

Space Janitor

by /a/non

I

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

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

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

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

Obviously, I accused him of cheating.

"Tanikawa," he said, "Are you saying you won't pay up?"

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

I'm not sure why I made my way to the space port. It was

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

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

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

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

"Are you an angel?"

I was a little out of it.

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

"Here's our stowaway, Captain," said Glasses, "What do we do with him?"

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

"Throw him in a medical pod for a few hours."

"Should we head back to Earth?"

"No."

"Captain, we can't just take this total stranger along."

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

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

“Ah, are you awake?”

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

“Uh, yes. What exactly is going on?”

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

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

“No.”

“No?”

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

“Onee-sama? Who’s your onee-sama?”

She blinked.

“There’s only one Onee-sama.”

“Huh?”

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

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

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

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

“He was our father. Why do you ask?”

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

“Not at all. Why do you ask?”

“Just making sure.”

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

“Miko, is he awake yet?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see?”

“Of course.”

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

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

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

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

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

“How honest?”

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

Her scowl deepened.

“That doesn’t sound very honest.”

“More honest than space piracy.”

“What did you say?”

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

“Miko, is he awake yet?”

“Yes, Onee-sama.”

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

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

“Running from gambling debts.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Are you messing with me?”

“N-no, ma’am.”

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

“I believe I heard you say that.”

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

“Uh... well, that sounds fair.”

“What are your skills?”

“Uh...”

Several seconds of silence passed. She rolled her eyes.

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

“Yes, Onee-sama.”

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

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

“Touma’s quarters?!”

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

“But... Touma’s quarters?”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

“Yes, Captain.”

“And you, new guy.”

“I’m Tanikawa.”

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

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

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

“That is all.”

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

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

II

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

Yamanaka Hoshiko, captain of the Argive.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thankfully, a voice came from the open door.

"Ah, Onee-sama."

Footsteps scurried in, followed by a soft rustle.

"You too, Tanikawa-san, please stand."

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

"Miko, shouldn't you be resting in the low gravity chamber?"

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

"Then go. I won't let you neglect your health."

"Yes, Onee-sama."

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

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

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

"Y-yes."

"That was fast. Are you sure? You won't change your mind?"

"No, ma'am."

"No you're not sure?"

"No I won't change my mind."

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

"I'll volunteer to work for you."

"Call me 'Captain.'"

"Yes, Captain."

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

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

“Oh. Yeah, the mission, what is it?”

“Follow me to the briefing room.”

“Briefing room?”

“Mission briefs happen in the briefing room.”

I gave her a blank stare.

“Just say ‘Yes, Captain.’”

“Yes, Captain.”

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

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

“Good morning, Noriko,” said the captain.

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

“Good morning, Captain.”

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

“Yes, Captain.”

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

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

“Uh, I don’t have a pen and paper.”

“Then take notes in your head.”

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

“Do you recognize this name?”

“Yeah, Yamanaka as in the space pirate. Your sister told me.”
The captain looked annoyed, but nodded.

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

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

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

“But—”

She scowled.

“Yes, Captain.”

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

“How long is this gonna take?”

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

“Understood. Well, if that’s all—”

“Don’t get up. Let’s talk. What are you good at?”

“Uh...”

“Let me put this another way. What’s your profession?”

“Well, I don’t know about ‘profession,’ but, uh... sometimes I’m a part-time, uh, custodial engineer.”

“A janitor.”

“I wouldn’t use that word.”

“You clean things for a living.”

“When I have to.”

“Tanikawa, why are you being so evasive about this?”

“Evasive? Who’s being evasive?”

“You are. Are you ashamed of being a janitor?”

“I’m not a janitor. I’m a gambler. I make money off of mahjong.”

“Mahjong isn’t useful to me. Besides, you’re bad at it.”

“How would you know that? You’ve never seen me play.”

“You’re running from gambling debts right now.”

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

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

“C-Captain...”

“Will you keep my ship clean?”

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

“Yes, Captain!”

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

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

“Oh.”

She rolled her eyes at my dejected state.

“It really is more helpful than you realize. We were sharing cleaning duty between us, but we’re always so busy. Noriko and I spend hours plotting out courses and plans, and Komori spends almost all her time manning the shipboard defense systems. Yukari is taking her high school entrance exam when we get back, and she needs to spend more time studying. And Miko is too frail for manual labor. Besides, most planet dwellers don’t

have any skills that are useful on a spaceship. Even if you really were some kind of pro gambler, the cleaning would still be about all you could help with.”

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

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

“Yeah.”

“Good. You may leave now.”

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

III

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, it looks good."

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

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

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't mention it," said Yukari.

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

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

“Huh? She walked out.”

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

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

“So, Komori? There’s a fifth sister?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What?”

“Stay behind to do the dishes.”

“Huh?”

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

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

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

“Onee-chan...”

Yukari glared at me.

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

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

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

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

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

Noriko glared at me too.

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

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

At long last, I had a few minutes to just stand around and slow down. I reached inside my jacket for my smokes. I wasn’t sure what the policy on smoking onboard the ship was, but experience told me it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission.

My hand reached the pocket where I normally kept them, but my fingers closed around nothing.

“Oh, shoot.”

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

“Ah, Tanikawa?”

Noriko was poking her head into the dining room.

“What?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I cleaned it. You're welcome.”

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

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

“You didn't wash that thing for six years?”

“Of course not!”

“That's disgusting.”

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

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

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

IV

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

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

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

"Uh, sure."

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

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

"Oh. Is this a low gravity chamber?"

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

"Yeah, your sister said something about that."

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

"Are you the ship's tailor?"

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

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

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

"Of the ship?"

"Yes. Onee-sama is the captain, of course, but once the mission is over she'll leave the ship and live her life. And I'll still be here. Our parents bought the Argive for me, since I needed a low gravity chamber."

"I see."

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

“Sorry, I don’t mean to pry.”

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

“Is that why...”

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

“Sorry, I really don’t mean to pry.”

“It’s fine, Tanikawa-san.”

“Well, anyway, Yamanaka-san—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Uh, no, it’s fine, I—”

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

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

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

“I’d be happy to.”

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

“So how was your first day?”

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

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

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

“Yes. And you washed it?”

“Yeah.”

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

“I’ll take your work for it.”

“Say, Tanikawa.”

“Yeah?”

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

“She did.”

“And you followed suit?”

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

“And you refused to rise before she did?”

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

“I see.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah, no, that’s—”

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

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

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

“Huh? Well, I, uh...”

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

“It would sure beat being a janitor.”

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

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

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

“Sure.”

She put away her measuring tape.

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

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

“Is that so? Well, maybe.”

A voice from the doorway interrupted us.

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

It was Yukari.

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

Yukari did not come in.

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

“What’s the question?”

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

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

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

Yukari left. Miko sighed.

“Miko-san?”

“I’m kind of jealous of her.”

“Jealous?”

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

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

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

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

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

“I guess that makes sense.”

Miko smiled.

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

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

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

“I’ll see you.”

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

V

Life on a spaceship is weird. You just fall into a routine, you live from mealtime to mealtime to bedtime and the days just pass you by in a blur. I don't think I could name anything specific that happened for the next several days. There were no major messes to clean up, so I just dusted, swept, and mopped. That was my routine. Dust, sweep, mop. Eat lunch, do the dishes, go to bed. I didn't bother showing up for dinner or breakfast, and nobody bothered me for the dishes during those meals. I didn't have much in the way of conversation during those few days.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Does that count for anything in this situation?"

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

"Well..."

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

"There's dust on the baseboard. I'd get it myself, but it hurts to stay crouched down that low. If you stay about three feet be-

hind me and dust off the baseboard as you go, that would be helpful.”

Yukari saluted.

“Understood.”

Wasn't she just boasting about her rank?

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

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

“Most people don't.”

“Is this what you do all day?”

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

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

“Naturally.”

“Bastard.”

“Aren't you slacking off right now?”

“No. I'm helping you clean.”

“But you should be studying.”

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

“Aren't you the cook?”

“That's only spaceship food. I just stick the pellets in the rehydrator and food comes out. That doesn't count.”

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

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

Onee-chan's uniform or something.”

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

“Huh? Why?”

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

“Miko is scary.”

“Scary? Why?”

“She's so tall.”

“I'm as tall as she is.”

“Yeah, but you're fat.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut.

“I am not fat.”

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

“If you can.”

Yukari pressed her thumb into the wall and rubbed.

“Hey, Yukari.”

“What?”

“We’re about to reach the bridge.”

“What about it?”

“Your sister is probably in there.”

Yukari groaned. Then the door to the bridge opened.

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

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

“But Onee-chan... I’m so bored.”

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

“But I want to help Onii-chan too.”

The captain smiled.

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

The captain’s smile vanished.

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

Yukari trudged away.

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

“How so?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VI

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

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

“Huh? What happened?”

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

“Oh? Uh, did I? Um, I didn’t—”

“It’s that door right there.”

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

“Is there? So there is. I see.”

The captain pressed an intercom button.

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

“Good, good. Send him in.”

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

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

“May I ignore it too?”

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

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

The weapons control room was dark, but in its center floated a huge, translucent sphere of light. The sphere of light showed a chaotic whirl of spaceships, missiles, laser beams, explosions, and debris. In the center of the sphere was a chair, spinning around as its occupant controlled it in order to blow up the enemy spacecraft. That occupant was a short but well proportioned young woman, dressed in a dirty, oversized t- shirt and basketball shorts. On the floor there lay heaps of discarded junk food wrappers and energy drink cans.

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

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

“Is there?” she asked.

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

“Did you tell him he could ignore that?”

“Of course.”

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

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

I stared open mouthed at Komori.

“What’s the matter? Start cleaning.”

“Aren’t you just playing video games?”

“Yeah.”

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

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

“Oh.”

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

“Uh, sure. Just let me get my cart.”

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

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

“Cleaning up after your sister Komori, apparently.”

“Eh? Komori works really hard.”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

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

Then the intercom crackled to life.

“Komori-nee, can I study in here?”

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

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

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

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

“Ah, crap,” grunted Komori.

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

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

“Huh? Is that okay?”

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

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

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

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

“Uh, what about Yukari?”

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

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

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

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

“Komori, are you sure about this?”

But Komori was already out the door.

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

“Ah, Yukari-san.”

“What?”

“There’s a spaceship.”

“What?!”

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

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

“Huh? What was that?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Where’s Komori?”

“She went to the bathroom!”

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

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

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

“Uh... I’ll do my best!”

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

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

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

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

“Ah, yeah. Hop down.”

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

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

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

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

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

Yukari frowned.

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

The captain thought for a moment. Then she smiled.

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

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

Just then, a strange thought occurred to me.

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

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

VII

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

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

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

Noriko cocked an eyebrow.

"Is it?"

"Look around you, Noriko. Don't you recognize this region of space?"

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

"Do you recognize this type of ship?"

Noriko turned pale.

"Yes, Captain."

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

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

"So, without further ado, the Argive is switching to wartime doctrine. Some of you will be taking on additional duties and ir-

regular schedules. In particular, I want the main weapons control system manned at all times, and I want my operators well rested. Twelve hour shifts, on and off, main and backup. Yukari.”

“Yeah?”

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

“Can I really? Is that okay?”

“You’re ready for more responsibility, Yukari. You’re not a little kid anymore.”

“I can do it, Onee-chan.”

“Good. And... Tanikawa.”

“Huh? Me?”

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

“Ah... yes, Captain.”

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

“I’ll have someone show the two of you how to operate the turrets later. And Noriko, one of us is to be on the bridge at all times. Twelve hours on, twelve hours off, just like the weapons system. If we come under attack, we’ll need an active pilot right away.”

“Yes, Captain.”

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

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

“Please don’t actually use the full twelve hours just for sleeping. You’ll start to smell bad.”

“Fine.”

VIII

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

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

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

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

"How could you tell?"

"Uh, I could smell it."

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

"Ah, crap."

Noriko ran to her desk and dug through the drawers. When she drew out a canister, she ran back to the door and switched it with a canister from the white box. The light on the box turned green, and a spritz of air freshener came out the bottom.

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

"What do you want, Tanikawa?"

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

"Ah, Noriko-san, I'm a little surprised. You always seemed so, uh, serious, I didn't think you'd – well, what I mean to say is, um,

can I have one?"

"You smoke?"

"Yeah."

Noriko reached into her desk and produced a pack.

"I'll give you this if you keep quiet."

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

"Uh, I'd keep quiet either way, if you wanted me to."

"Yeah, right. Guys like you don't keep secrets for free."

"Guys like me?"

"Just take it."

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

"Thanks. Uh, why's it such a secret anyway?"

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

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

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

"I am a little surprised, though," I said, "Caffeine, tobacco, all that's missing is a fridge full of—"

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

"What?" she demanded.

"I didn't think you had a fun side, Noriko."

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

"No, no, I'll take it."

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

"Don't smoke in your own room, you understand?" she said,

"It's not safe. My room is the only space on the ship with a fume vent."

"Oh, do I have to come here then?"

"You may come here, but only if I'm present and awake, and only if you knock first."

"That's a lot better than I was getting. Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

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

"So, aliens, huh?"

"Yeah. Aliens."

"I didn't think aliens were real."

"Most people don't."

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

"Not normal. Not these aliens."

"The captain said you'd met these ones before."

Noriko rolled her eyes.

"If you're trying to get the story out of me, just ask for it."

"Oh, so there's a story, huh?"

She shot me a deadpan look.

"Ah, sorry, it's hard to be blunt here," I said, "I mean, the captain seemed to treat it like—"

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

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

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

"I think so, yeah."

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

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

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

"You don't think it crashed."

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

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

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

Noriko took another drag.

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

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

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

She pulled another cigarette from her pack.

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

Noriko clicked her lighter. I stared at her.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“You didn’t.”

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

“It’s fine. I was already thinking about it. It’s more relaxing to talk about it than think about it, I think.”

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

That’s when the intercom crackled to life.

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

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

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

“Okay. Just checking.”

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

“Tanikawa-san, do you have a moment?”

“I’m in a bit of a hurry, Miko. What is it?”

“We can talk more in detail later, but I was thinking that if you’re going to be fighting with us, you should know more about the aliens. I think it’s important to know what this means to us.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I’ve already been filled in.”

Miko blinked.

“Really? Was it Noriko?”

“Yeah. How’d you guess?”

Miko smiled.

“Who knows? Intuition, maybe? Anyway, do your best, Tanikawa-san.”

I did find the turret pod, and a little while later Noriko showed up in a huff. She showed me how to aim the turret and had me shoot at some asteroids. She explained how the turret pods were just escape pods with guns bolted to them, and warned that she would personally tear off both my ears if I ever pressed the big red eject button. Then she climbed out of the pod without

saying goodbye, and I assume she went to bed since she was now the night shift pilot.

I hung around in the turret pod for a while after that.

IX

I woke up to the sound of my name over the intercom.

“Tanikawa? Where did he go? He’s not in his room.”

“Huh? Ah, I’m in the aft turret pod.”

“Were you napping in the turret pod?” asked the captain.

“Uh, I guess so.”

“Even though I told you– ugh, never mind. You’re there. Stay put.”

“Captain? Are we under attack?”

“No, but we will be. If you’d been awake five minutes ago, you would have heard me announce that we’re closing in on my brother’s position. The area is swarming with enemy vessels. We’ll have to dash in, extract Touma, and get out of here as fast as possible. It’s your job to help keep the enemy off our tail, is that clear?”

“Oh, I see, I see? Is that all? Haha, okay–”

“Please keep the nervous babbling to a minimum,” said the captain, “We’re all coordinating over this channel.”

“Heh, Janitor-san sounds scared,” said Komori.

“I’m scared,” said the captain, “You should be too.”

“Geez, I know that, Nee-chan,” said Komori, “But you don’t have to sound like it.”

“Ah, I see them!” shouted Yukari.

“Open fire,” said the captain.

Loud noises sounded from within the ship. Outside the ship, I couldn’t see or hear anything. Space was full of darkness, silence, and asteroids. Then the ship banked to the left, and I saw a bright needle go flying by. The turret controls felt hot under my grip. Finally, I saw a grey and green cone with a flat top. My arms spasmed and jerked the turret straight at it as soon as I saw it, but

before I could press the trigger, a shot from the main weapons battery hit the enemy vessel and blew it up.

“Onee-chan, I got it!” said Yukari.

“No, I got it,” said Komori.

“Focus,” said the captain, “We’re fast and we’ve got a lot of guns, but we’re dead if they catch us off guard.”

“Onee-sama,” said Miko, “I think I see the asteroid.”

“Noriko, analyze it,” said the captain.

“Yes, Captain, that’s the one,” said Noriko, “Or at least, that’s where Touma’s distress beacon is coming from. Still, if he’s here I can’t see why the aliens are leaving him al- Ah, Captain, a weapon is being fired from the asteroid, I think it’s an excavation laser. It’s hitting enemy vessels. Captain, Touma is alive down there!”

“Of course he is. He’s our own brother, after all. Pinpoint where that laser is coming from, it’s probably the entrance to whatever cave he’s holed up in. I’m taking us in.”

The captain must have plunged the ship into a full blown sea of enemies, because all of the sudden I saw a whole lot of them.

“Ah, crap, crap, crap, crap,” I muttered as I sprayed laser bolts all but randomly. There were a few explosions out there, so I must have hit something.

“Geez, Janitor-san, that’s no good,” said Komori, “Your aim is all sloppy.”

The main weapons battery launched a barrage of fire behind us, to much greater effect than my own shooting.

“Tanikawa-san, take your time and aim properly,” said Miko, “I think it’s better to take fewer shots if it means you’re actually hitting targets.”

I imagined Miko calmly, cheerfully, and methodically blowing up hordes of aliens from the forward turret. Then I realized that’s probably exactly what she was doing.

“There are limits to that, so don’t freeze up back there,” said the captain, “Aft gunner is going to get more important as we get closer to the asteroid.”

With the initial shock of seeing a swarm of alien spacecraft worn off, I was able to take Miko's advice and actually aim. Yukari and Komori were taking out enemy vessels left and right, but they had the entire ship to worry about. For the space behind us, I was supposed to be taking more of the pressure off of them. So I tried my best.

It's a little hard to describe what it was actually like. I would take aim at a ship, press the trigger, then take aim again. It was strange just how silent the battle was. I'd hear a quiet click from the trigger, then a muted electrical noise from below me, and then no sound at all as an enemy vessel exploded in the distance. Pretty soon, I stopped feeling so nervous and began to feel like I was in a dream. The events around me felt strange and disjointed, and it was like my brain couldn't make the connection between the danger I was in and the bright needles that flew past the Argive as it bobbed and weaved through the asteroid field.

Then there was an enemy spacecraft within ten feet of me. It was a small vessel and it came up suddenly from below and I yelled in surprise and mashed the trigger. My sense of reality returned as I saw the debris of the small craft drifting away.

"Onee-sama!" came Miko's voice, "Something hit the forward turret pod. The gun won't work. I... I think I'm hurt."

"How hurt?" asked the captain, "Do you need help?"

"There's blood, Onee-sama. It's floating around like bubbles."

"I asked you if you need help. Say yes or no."

"No, no. That's too much trouble. I feel fine, I'm just a bit cold."

"Noriko, get her out of there. There's a medical pod in the low gravity chamber, right?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Good. Get her in it and then see if you can get that turret working."

"It's fine, Onee-sama. You need Noriko on the bridge. I'm sure there's a first aid kit—"

"Shut up."

"You sound harsh. Do I really sound that bad?"

“Just shut up, Miko.”

There was a nerve-wracking silence over the net. I focused on firing. Was it just coincidence, or had Miko’s pod been targeted at the same time as mine? The rate of fire from the main weapons battery seemed to increase. My eyes kept scanning the perimeter of my viewshield to check for anyone else getting too close.

“Captain,” came Noriko, “I’m in the forward turret pod. Miko is unconscious, but breathing. There’s a cut on her forehead, but it doesn’t look like she could have passed out from blood loss or head trauma. I think she just fainted.”

“Get her in the medical pod anyway,” said the captain, “Better safe than sorry.”

“Understood.”

“Geez, what’s Miko think she’s doing, making us all worry like that?” said Komori, “Just a little cut.”

“No, I don’t blame her. The area ahead of us is total chaos. It must be really scary in the forward turret,” said Yukari, “Miko must be really brave to go down there at all.”

I didn’t hear anything for a while after that until Noriko returned to the forward turret.

“Captain, Miko is sound asleep in a medical pod. I’m troubleshooting the turret now.”

I imagined Noriko in a pod just like mine, but with even more danger whirling around in all directions, and unable even to shoot at anything.

“Noriko, watch out for small craft up there,” I said.

“Hm?” she asked.

“One got pretty close to me a while ago. It was kind of scary.”

“I’m busy, Tanikawa.”

“Yukari,” said the captain, “Keep an eye out for small craft. They can be easy to overlook, but if one sneaks up close enough we’ll be in trouble.”

“Hey, why not ask me to do that?” asked Komori, “I’m a good shot.”

“Division of labor. You keep blowing up the big ones,” said the captain.

I still felt a bit uneasy for some reason, but the captain's next announcement calmed my fears.

"ETA to the asteroid, five minutes. Location of the cave is pinpointed. Once we get inside, the enemy will most likely abandon pursuit."

Five minutes. Just five more minutes. Five minutes, and then... well, I didn't know what would come next, but it would be a break from all this at least.

"Yukari, what did the captain just tell you? There's a small craft getting right up close to me," came Noriko.

"What? I'm looking up there right now. There's nothing there."

"It's right there. It's got some kind of pincers on the front."

"It could have some kind of cloaking technology," said Komori, "If that's the case, you'd only see it from the turrets."

"I don't see it on my sensors either," said the captain, "Noriko, get out of there now."

Then there was a loud grinding sound that I heard as much from the ship itself as from the net.

"Noriko! What happened?" asked the captain, "The turret pod is partly broken off!"

"Would that be why the exit hatch closed shut?"

The captain hesitated before answering.

"Yes. That hatch will snap shut when there's vacuum on the other side of it. What happened?"

"The small craft. It's got a grip on the pod. It's trying to tear me off the ship. Captain, what do I do?"

"Eject."

"Captain? What?"

"You can't climb through vacuum, and the main weapons battery can't fire at what it can't see. If the pod is torn off while it's still attached, we'll be crippled."

"What? Hey, this is crazy," said Komori, "What would aliens want to kidnap Noriko for?"

"What if I just took a shot in the dark?" asked Yukari, "I could maybe shoot near the turret, or, no, I might hit Noriko. Uh..."

“Uh, wait, um,” came my voice for some reason, “Aren’t we almost at the asteroid? Maybe the pod will hold out til we get there?”

“Noriko, you have to eject,” said the captain, “You know there’s no time.”

Noriko’s reply came in a whisper.

“Onee-chan...”

“Come back alive, Noriko. That’s an order.”

And then, a robotic voice over the net.

“Forward escape pod ejected.”

“Yukari, where’s that pod going?” asked the captain, “Don’t lose track of it.”

“I think it’s going to the enemy mothership. It’s headed aft.”

“Good. Tanikawa, you’ll see the enemy craft when it gets behind us. As soon as you see it, destroy it. Noriko should be able to pilot the pod into our cargo bay.”

“Huh? Captain, that’ll be an awfully close shot. What if I hit Noriko?”

“You might, but you won’t.”

“How can you possibly know that?!”

“It’s simple. You won’t hit my little sister because I’ll kill you if you do.”

I don’t know if she thought that would motivate me, but the cold iron in her voice only made my hands tremble.

“Captain, can’t someone else come back here and take the shot?”

“No. By the time anyone else gets there, they’ll be too far away for us to safely fire. It has to be fast, so it has to be you.”

“Tanikawa, you’ll see it on your left in a couple seconds,” said Yukari, “Be ready!”

I yelled something inarticulate as I swung the turret all the way to the left. Sure enough, I saw it a moment later. Noriko’s pod came up on my left, and for a few moments, we could clearly see each other. Noriko looked at my gun pointed at her and shook her head frantically. I understood why.

“Captain, I can’t take the shot!” I said, “The enemy is using Noriko as a shield, it’s keeping her pointed straight at me at all times.”

“Shit!” said the captain, “There’s nothing we can do then. We’ll have to figure something out later. Or hope she can escape on her own.”

“What the hell do they even want with her?” demanded Komori.

“I don’t know. Aliens have never bothered talking with humans. I have no idea what they want to do to her,” said the captain.

So there I was, stuck in a cramped turret pod, watching my only smoking buddy get dragged off by aliens for unknowable purposes. I had an idea. I knew it was a dumb idea, but consider my situation. Noriko’s room was the only place on the ship with a fume vent, and I had no idea if I’d be allowed in there without her around.

I hit the eject button.

“Aft escape pod: ejection overridden by bridge,” said the robotic voice of the ship, “To eject anyway, press the eject button again.”

“Tanikawa, what do you think you’re doing?” asked the captain.

“I could get closer,” I said, “I could get on the other side of them, get behind the enemy craft and blow it up without hitting Noriko.”

“That’s an insane gamble,” she said, “And you’re a terrible gambler.”

“There’s no such thing as a good or a bad gambler,” I said, “Sometimes you’re lucky, and sometimes you’re not.”

“Can you even pilot that thing?”

“There’s a joystick looking thing under the turret controls. How hard can it be?”

“You are the worst kind of hypocrite,” said the captain, “You spend all your time trying to present yourself like you’re lazy and cowardly, and then on the spur of the moment you suddenly

want to do something crazy like this. I can't stop you from hitting eject again, but if you do, you come back with my sister or you don't come back. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Captain."

"You'll be good friends with my brother. You're just like him."

I hit the eject button.

X

There was a loud click, and then the Argive began to speed away behind me. I grabbed the joystick and jammed it forward as hard as I could. The enemy small craft and Noriko were just landing in the hangar bay of a huge, flat topped cone. The doors were closing, but the aft turret pod managed to catch up in time. In fact, I not only caught up, but zipped right past them and unceremoniously crashed into the floor. When the airbags had finished pummeling me, the exit hatch popped open. I took that to mean there was breathable air outside and pulled myself out of the pod.

Scattered around the hangar bay was a score of tall, thin humanoids, dressed in full bodysuits with opaque helmets. Over by the forward turret pod, four of them were holding Noriko by the arms.

Every single one of the aliens was staring right at me. What the hell was I supposed to do? I tried to run toward Noriko.

“Tanikawa!” she yelled, “The low gravity! You can’t just—”

Unfortunately, she’d spoken far too late. The hangar bay was about as low gravity as Miko’s room. My first step, intended to be for a hard sprint, turned into a long jump. I crashed into her and carried her way to the other side of the hangar. A pair of metal objects clattered on the floor next to us.

“Huh,” I said, “Those look like laser guns.”

And then laser bolts started flying over our heads.

“You dumbass,” said Noriko as she grabbed my wrist and dragged me behind something like a metal shipping container. Then she reached out from behind our cover and grabbed the laser guns. She handed one to me.

“Noriko, I don’t know how to use one of these.”

“What do you mean you don’t know how to use a laser gun?”

“They’re illegal in Japan.”

“So what? Aren’t you supposed to be some kind of scumbag?”

“Well that’s a bit rude. I mean, maybe, but I’m not the cool kind of scumbag.”

“Geez, you’re hopeless. I’ll make you practice with some of my guns when we get back to Earth.”

“Ah, that sounds nice. I’d like to hang out with you after all this is over.”

“N-no, no, no. I’m not inviting you to hang out, it’s just that you need some experience on the range. You’ll get into shootouts fairly often with this crew.”

“Am I staying on with the crew after this?”

“Are you not?!”

A laser bolt hit the wall behind us way too close for comfort, and we were reminded of the aliens currently laying down a barrage of suppressive fire against us.

“Well, maybe now’s not the time for career decisions,” I said,

“Anyway, how do we get out of this?”

“I don’t know,” groaned Noriko, “If the captain were here she’d think of something, but...”

“Noriko, aren’t you the first mate?”

“Yeah. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“That means that when the captain isn’t here, you’re the one who knows what to do, right?”

“Wh- huh?!”

“I mean, if you believe in the captain, and the captain believes in you, shouldn’t you believe in yourself?”

“Aren’t you misquoting some old anime?”

“Uh, maybe? I’m not sure.”

“Geez. You can’t even say you’re the one who believes in me.”

“But Noriko, I do believe in you.”

Noriko turned bright red.

“I think you’re a reliable person,” I said.

“Don’t say something like that so earnestly when we’re—”

An alien appeared around the corner of the container. Noriko shot it and cursed.

“I can’t think of anything,” she said, “We’ll have to surrender.”

She kicked the shipping container in frustration. The huge metal box shifted as though it were made of cardboard. Her eyes widened.

“The low gravity,” she said, “Or low to us, anyway. To them, this is just normal gravity. These aliens must be frail.”

“You’re on to something?”

“Obviously. Put your hands on the box. When I say go, push as hard as you can.”

I put my hands on the container. She did too.

“Ready... Go!”

Together, we thrust the container out into the hangar. There were a lot of sounds like snapping twigs, and then we were exposed.

“Okay,” I said, “What now?”

“Uh...”

Without explaining anything, she grabbed my hand and jumped forward. In the low gravity, she dragged me with one hand easily while blasting aliens with the other. Next thing I knew, we were diving into the aft turret pod. Noriko grabbed the joystick and we began to rise.

“Tanikawa, blast the doors!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I aimed the turret and pressed the trigger. And then we were free.

Space was oddly peaceful as we flew through it. The Argive had made it inside the asteroid and was nowhere to be seen. The enemy fleet had stopped firing and begun to retreat. I couldn’t tell you why, but I sure couldn’t complain either. Noriko didn’t say anything for a while as she flew us toward the asteroid. And then:

“Tanikawa.”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“Ah, no, no. I would have gotten blasted back there without you.”

“Shut up. I’d still be trapped there without you. Why would you come after me like that?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just... wanted you back.”

“Geez. How can you say something so embarrassing?”

“Well, you know, I wanted you to stick around for, uh, the fume vent. I don’t think I could smoke in your room anymore if you were gone.”

“Tanikawa.”

“Yeah?”

“I hope you stay with the crew.”

“I might.”

She smiled.

“Dumbass.”

“Huh? What was that for?”

“Idiot. Stupid janitor.”

I didn’t know why she was saying that, and I didn’t know why she was smiling as she said it. We didn’t say anything else til we pulled into the asteroid cave and landed. The exit hatch sprang open, so we figured there must have been atmosphere generators set up.

As soon as we stepped out, the captain stormed straight over to us, dragging along a man I’d never seen before by the ear.

“There she is! Look, there she is, Touma! There’s our precious little sister, who was in danger because you wanted to go exploring in a place you knew was swarming with aliens! Apologize! Apologize to Noriko right now!”

“Ah, sorry. Sorry about all that, Noriko. I’m glad you’re all right.”

Noriko’s eyes lit up.

“Onii-chan! I—”

For some reason, Noriko cut herself off and cast a strange glance in my direction. Then she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and smiled professionally.

“I’m glad you’re all right, too, Touma.”

Touma looked at me, and then back at Noriko.

“Noriko, who’s this guy? Is he your boyfriend or something?”

Instantly, Noriko grabbed him by the other ear and yelled something incoherent.

“Ow, ow, ow. Noriko, aren’t you being a little too defensive? I was only joking, you know.”

“Captain! Have you made him apologize to Miko yet? She bumped her head on the way here, remember?”

“Ah, good idea, good idea, Noriko. Let’s take him to her right now. Right now!”

The two sisters dragged their brother by the ears toward the Argive. Miko stepped up from behind me with a band aid on her forehead.

“Ah, where are they taking Onii-sama?” she asked, “I wanted to talk to him.”

“They’re taking him to see you.”

“Oh dear, there must be some sort of misunderstanding. I’d better go clear it up.”

“Good luck. They seem mad at him.”

“Before I go, I want to ask. How was your first mission with our crew, Tanikawa-san?”

“You’re asking me that?”

“Of course.”

“Well, it wasn’t so bad. The work isn’t too hard, and I think I can get along with everyone.”

“Tanikawa!” came a yell from the captain, “Are you messing with us?”

The captain and Noriko burst out of the Argive, still dragging Touma by the ears.

“You knew we were looking for Miko, and you didn’t send her after us?”

The captain let go of her brother.

“I’ll have your ears for this!”

Miko patted my shoulder.

“Congratulations, Tanikawa-san.”

“Huh? What on Earth are you congratulating me for?”

“You’re part of the crew now.”