direction. Then he was gone.

"Did you both see that?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Should we go that way?"

"It's the only thing we've got to go on."

Noriko rose to her feet, but winced. I thought for a second, and then asked.

"Miko, are you holding on tight?"

"Yes."

I let go of her legs and held out my arms to Noriko.

"Come on. You're not going anywhere in a hurry." When Miko realized what I meant, she gripped my sides with her knees and gave a soft laugh. Noriko looked from my arms to my face and from my face to my arms, looking more and more incredulous with each moment.

"You can't be serious," she said.

"I mean, wherever we're going, you want to get there today, right?"

As if experimenting, Noriko shifted her weight. Then she winced. Then she sighed.

"Fine."

Refusing to meet my eyes, Noriko placed one arm between my neck and Miko's. I put one arm behind her thighs and another behind her shoulder blades. Then I was holding her.

"Oof," I grunted.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. It's just that Miko's so light I kind of wasn't expecting—"

"Are you saying I'm heavy?"

"No, no way. It's just my back. I'm old, remember?"

"You're not that old. Touma is the same age as you and he doesn't complain about his back."

"Does he carry you like this often?"

"That's not the point! I'm saying you're the one who needs to lose weight."

"Yes, ma'am. You want another promise out of me?"

"Idiot."

As Noriko hurled that insult at me, she pressed her cheek to my chest. I could have teased her about it, but somehow I didn't want her to pull away. Miko seemed to be asleep again.

"Get going already."

"Yeah."

I turned in the direction Hatsunori had pointed in and walked. As I walked, it became apparent we were approaching the rim of a valley. And as the rim of the valley receded before us, we began to see tall stone buildings hidden in the shadows below.

* * *

"Argh!"

"Die die die die die die die die!"

"Kyah!"

Komori marked the passage of time by the strange noises apparently coming from her mouth. It hadn't been very long, but she couldn't see Morishita anymore. Which way was the office again? Why was there a hand on her shoulder?!

"Hiiiiiiiiih!"

The hand yanked her backward through a door and let go. She stumbled and had to turn around to keep herself from falling. As soon as she saw humanoid shapes, she raised her gun and pulled the trigger.

Click. Empty.

"S-senpai?"

Shirotako's eyes were locked on the muzzle of the needle pistol. Behind him stood the rest of Komori's team, looking very much like the scared, fresh high school graduates they were.

"Oh. It's you guys."

Footsteps approached. One of the girls hurried to shut the door. Shirotako teared up as he hugged Komori tightly, and Komori yelped as her feet left the floor.

“Senpai, when I saw you were free I knew you would come for us. We all believed you would come save us. So when all the fighting broke out, we hid here and waited for you.”

One by one, the others joined in on the hug. Komori made a muffled grunt as her body was flattened and her hair was covered in everyone’s tears and snot.

“Uh, yep, yep,” wheezed Komori, “Just leave it to Aneki, I’ll, uh, get you out of here. Please put me down.”

Once she was back on the ground and had recovered her personal space, she took a deep, deep breath that seemed to reinflate her whole body.

“Okay,” she said, “Have you guys seen, like, an old guy? With a big laser gun?”

“He ran into Hatsunori-san’s office a little while ago. He should still be right across the hall.”

“Right across the hall?!”

Komori cracked open the door and peered out. There it was: the door to Hatsunori’s office. The coast looked clear.

“We’re saved,” she breathed.

Komori took a needle cartridge from her pocket and reloaded.

“We’re heading over there. On my mark, get into Hatsunori’s office as fast as you can.”

With that, Komori was off. She scuttled to the door, threw it open, and started waving at her underlings.

“Go, go, go!”

When everyone was inside, she slipped in after them and shut the door. Morishita was glaring at her with his arms half-buried in the drawers of Hatsunori’s desk.

“Who the hell are these assholes?”

Komori put her hands together, bowed several times, put her fist to her forehead, laughed as cutely as she could, and generally tried every trick she knew of to look apologetic.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m kind of their manager. Please don’t be mad.”

"Oh, so that's the real reason you wanted to come up here."

"Huh?"

"I get it, I get it. In the world of Japanese business, we believe in lifelong employment. That means the bond between manager and employee is unbreakable. To violate that sacred trust would be unforgivable!"

Komori, remembering very distinctly how she tried to sneak out of the building without her team, could only squeak out:

"Y-you have principles?!"

"Anyway, that's what I assume happened," said Morishita, "Because there's no fucking jammer in here."

Morishita looked out the window.

"And since I'm not seeing anyone by the entrance, I'm out."

"You're...out?"

Morishita looked at Komori's team of brand new office workers and laughed.

"Yeah, this whole thing's been a massive waste of time. Now that Hatsunori's an alien or whatever he's not gonna sign my deal. Good luck sneaking ten people out of here."

He opened the door and strolled out. Then he froze.

"The hell?"

Something green was wrapped around his wrist.

"Shit."

The tendril yanked Morishita out of sight. Komori shrieked as she scrambled to slam the door shut and put her weight against it.

"Th-th-th-the desk! G-get the desk over here!"

Shirotako and the others shoved Hatsunori's desk into the door right as the banging started. And as they piled on bookshelves and filing cabinets, the banging grew louder and more erratic. Komori's first instinct was to run around and panic, but when she ran face-first into Hatsunori she couldn't even do that.

She froze. He hadn't been there just a second ago. He was in the same spot and the same posture he'd been in when she last saw him. For a moment he looked green, and then he looked the

way he always did, and then it was as if he'd been replaced with a window to somewhere else.

There was Tanikawa, carrying Miko and Noriko. Was Noriko of all people really okay with getting princess carried like that? No, more importantly, could she escape through this? She reached toward the Hatsunori-shaped hole in the air, but when her fingers touched it, it vanished.

"Yamanaka-senpai? What was that?"

"Um, I don't really know. Hey, is anyone getting signal?"

The new employees took out their phones and shook their heads no.

"Right. That figures. I know some people who could get us out of this, but...urgh..."

"You mean the police?"

"No, no, no. Haven't you ever been arrested by the Ministry of Alien Control?"

"The what?"

"It's- look, it's pretty scary. I know some people with a space-ship and a lot of guns, I think that'd work out a lot better for us."

"Eh, you make it sound like you're a space pirate."

"Ehehe, you could say that. Have you ever heard of a man named Yamanaka Hiro?"

Ten blank stares were all the response she got.

"He was my- oh, never mind. Listen, just sit tight and leave it all to Aneki. Just as soon as I figure out how to contact my family, we're as good as out of here."

"How are you gonna do that?"

"Shut up and let me think," said Komori as she stared out the office window, "I'm working on it."

At some point it had gone from morning to late afternoon. The sun already looked a bit orange as it hung low in the sky. The banging grew even louder.

X

I guess I should describe the city in the valley. I should probably mention something about the mind-bending, cyclopean megaliths; the incomprehensible, non-Euclidian geometry; the shattered windows opening upon vast, tenebrous voids. I'm not really that eloquent though. It was eerie and lonely, and if I looked at one spot too long I'd start to get a headache.

The roads looked like twisted mazes leading into dark alleys somewhere out of sight, but there was also a main thoroughfare leading directly from the city gates to something that looked like a temple. All around that thoroughfare there were strewn countless shriveled objects that looked like dried vines. For all that, the roads themselves were spotless and smooth and gleaming like snow under the starlight.

If we were supposed to go somewhere other than the temple, I couldn't tell you where. The flickering purple lights in the windows were a bit intimidating, but they were the only lights we'd seen on this planet.

Miko seemed to be asleep, though her breath caught in her throat several times, almost like sleep apnea. Noriko was staring straight ahead and I couldn't see her face. I kept waiting for her to say something insightful, but she didn't. Since there weren't any other suggestions, I walked to the temple.

The wind picked up as we went, and the world turned green again. Looking up, I could see the dust clouds being whipped along on strong air currents, so that the sun and stars were both partly visible at the same time. Then as I stopped at the door to the temple I heard a loud rustling. Looking to the side, I could see walls of black dust and red sand blowing out of the alleys.

"Holy shit," I yelped.

I set Noriko down and threw both hands on the huge ruby

handles of the great stone door. Noriko, seeing the dust, caught on quickly and helped me pull. Miko clung tight as the grains of dust and sand began to pelt us, but it wasn't long before the door began to give way. Soon we opened it wide enough to fit through, dashed inside and closed it behind us against the storm.

The first thing I noticed about the inside of the temple was a cold, musty draft, like death was trying to breathe into my mouth. The second thing I noticed was the flickering, purple light that seemed to be coming from the bottom of a deep square stairwell. It looked like if we went down those stairs we'd arrive in a violet hell.

"Was this really the only place we could go?" asked Noriko.

"Did you see something else out there?"

"I don't know. I guess it's too late to check now."

I looked uneasily at the stairs.

"We could check after the storm passes," I suggested.

"Why bother? We don't even know what we're looking for."

"Down there," said Hatsunori.

I jumped about five feet into the air. Or I would have if I wasn't carrying Miko. Hatsunori's translucent form was pointing at the stairs. I could vaguely see Komori tapping away on her phone through him, but I didn't pay that much mind in the moment.

"Down there is the door through which I came to your world. The last scrap of energy on this world. It must have taken a very long time to recharge. I don't know how long I've been gone for."

"You again!" I said, "What the hell is going on?"

"Down there is the door through which I came to your world. The last scrap of energy on this world. It must have taken a very long time to recharge. I don't know how long I've been gone for."

"You're Komori's boss, right?" asked Noriko, "What's all this about?"

He repeated himself again.

"Do you remember me?" asked Miko, "We spoke not long ago. I think it was this morning. You seem different now. Are you sick?"

He repeated himself yet again.

"He can't hear us," said Noriko.

"He almost seems like one of the Beautiful Ones' projections," said Miko, "But wrong somehow."

"Do we really have to go down there?" I asked, "Noriko, I don't think I'll be able to carry you and keep my balance on those stairs."

"That's fine. The floor is smooth in here. It should be a lot nicer than that rocky ground from earlier."

Even though she said that, I could see the dark spots her feet were leaving behind. Noriko saw where I was looking and shrugged.

"No point in waiting around," she said, "I'll be fine."

I felt Miko pull her hand to her mouth and heard her cough. I heard her breath catch and felt her weight shift as she made to wipe her hand on her skirts. But her movements were unsteady, and I saw the dark spot on her palm.

"Miko?" I asked.

"It's nothing," she said, "But I agree with Noriko. There's no point in waiting around."

Far be it from me to stand in the way of democracy. I decided not to say anything that would make Noriko worried, and agreed that we should head down as soon as possible. As I mounted the stairs, I made the mistake of looking down. Something like a purple bonfire clearly showed a square, merciless floor of hard stone far below. Simultaneously resolving not to look down again and cursing the aliens for not using safety rails, I trotted down as fast as I safely could with Noriko not far behind.

* * *

The banging came from the door, the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Komori had wondered why they didn't just break through already, but now, whether they couldn't or wouldn't, she just couldn't care anymore. In the end the only plan she came up with was to write a text message.

"Nii-chan, I tried explaining this to Nee-chan but I don't think she understood..."

It was a paragraph describing the events of the day. If Touma received it, her family would come. She didn't doubt it for a second. She hit the send button. A circular icon spun around once.

"No signal. Trying again."

It spun again.

"No signal. Trying again."

Once she sent it, the Ministry of Alien Control would probably catch the keyword "aliens" and come too. At this point, even that would be better than nothing. Even so, she had faith that Touma could get here first.

"Mai-kun," said Komori.

"M-me?" squeaked Tachibana Mayoi, a mousey, skinny girl who seemed too small for her suit.

"Yeah you. Get the window."

"Yes, Aneki."

Komori grinned. Yep, she was a super cool boss. Tachibana opened the window and backed away bowing nervously. Komori punched the window screen as hard as she could, hoping it would pop out and fall to the ground in one smooth move. Instead, the mesh gave just a little bit before snapping back and sending the force of the blow right back into her arm.

"Ow! Uh, Yu-kun, the screen."

She was a little irritated when Shirotako simply unlatched and removed the screen instead of punching it.

"Aneki, what are you gonna do?" he asked.

"This," said Komori, winding back her phone for a mighty throw, "All I have to do is throw this thing beyond the jamming range."

Not that she knew how far the jamming range was. But hey, sometimes you just have to believe. She threw.

"Gah!"

When another Hatsunori-shaped hole in the air appeared beside her, she flinched. The phone slipped from her fingers too soon.

“Crap!”

The device hurtled toward the ground at a breakneck pace, but she had no idea if it would get far enough from the building before it was smashed to bits.

* * *

We all flinched when Hatsunori showed up again. It was only Noriko who slipped. What happened next must have only taken a few seconds, but I’ve relived it in my head so many times since then that it’s hard to be brief.

This time, I definitely saw Komori. She was turning from a window to look at us in surprise. Under any other circumstances I think I would have tried to reach through Hatsunori’s form to see if we could escape that way, but the idea didn’t even occur to me until days later.

Noriko’s slipping foot left a large smear of blood on the stair. Her knee hit the stone, but momentum carried her backwards again, leaving another scrape on her skin as she bounced over the edge.

She looked a little surprised, as though she’d only stumbled a few inches off of some curb. Heedless of everything, I hurled myself at the stairs and stretched out my arm as far as it would go, and I distinctly remember she didn’t look afraid at all. And when I saw that, I wasn’t afraid either. I knew, irrationally, that she had complete faith that I would catch her. And that faith was contagious.

My chest hit the edge of a stair and knocked the wind out of me. A hand grasped mine and yanked down violently, digging the stone corners deeper into my skin. A spray of warm blood hit the back of my neck.

Noriko cried Miko’s name before slamming into the wall, sending a shattered pair of glasses hurtling down the stairwell. Miko coughed, dribbling even more blood onto the back of my head. Even though I’d taken the brunt of the fall, enough of it had transferred through my body to seriously hurt her.

"Miko?" I asked, "Miko?"

She wheezed without speaking for a few seconds. Noriko looked straight up at her, her swelling eye not masking her deep concern.

"I'm fine," Miko said at last.

Then she leaned into my ear and whispered.

"Anyone who couldn't endure this much for Noriko has no right to claim to love her," she said, so quietly I could barely hear her, "Do you understand?"

"What's she saying?" asked Noriko.

"Hurry up and pull her up," said Miko, out loud, "I don't have all day."

"Yeah," I said, "I'm on it."

I was made aware that I was a bit banged up myself as I pulled, but soon both Noriko and I were on our feet. We realized Hatsunori was still there when we noticed Komori frantically waving and trying to say something, but we couldn't hear anything.

"Sorry, can't wait," I said, pointing to Miko, "We'll be over there soon. Hopefully."

And we staggered down the stairs as fast as we could.

* * *

"No signal. Trying again."

And the circular icon spun again.

"No signal. Trying again."

It spun again.

And again.

Until finally:

"Message sent."

Then the phone shattered to dust as it smashed into the concrete.

* * *

We all entered the cold, purple bonfire at the same time, but I found myself alone with Hatsunori in a sort of dark corridor.

“But by the time I returned, it was too late. Their faith in me was misplaced.”

He slumped. Then jerked upright.

“But by the time I returned, it was too late. Their faith in me was misplaced.”

He slumped again. Then jerked upright again. And said it again.

I wish I could tell you something about Hatsunori. What he was trying to do, why he was trying to do it, how it went wrong. Unfortunately, I can't ask him about it now. As far as I'm aware he's still there in that dark hallway just beyond space and time, muttering about something he failed to do. Over and over. Forever.

There was a light at the end of the corridor. I walked into it.

XI

Soto Jun was more of an expert on living with low gravity syndrome than she cared to be. She spent hours waiting for Yamanaka Miko to return to the space dock cafe. She berated herself for holding out hope so long after she'd clearly been ditched. Then she second guessed herself and was afraid that Miko would be mad if she left. In the end, she was glad she did wait. When Miko reappeared in the cafe coughing up blood, Jun knew right away that she probably had a medical pod in the low gravity chamber on her ship.

By the time Miko was situated in her pod with space dock medical staff all crowding her chamber, Jun was exhausted so she headed back to her own ship. She didn't know what strange things had happened to her new friend, but she did know one thing. When the president and founder of the Low Gravity Club woke up, she would have no fewer than two dozen new friends waiting for her. Jun would make sure of it.

* * *

Komori felt kind of bad about loading her team—along with the unconscious Tanikawa—in the cargo bay of the Cassandra while she squeezed into the cockpit with Touma, Hoshiko, and Yukari—now officially a high schooler. But the Cassandra was a pretty small ship; there just wasn't much space up front. Besides, the cargo bay had to be better than leaving them in the crossfire of that battle between the aliens and the Ministry. Maybe the decent thing to do would have been to join them down there, but there was something she wanted to talk to Hoshiko about.

“Oy, Aneki.”

“Hm?”

Hoshiko's response was both immediate and natural. Komori congratulated herself before proceeding.

"I think Noriko and Tanikawa like each other."

Touma grinned. Yukari's eyes widened. Hoshiko grimaced.

"I know that," she muttered, "It's been bothering me all day."

Knowing Hoshiko, Komori had figured as much.

"Why?" she asked.

"How can I trust an unreliable guy like that with my little sister?"

"He saved her life. Again, I mean. Today."

"What?!"

"You're gonna have to ask Noriko about it, I don't really understand what happened. I'm just saying."

"If you don't understand, don't run your mouth about it."

"All I'm saying is, whatever happens, maybe you should just let it happen. I mean, you trust Noriko to make good choices, right?"

"You sound way too mature right now."

"I'll try not to make a habit of it."

* * *

Noriko woke up on her bed, surrounded by study materials, to the sound of her phone ringing.

"Ow, my face."

She looked at her surroundings and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Guess I'm back."

Her face hurt way too much to write off what had just happened as a dream. She groaned and reached for her phone.

"Hello? Captai- Hoshiko. I'm fine. Yeah. Have you checked on Miko yet? Check on her before picking me up. I think Komori's right, she must be on the ship. I'll tell you all about it in person, you know we can't talk about stuff like this on the phone. What's that supposed to mean? Fine. I love you too, Onee-chan. Bye."

I sure didn't expect to wake up on the Argive two days after leaving it. The Yamanakas seemed to take it for granted that I would want to check on Miko. For what it's worth, I did want to check on Miko. I walked in on her chatting with some pink haired girl with the same build as her; apparently that story about making new friends was all true. More importantly, she was all set to recover from her injuries. Thankfully, since those were arguably my fault. I have no idea how she told that story to Hoshiko, because the Captain never confronted me about it.

There was also a matter of clearing up some things with some government ministry. I had to sign an NDA before I was allowed back on Earth. They also wanted me to sign something to get my uncle released for some reason. I regretted it pretty quickly, because the old bastard ambushed me at the spaceport and pestered me into going to yakiniku with him.

I wouldn't say we get along now. But now that I can get drunk with him and hit him back we have a sort of understanding. By which I mean we got into a drunken brawl and got kicked out of the yakiniku place. Apparently the higher ups at Daisangen forced him to retire after some hijinks at Ryuuiisou. I don't know what the hell someone like that is gonna do with himself if he can't do violence for a living.

Speaking of Ryuuiisou, the government forced it to liquidate after finding that most of its executives were some kind of alien clones. Hoshiko, working with a branch family, managed to snatch up most of the company's assets at bargain prices. I think that probably qualifies as insider trading, but whatever. When Komori asked her how she planned on managing half a mega-corporation on top of everything else, Hoshiko made her take it. Even though Komori has a secretary named Shirotako who does most of the work for her, she frequently complains about what a hassle it is. Shirotako seems to believe in her for some reason though.

I spent a lot more of that week with the Yamanakas—especially Noriko—than I thought I would. I couldn't even tell you what we talked about. Mostly I just hung out in her room and watched her study. Even though there was a lot of silence, it was a nice silence. It was the kind of silence that helped me build up the courage to do what I needed to do.

The day came to see off Noriko. She said goodbye to each of her siblings in turn before facing me with an expectant expression. She seemed to know what was coming. After a week of racking my brains, I had decided it was best to rip off the band aid as fast as possible.

"Noriko!" I shouted, suddenly pointing at her.

"Huh?"

"I like you! Please go out with me!"

She stared at me in wide-eyed disbelief.

"That's how you're doing this? What's up with that high school-like confession? Isn't this too embarrassing?!"

"You say that but you're already holding his hand," grumbled Komori.

To tell you the truth, I was feeling pretty embarrassed too. I endured it though, holding the position and grinning at her even as she kneaded my hand with both of hers and stammered angrily.

"You'd better call me every day! I seriously won't forgive you if you miss even a single day!"

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes, you idiot! I-I have to go. Bye everyone, I'll miss you. And screw you, Tanikawa, you'd better call me!"

"It's a promise."

Noriko ran off pursued by loving farewells from all of her siblings. I dropped my arm and sighed in exhaustion, allowing the embarrassing situation to hit me all at once.

"Ah, congratulations, Tanikawa, I've been rooting for you from the start," said Touma as the train took off, "Just know that if you hurt her I won't go easy on you."

"It's kind of scary how you said that in the same cheerful way you say everything," I replied.

"I agree. I'll beat you up if you make Noriko-nee cry," said Yukari.

"You guys are a bunch of saps," gagged Komori, "I can't believe I helped make this goofy crap happen."

All of the sudden, Hoshiko pointed at me.

"Tanikawa!" she shouted, "I want you."

I stared at her in disbelief.

"You're saying this? Now? After what just happened?!"

"Don't flatter yourself. It's just a job offer."

"What's the job?"

"We need another servant at the mansion."

"I can't do that."

"Why not? You've met Kaori, you'll get along with her. And I've seen your apartment, the way you keep it clean is like a work of art."

"Don't say that like it's a compliment."

"Tanikawa, how many times do I have to tell you? If cleaning is what you're good at then cleaning is what you're good at. That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"People look down on janitors. I don't want you to look down on me."

"You won't be a janitor. You'll be a butler. That may sound similar, but people look up to butlers. They're bastions of refinement; they help to manage respectable families."

"Have you met me? I'm not refined."

"I have met you. And in the five weeks since then, you've grown a lot. You've grown on me, and you've grown on all of us. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I respect you. More or less."

"We've all talked it over, Tanikawa," said Touma, "We're all in agreement on this. If you walk away here, it's because you don't want us, not because we don't want you."

"Well, this is all—"

“Besides,” Touma went on, adopting that scary quality again, “You don’t think you can go on being a half-employed janitor and be good enough for my little sister, do you?”

“Very true,” said Hoshiko, adopting her own scary quality.

“All right, all right,” I yielded, “I’ll take the damn job.”

“You’re not just saying that because they scared you, right?” asked Komori.

“No,” I affirmed, “I want the job.”

Hoshiko held out her hand. I took it, looked her in the eye, gave her a firm handshake, and stepped into the future.

It’s been about two years since then. Contrary to what Hoshiko said, Kaori is a bit cold with me. I don’t think she ever forgave me for already knowing most of the things she wanted to teach me. Apparently she was really looking forward to being a senpai, but what do you want from me? I’ve been a professional cleaner my entire adult life.

More importantly, Noriko has just finished her degree. Soon she’ll come home, and when she does I’m going to propose to her. Or at least, that’s the plan. I’m a little worried about it because Touma is hurtling back to Earth with some sort of news, and it seems like the kind of news that’ll send the Yamanakas on their next mission. I might have to pop the question in space. I guess that’s just what you get when you join a spacefaring family.

Oh, and I haven’t gotten any better at mahjong. I’m still working on it though.