

Translated by Takami Nieda



THE STORIES OF IBIS
HIROSHI YAMAMOTO

EVEN A MACHINE HAS TALES TO TELL.



**THE STORIES
OF IBIS**

HIROSHI YAMAMOTO

TRANSLATED BY TAKAMI NIEDA



SAN FRANCISCO

 **COLORSCOPE**

Ai no Monogatari

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To my wife, Manami

My deepest gratitude for your support and assistance
with the research of this book.

To my daughter, Mizuki

May your future brim with happiness.

PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

It was the most exquisite machine I had ever seen.

Spreading its enormous wings, it descended silently out of a burnished sky that would soon turn dark as the deep blue sea. At first I thought it was a crow, but as the ominous silhouette grew larger it appeared to be a human on a hang glider. Just when I thought I had finally managed to shake off my pursuers, it was a sight as frightful as a visit from the Grim Reaper.

It glided through the valley of high-rises, then detached its wings, tracing a simple arc as it fell fifteen feet to the ground. The slender body of the machine, wrapped in a rose pink and pale yellow suit, somersaulted in the air, its red hair flowing in the wind like fire. I stood there, forgetting my fear for a moment, mesmerized by the beauty of its movements. It landed before me on top of a rusted abandoned bus. A loud bang reverberated through the ruins. Its lithe body bent forward to absorb the shock of the impact, but it dented the roof of the bus nevertheless. The discarded wings continued their glide and dropped somewhere behind me.

Centuries ago, in a time when humans still prospered, the area had been called Shinjuku. The deserted buildings looked as if they might crumble at any moment. Most of the windows were shattered, the writing on the weathered billboards difficult to make out, and vines tangled up the walls. The towering buildings made the streets, which had been deprived of their purpose long ago, look like the bottom of a gorge. Weeds sprawled out of the cracks in the asphalt, while what remained of rotted billboards were scattered everywhere.

It was at this desolate place I first encountered it.

It slowly stood from its crouched position as the silver “cat-eyed” moon began to rise behind it to the west. Its movements were smooth and efficient. While its proportions were human, it was plain to see that it was a machine.

No human could be this beautiful.

Steadying its perch atop the bus, it thrust out its chest and rested its right hand on its hip as if to preen over its own beauty. In human years, it appeared to be in its late teens. It had bright red hair and wore hemispherical goggles resembling the compound eyes of a dragonfly. Emblazoned on its face was a tattoo in the shape of a flame. Its left hand gripped a long metal rod. Though not overly sensual in any way, its silhouette—from the swell of its breasts to its curved hips and thighs—formed a line that was a thing of beauty. It wore something like a two-toned racing suit made of shiny artificial leather, but the areas from the neck to its breasts as well as the sides of its hips were naked. Not “naked” was the wrong expression. Even the parts that looked like skin were made of a soft artificial material and unmistakably part of its cover.

“Storyteller.” It uttered my nickname in a clear, sweet voice. A smile came across its innocent, girlish face as if it were challenging me. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Taking a step forward, it jumped off the bus onto the cracked asphalt, at which point I noticed that it was roughly my height. Only then was I finally set free from my stupor. I threw down my heavy knapsack, hefted my rod, and dropped into a fighting stance.

Most people think robots are indestructible. Large work machines are definitely not something human hands can destroy. But it is possible to destroy smaller robots and androids. Against them, you always have a fighting chance so long as you don’t get grabbed. A good bash with a heavy blunt weapon can crack their thin plastic covers. The bipedal ones can easily be brought down with a tackle. Even better is to aim for the joints. A favorite move of mine is to first destroy a robot’s camera eye by robbing it of its sight. Then I knock it down by bashing its knee joint and I jam my rod in the seam between the armor plates to finish it off. That is how I’ve destroyed dozens of machines in the past.

This one before me was clearly the kind with an endoskeleton, that is, the kind with only a so protective cover. Though it looked agile, it also had to be vulnerable to a blunt strike. I might be able to take it down.

“I don’t want to fight,” it said. Taking a look at my hostile stance, it reached out with its right hand and smiled. It gestured in a way that was incongruous with the gentle tone with which it spoke. “I only want to talk.”

I didn’t believe it, of course. What kid in his right mind would trust a machine that had chased him down and told him that it only wanted to talk only moments after he had made off with some food?

I lunged forward and thrust my rod in its face. The blow was supposed to take out one of the cameras behind the lens designed to look like a human eye. But surprisingly, I missed. It had taken a step back and parried my rod with a quick half turn of its own rod. Such economy of motion.

I flinched for an instant but quickly resumed my attack. I swung my rod again and again in an attempt to bash its head. But it blocked every one of my attacks, smiling all the while. Try as I might I couldn’t get past her guard; it was as if there were an invisible wall between us. *Clang!* The clash of two metal rods echoed throughout the ruins. *Clang!* My hands began to throb and go numb. *Clang!*

Then I understood. This was no ordinary android I faced. It was a fighting machine. It wasn’t an enemy I could defeat without taking it on with all my strength.

“Hyahhh!”

I let out a battle cry as I charged and swung with all my might. Deflected yet again. But this attack was only a feint. The machine swung its rod to the right. Without missing a beat, I ducked down and turned in the same direction so I could slip just underneath where its rod stopped. We were close now. I wouldn’t take any damage even if it brought its rod straight down over my head. I knew that there would be a split second delay when it pulled back the rod for another strike. I would have to aim for the knee joint from behind before it could launch another attack.

But my rod slashed the air in a horizontal motion and missed. It had jumped. Had it anticipated my attack? Not only did it jump, it had sprung up into an easy backflip and now unfurled its body, a foot arcing toward my head. That look of amusement on its face in the instant it was suspended upside down and over my head would forever be burned in my memory. It was all I could do to jump sideways to evade the kick.

It unleashed a roundhouse kick the moment it touched the ground. I had barely managed to dodge when its rod came flying at me. And when I’d dodged that, it followed up with another merciless kick. Without a moment’s reprieve to fight back, I could only continue my humiliating retreat.

Suddenly I was terrified. What was it with the way it moved? It wasn’t at all like a machine. Or human. It moved elegantly, but with a deadly speed that seemed to transcend the laws of physics. It was fully cognizant of what its body was capable of and knew exactly how to draw out its maximum potential.

My right foot got caught in a crack in the asphalt. Before I knew it, another roundhouse kick flew in a blazing arc toward me. Although not a direct hit, the blow knocked the rod out of my hands, and I fell backward to the ground.

A sharp pain shot up my ankle, and I let out a silent cry. I crouched down on the asphalt and grabbed my foot. The pain... Was it broken?

“Are you hurt?” it asked.

I looked up to find that it had raised its rod high over its head but had stopped in mid-motion. The excruciating pain kept me from answering. As much as I wanted to run, I was unable to even stand.

It lowered its rod slowly and squatted down next to me to examine my foot. I tried to punch it in the face, but it caught my weakened punch easily.

“I’ve called for a rescue,” it whispered gently. “Try not to move. It won’t help you to resist.”

Hot tears rolled down my cheeks. Half of the tears were brought on by the pain and the other half out of bitter disappointment in myself.

I had been captured by a machine.

INTERMISSION 1

INTERMISSION 1

I was taken to a building not too far from Shinjuku. A humanoid machine strapped me onto a stretcher, and I was carried away in an unmanned helicopter.

As I gritted my teeth in pain, I was afraid. What was going to happen to me? The grown-ups in the colonies told terrifying stories at night about what happened to people captured by the machines. I had grown up listening to those stories about how the captives were skinned alive, or turned into cyborgs, or how their bodies were melted with acid, or their heads sliced open, electrodes inserted into their brains to have their personalities altered...

I had believed every word as a child. But as I grew into my teens, I had become more skeptical. None of the grown-ups had ever actually seen anyone being tortured by a machine, and anyone who had witnessed a scene like that would never have made it back alive to begin with.

In fact, as I wandered from colony to colony, I discovered that there were more than a couple of people who'd been captured by the machines only to be later released unharmed. Those people were reluctant to talk about their experiences though. Not only were they confused about being saved by the machines they'd come to hate, they remained vague out of fear that they might be ostracized for uttering anything favorable about the machines. But none of them appeared to have been experimented on or brainwashed. Regardless of what might have gone on in the past, it was obvious now that those stories were nothing more than legend.

Besides, the machines could have wiped out humanity ages ago had they wanted to. The human population had probably dwindled to a point that we were no longer a threat to them. They didn't have to kill us, or control us, anymore. Since the only losses they suffered were when the freight trains were attacked for their cargo of food and daily necessities, they left us alone.

But none of that alleviated my fear. That machine that looked like a girl had clearly come after me, knowing who I was. Just what did it want, and what did it plan to do with me? Had I been captured as some rare human specimen?

My dissection never took place. Inside a white room, a medical robot examined my foot—I saw a CT scanner, which I had only read about in novels, for the first time—and, after showing me a three-dimensional image, explained to me that my foot was not broken but the ankle dislocated. The robot reattached the joint and applied a thick white substance to my leg. The liquid bubbled and expanded, covering the area from my heel to my shin before it hardened. After wrapping the cast with tape, the robot informed me that if I kept my leg still, I would be up and walking in a couple of days. I hated to admit it, but much of the pain had subsided.

After I was treated, a nurse android the spitting image of a human wiped my body clean with a warm cloth and dressed me in some underwear and pajamas that felt like paper. Then I was taken to another room where I was laid down on a bed with a wire to secure my leg. Never had I slept on a bed so clean and soft in my life. Scenic paintings hung on the walls, and there was even a vase of artificial flowers on the table. Since robots had no need for a room like this, it was probably made for the humans they captured. Though the room was climate controlled and quite comfortable, I felt crippled both physically and mentally. I couldn't even get up because of the cast on my leg. There would be no escaping this place until my foot healed.

It was already dark. I was lying in bed feeling dismal when the door opened and the red-haired machine entered. Unable to sit up, I could only watch it come closer in that elegant way and sit on a transparent cube stool next to the bed. It held my backpack in its hands.

“Does it hurt?” it asked.

It tossed the backpack aside and crossed its legs like a woman. Resting an elbow on one knee,

leaned forward and peered into my face. Its innocent expression didn't at all match the flame-shaped tattoo on its face. I noticed that its eyes were azure like the summer sky.

From this distance, I could also clearly see its naked hips peeking out of the sides of its suit, well as its breasts. Suddenly I became embarrassed. I tried to tell myself that it was all nothing more than a cover made of rubber or plastic. But its skin looked so human that it was difficult to put the illusion out of my mind.

As embarrassed as I was, I was struck with a thought. I could understand the need for nursing androids to look human. But where was the need for a fighting machine to look like a girl? Of what use were those breasts to a machine?

“Call me Ibis,” the machine said, pointing to its own neck. There was a thick plastic ring around its neck with IBIS engraved on it. Although I hadn't noticed during our encounter, I saw now that the same letters ran along the side of its suit.

“You can relax,” it said indifferently but with a surprisingly natural smile—so natural, in fact, that it seemed unnatural. “I have no intention of hurting you.”

I looked away, red-faced, and stared sullenly at the cast on my foot. “After you did *this* to me?”

“You attacked me first. You should have been able to fend off every one of my attacks. After all, I adjusted my strength according to your relative speed and technique.” It spoke to me like an older sister would to a younger brother.

“Are you saying you held back?”

“If I had fought you with all of my strength, I would have killed you in a matter of seconds. I only wanted to demonstrate that you were outmatched so you would give up. Your injury was an unfortunate accident.”

“You're lying!” I blurted out, my pride hurt.

“I understand why you might feel that way, but it's true. If you don't believe me, we can fight again when you're fully healed. I'll prove to you that you can never defeat me in hand-to-hand combat.”

I fell silent, mortified. In thinking back on the encounter, however, I had to admit that it had fought me as if it had something more in reserve. While I didn't have complete confidence in my skill with the rod, I had trained long and hard and thought I had gotten pretty good with it. But now this machine was telling me that I was no match for it...

“There's no need to beat yourself up,” Ibis said, as if it had read my mind. “I was created to fight. All of my functions have been optimized for combat. I'm not like humans, who were born out of an inefficient process of natural evolution. The time I've spent in combat simulations exceeds your lifetime dozens of times over. It's only natural that humans can't defeat me. The only ones that can are other machines.”

“Stop that.”

Ibis stared at me blankly.

“That smile. It's unnatural. Stop acting like you're human.”

“Then perhaps you'd like this better.” Suddenly Ibis became expressionless, sat up straight, and moved its mouth up and down. “I AM A MACHINE. YOUR WISH IS MY COMMAND, MASTER,” it said in a monotone. It quickly reverted to its original expression and smiled at me mischievously. “Seems like you're being mocked, doesn't it? It's true that I don't possess emotions like humans do. I'm merely role-playing a human. This expression functions not to reflect emotion, but is designed to give a good impression to humans. It's a kind of communication interface,” it explained. “Did you notice these eyes?”

Ibis pointed to her own eyes.

“They're not real,” I replied.

Even I could tell that. Those sky-blue eyes looked too unnatural to be camera lenses.

~~“That’s right. My camera eye is here,”~~ it said, pointing to the lenses on the goggles it wore on its head. “This is what is looking at you. These things that look like human eyes are nothing more than decoration.”

I recalled then that the nurse android had also worn something like headphones with lenses on its ears.

“It wouldn’t have made any sense to use one device as both the camera and interface. But it’s a necessary interface. There’s even an old saying: ‘The eyes are more eloquent than the lips.’”

“What are you trying to say?” I said.

“Just that since my expressions and tone of voice don’t serve to convey emotions in any way, I’m going to rather try to make a good impression on you. So I’m going to go on talking to you with this expression and in this tone. Now then—”

Ibis searched my backpack and made a rather deliberate show of taking out the bread, cans, and sausages it found inside. “You stole these, didn’t you?”

“To survive,” I replied.

“Yes, I understand it’s a necessary recourse for humans.”

Remarkably, it said nothing more on the matter. Ibis then pulled out a plastic waterproof bag. Inside was a book that I used regularly. Its blue cover had a solar battery that I’d used for over ten years and that had yet to give out on me. There was also a plastic case containing over forty memory cards.

“Don’t be offended, but I checked the contents of the memory cards.”

“There shouldn’t be anything illegal in those,” I said crossly. It was mostly stuff that I had downloaded from working databanks at various colonies. One memory card alone could store thousands of movies and tens of thousands of books, making my collection something of a mobile library. For years, I’d traveled from colony to colony, telling stories for others to hear. As hard as it was to believe now, there was a time when the literacy rate approached 100 percent. Now, people like me who could read were a rarity, which is why storytellers were so welcomed in every colony. During the day, I regaled the children with stories filled with adventure and mystery and the women with romantic stories of love. After nightfall, I narrated stories of a more adult nature to the men. Since my memory cards were filled with old movies and dramas, I also held screenings at the colonies that had projectors. Everyone marveled at the glorious civilizations of the past, at the stories of the time when humans ruled the earth.

“Yes, they were nothing more than old novels and films. The copyrights had expired long ago. There is nothing illegal about your telling these stories. Few people bother with copyrights anymore...”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Don’t misunderstand. I only became interested after I heard the rumors about you.”

“Interested?”

“The stories you are collecting focus mainly on those from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. Why is that?”

“Because that was the time humans were at their most glorious,” I answered instantly.

I had read plenty of history but found myself most drawn to the period called the Final Hundred Years. It was the century-long span between the 1940s and 2040s, the period during which the computer was born and surpassed humans. But in those hundred years, humans were able to bring about dramatic revolutions and advancements far greater than in the thousand years that came before. They invented the atomic bomb, popularized the television, sent men to the moon, and covered the earth with a computer network. While on one hand they took away the lives of hundreds of millions

countless wars, their immeasurable love also gave birth to billions on the other. The earth became overpopulated. Humans squandered their resources at an alarming rate and changed the face of the planet. They cut down trees, drove other species to extinction, and built overcrowded cities. They also made many movies and wrote many stories. And they acted out tragedies and comedies too numerous to count.

Then they created a machine with a will and fell to it.

“Aren’t you interested in the years after 2040?” Ibis asked.

“Why are you asking?”

“There isn’t a single story in your collection written after 2039.”

“They’ve been banned in every colony, destroyed mostly.”

“You can download them whenever you’d like if you access our network,” it offered.

“Your network?” I scoffed. “You must be joking! Who’d access that, knowing it’ll only be filled with machine propaganda!”

“You’ll find stories written by humans too,” it pointed out.

“Probably altered to suit your own agenda. You can’t fool me.”

“Oh.” Ibis revealed a sad look—rather, displayed a sad expression on its face to try to sway my emotions. “So you refuse to listen to the truth, just like other humans.”

“Not the so-called truth you’re peddling,” I said. “Now if we’re through here, I want you to leave.”

“I’m not done yet.”

“What, do you want me to tell you a story?” I said sarcastically.

“The opposite. I’d like to tell you one of mine.”

“Like I said, I’m not interested in listening to your—”

“No,” Ibis interrupted and put up a hand. “I won’t talk about the truth.”

“What?”

“I’ll give you my word that I won’t talk about the true history between man and machine.”

“Why?” I asked suspiciously.

“Because you don’t want to hear it. I won’t force you to listen to anything you don’t want to hear. The story I want you to hear is fictitious.”

“Fictitious?”

“That’s right. It wasn’t in any of your memory cards. A story you probably don’t know. It wasn’t written by a machine either. It’s a story written by a human during the end of the twentieth century or the beginning of the twenty-first century, long before a truly self-conscious AI was born. Now that shouldn’t violate your taboo.” Ibis produced a new memory card from somewhere and toyed with it. “Well? Don’t you want to hear it?”

Ibis let out a chuckle. Where had it learned that expression? That devilish smile and the silver canines pinched between its fingers smelled like a trap.

“Why did you bring that here?” I asked.

“Because I wanted you to hear it. Like I told you when we first met. I only want to talk.”

“Why should I have to hear it?”

“It’s a good story.”

“And you chased me around for that?”

“Yes.”

“Then give it to me. I’ll read it myself.”

“No, I’m going to read it to you,” it insisted.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t trust you. You say you’ll read it, but then you might just toss it aside. I can only be certain if I read it to you. There’s also another reason.”

“What is it?”

Ibis flashed its white teeth and smiled. “It’s fun to tell stories to humans.”

I groaned to myself. Just how much of what it said could I believe? And to begin with, were machines capable of feeling that something was *fun*? It could be trying to indoctrinate me with useless propaganda. Maybe it intended to brainwash me and use me to spread its machine ideology to other humans. But that was too obvious and idiotic a plan. My thinking wasn’t going to change just because I was made to hear a story. As ignorant as machines were to the inner workings of the human psyche, I couldn’t believe that they were this stupid. In which case, perhaps Ibis had another purpose in mind.

My natural curiosity was piqued. I became fascinated by Ibis’s identity and enigmatic behavior and wanted desperately to figure out what it was thinking. I hated to leave a mystery unsolved. The impulse to learn what others did not know and did not strive to know—that was what had compelled me to leave my home colony.

If Ibis was acting out a calculated psychological move to arouse my interest, you had to be impressed.

“It’s really fiction? It isn’t real?” I asked.

“I’m not lying,” it answered.

“It’s not any kind of propaganda?”

“Perhaps that’s for you to decide.”

I made up my mind. *Okay, I’ll play your game.* I was bored and wouldn’t be able to move for a couple more days anyway. It was just the thing to pass the time.

“All right. Let’s hear it.”

Ibis nodded and inserted the memory card in the book. She opened the book on her lap and prepared to read.

“Why don’t you just download it into your head?”

“This puts me more in the mood,” she answered.

“You’re a strange one.”

“That’s because I’m a machine.”

Ibis looked down at the book, although it was the camera eyes on the goggles doing the actual reading.

“I should ask, are you familiar with Japanese customs of the early twenty-first century?”

“Sure. I’ve read plenty from that period.”

“And you’re familiar with *Star Trek*?”

“Yeah. It was a popular television series during the latter half of the twentieth century. What about it?”

“Have you seen the actual episodes?”

“A couple.”

“Then you won’t need any annotations. The first story is called, ‘The Universe on My Hands.’ It’s set in Japan in 2003, and also in space in the distant future.”

Ibis began to read in a clear, sweet voice.

STORY 1

THE UNIVERSE ON MY HANDS

The detective, wearing a gray coat, showed up at my door just when the high-speed shuttlecraft *Dart* landed on the tripolium mining base on Choudbury 1.

“My God...”

Xevale took one look at the brutality wrought upon the base and was struck speechless. Several corpses lay in a heap in the corridor on the other side of the air lock. The bodies were twisted, their faces contorted in agony and their arms outstretched toward the air lock. No doubt they had tried to escape the base by shuttle but died before they could reach the air lock.

“Any external injuries?” Xevale asked.

Nicole Cristofaletti held a life scanner over the bodies. “Negative,” she responded, her voice trembling. Her face looked ashen beneath the visor of her helmet. For a medic young enough to be called a girl, the situation was too much to handle.

“I’m not detecting any toxic gasses in the air.” The science officer Jian Jiji studied the readings from the ENV analyzer. “Radiation levels within normal parameters.”

“Keep your V-suits on,” ordered Xevale. “There could be microbes in the air.” He held out his stunners and led the away team toward the control room.

They found four more dead bodies inside the control room. The faces of the dead were twisted in agony, like those of the others. Xevale went to one of the control panels. Since it operated on the standard Federation system, he was able to work the controls without a hitch. He tapped on the panel and called up a damage report.

All green. There was no evidence of an attack from outside the base, nor was there evidence of sabotage from within. All systems were operating normally, and the report showed no record of an alert.

Was this the work of the *DS*?

Xevale’s mind filled with suspicion. They knew the *Doomsday Ship* had fled to this planet. Then there was the distress signal they had received from the mining base two hours ago. It was crazy not to assume that the two weren’t connected.

But what kind of weapon was capable of killing without leaving a mark on the bodies?

“*Celestial* to away team.” It was the voice of Captain Ginny Wellner on the comm. “Xevale, were you able to find any answers?”

“Nothing so far. What is the *DS* doing now?”

“The plasma storm is getting worse over here, and we’re losing our sensors. We wouldn’t be able to find the ship if it were right under our noses.”

A plasma storm was whipping around Choudbury, a pulsating variable star emitting a high-intensity electromagnetic pulse. Any electrical equipment classified level E or higher was affected by the storm. On this base, however, none of the robots were level E or higher, and all of the equipment lower than E was specially equipped with a shield. It was because of this punishing environment that Choudbury 1 yielded the precious energy source tripolium.

“We’re going to look around a bit more, Captain. We may find some survivors in the mining shafts,” said Xevale.

“Understood. Be careful.”

“Hmm...!”

I, Ginny Wellner, captain of the deep space research vessel *USR 03 Celestial*, took a big stretch away from the computer monitor and racked my brain.

“He sure has made things difficult as usual...” I mumbled to myself.

The security chief Xevale Belzniak was thought to have the most writing talent among the crew of the *Celestial*. A member since the very beginning, he had an abundance of technical knowledge and originality, often coming up with fantastic ideas. On the other hand, his stories were hatched only for his satisfaction and often ignored any previous plot development. Thanks to his recklessness, last year's Delta Space cycle had become riddled with inconsistencies and had to be concluded with one of those "and then I woke up" kind of endings. Contradictions had also surfaced in the Mutant Planet cycle, and then I got an earful from the other crewmembers, though I suppose I was partly to blame for not having kept a tighter rein on Xevale.

The Domsday Ship (DS) cycle currently in progress revolved around tracking down the ultimate weapon left behind by an ancient species that had been wiped out two million years ago. It was a sentient starship with the ability to repair itself and evolve. It was also programmed to destroy any ship it encountered. The story, suggested by the combat officer Jim Warhawk, opened with a crackling battle scene between the *DS* and several Federation battleships.

But the story had stalled about a month ago. Which is to say, everyone had forgotten that the *Celestial* was a research vessel with only the barest of weapons. We were pitted against a formidable enemy that not only had the firepower to annihilate four Federation battleships but the ability to evolve by assimilating the data from the ships it destroyed. There was no logical way that the *Celestial* could defeat it in a head-on battle. For this reason, the story dragged on with the research vessel only chasing the *DS* from star to star. One skirmish (written by helmsman Chad Est Baroudeu) against several unmanned fighters launched from the *DS* provided only a brief glimmer of excitement.

The one crewman I could count on at a time like this was Shawn Mornane in Maintenance. He had come up with some incredible solutions in the past when a story hit a dead end. But maybe he was busy in real life, judging from his declining number of submissions lately.

Science Officer Titea Peche ended up posting a great idea in the forums instead. What if we lure the *DS* to a planet that produces tripolium and blew it up, planet and all?

Various opinions flew back and forth over the forums. The chief science officer, Meyer S. Mercury, who was in charge of research, assured us that a concentrated shot with the graser could trigger a chain explosion of the tripolium on the planet. (At least that was the way it was written.) But how do we lure the *DS* to the planet? What if the energy source for the *DS*'s warp core was tripolium like the *Celestial*? That way, it would seem natural for the *DS* to make a stop at a tripolium-rich planet to replenish its energy.

Since Titea wasn't much of a writer, I took over the writing duties for that section. After learning that the *DS* was headed for the Choudbury planetary system, the *Celestial* went after it in order to carry out the plan. (Of course, Titea is credited for having proposed it in the story as well.)

As soon as the new material was uploaded, Francois DuCoq in the Steward's Department raised a question. Are there any humans on that planet? Meyer chimed in that there had to be. Robots did not function properly on the planet because of the fierce plasma storms around the Choudbury system, which meant that the mining equipment had to be operated by humans. How many workers are there? Maybe a couple hundred. We can't possibly accommodate that many on our ship. Then how about we say ninety?

It was decided that there were eighty-eight workers on the mining base on Choudbury 1. We needed to extract them from harm before we could execute the plan to blow up the planet along with the *DS*.

That was how the story had unfolded three days ago. And then Xevale came up with his plot proposal—one in which the *Celestial* received a distress signal from the mining base the moment it came out of warp and entered the planetary system—only today. And how the away team took the shuttlecraft *Dart* to the base only to find that the workers had all been killed by some mysterious

force.

~~“This story better have a resolution,” I said to myself, dubious about the whole turn of events. Knowing Xevale, he probably didn’t have an explanation for the workers’ deaths. He only liked to create these kinds of mysterious incidents.~~

I could just ignore Xevale’s plot submission. But then simply destroying the planet and the *DS* planned didn’t provide much of a catharsis. The story could use one more twist before the end. After thinking about it long and hard, I pasted the text written by Xevale onto a new web page, created a link from the contents page, and clicked PUBLISH.

Just as I opened a new tab on the browser to verify the changes on the website, there was a knock on the door.

“Coming!”

I left the computer running and went to answer the door. I couldn’t remember ordering anything by mail order. The only people that came knocking on the door on a late Saturday afternoon were either newspaper solicitors or some lady from a local religious group. *I’ll just get rid of them.*

Standing on the other side of the peephole were a young policeman and a balding middle-aged man.

I cautiously opened the door just a crack, and the middle-aged man asked, “Are you Nanami Shiihara?” He pulled out his ID from his gray coat and held it up in front of my face. Although I’d seen plenty of police IDs being flashed on TV, this was my first exposure to the real thing.

“My name is Iioka. I’ve been asked by the Niigata Prefectural Police to investigate an incident. Do you know a young man by the name of Yuichiro Tanizaki?”

Yuichiro Tanizaki—several seconds went by before I could retrieve that name from my memory. It was the name of Shawn Mornane in Maintenance.

“Yes, I know him,” I replied.

“Is he a member of your club?” the detective asked.

“Yes, what about him?”

“He killed someone.”

In that instant my mind stopped functioning. I felt nothing, not even shock. This story was so unrealistic that I couldn’t process it.

I could believe any other story. A sentient warship destroying four Federation battleships, a hyperdimensional vortex swallowing up planets, the vicious shape-shifting mechanoid reaper, the existence of the great Sower who scattered the seeds of intelligent life throughout the galaxy—for a story that I could suspend my disbelief. But Shawn killing someone...

I recalled Shawn’s face from that one time we met at last year’s year-end club gathering. Contrary to the impression I had of him from the forums as a chatterbox, he was a quiet, reserved-looking kid. I had a hard time connecting the phrase “killed someone” with the image I had of Shawn.

“Can I talk to you for a bit?”

Before I knew it, I had answered “yes” and was undoing the chain on the door. The policeman said “I’ll be on my way” with a bow and left. The detective took off his shoes and came inside.

Before sitting down on the cushion I put out for him, the detective took a slow turn around the center of the room, eyeing various things with a penetrating look. “Hmm...” he murmured. It was probably a habit that came with the job, but I couldn’t help shrinking in embarrassment. The room had bookshelves stuffed with science fiction novels, the piles of manga stacked on the floor, the model of the *Enterprise* hanging from the ceiling, the computer taking up most of the small table, a half-finished drawing, and the toy figures arranged along the top of the monitor were hardly the kinds of things found in a single woman’s room.

“Did you want to keep that running?” the detective asked, pointing to the computer screen.

“Oh, that’s not a problem,” I replied.

“But you’re on the Internet, aren’t you? Doesn’t that cost money?”

“No, I always keep the computer connected with ADSL.”

The detective gave me a blank look. Apparently he didn’t know much about the Internet.

“I pay a fixed fee, so it doesn’t cost extra to be online for long periods. It’s fast too. Actually, fiberoptic wire and CATV are faster, but those services aren’t available here yet.”

“Oh, I see.” The detective nodded but didn’t look like he completely understood.

“You wanted to talk about Yuichiro Tanizaki?” I asked timidly.

“Yes, that’s right.” The detective cleared his throat and opened his notepad. “Yesterday around four PM, he stabbed a classmate in the woods near his high school in Niigata City. It was in the morning paper—didn’t you read it?”

Come to think of it, I might have come across it in the paper. But even if I had read the article, there was no way I could have known that “one suspect, age 18,” was a reference to Shawn.

The detective’s report went something like this: The victim was Ryosuke Namikawa, a classmate. The body was discovered two hours after the incident. It was already past midnight by the time police identified Yuichiro Tanizaki as a suspect based on the account of a witness who saw a young man fleeing the scene. According to his mother, Tanizaki came home after the incident and seemed confused when he told her, “I did something horrible.” Then he took his cash cards, laptop, and other personal effects and ran out of the house. Soon afterward, his entire savings had been withdrawn from an ATM across from a train station. After questioning witnesses at the train station, the police suspected Tanizaki had boarded a bullet train for Tokyo.

“But why would he do such a thing?” I couldn’t help but ask the fundamental question. “Not Tanizaki...”

“Well, the matter of motive falls under the jurisdiction of the Niigata Prefectural Police,” the detective said a bit dismissively. “We’re merely tracing his steps to look for places he might go.”

The detective went on to explain that the address book Tanizaki left behind at his home listed only a few local names but many from the Kanto area. According to his mother, he was a member of some sort of manga club called The Celestial. That was when the Tokyo Metropolitan Police got the call from the Niigata Prefectural Police to conduct a joint investigation, which was why the detective was here to see me, the president of the club.

“So you think he might come to me for help,” I said.

“That’s about right. Has he tried to contact you in the last two days?”

“No,” I replied. “I haven’t received any emails, and I haven’t seen him either, of course.”

“Really?” His tone was so blatantly suspicious that I was slightly offended.

“Really,” I answered coldly.

“Can you think of any place he might go? Any club members he was especially friendly with?”

“I don’t think so. He isn’t a local member, so the only time we saw him was at an end-of-the-year gathering last year.”

“And he came all the way from Niigata for that?”

“Yes.”

“He must have been very invested in this club of yours.”

“I guess you’re right,” I replied, even as my face began to feel hot. It wasn’t because I was embarrassed; I was irritated by the detective’s provocative tone. He seemed intent on linking me and The Celestial to the crime.

“About this club,” the detective continued, “it’s supposed to be some sort of manga club according to the mother.”

“No, I’ll show you.” I couldn’t have him entertaining any strange suspicions. I decided to explain

everything to the detective in detail.

I turned to the computer and put my hand on the mouse. The screen saver vanished, and the Celestial's homepage appeared on-screen. The 2,040-foot interstellar starship. Its beautiful streamlined body, reminiscent of a dolphin in shape, gave off a pearly white sheen. The CG was a labor of love by the first officer Rafale Ardburg.

"The Celestial is both the name of the club and the name of this starship here. The members of the club are all crewmembers aboard the ship. We all call each other by our character names."

I clicked on the CREW icon to pull up a schematic tree displaying each section: Bridge, Navigation, Science, Security, Combat, Steward's Department, Medical, and Maintenance.

I clicked on BRIDGE first. The faces of the captain, first officer, and each of the section chiefs were arranged in a circle over the layout of the bridge.

"This is me, for example. The captain, Ginny Wellner." I felt a little embarrassed introducing myself. The red-haired intellectual beauty that appeared on-screen bore little resemblance to me. "You can pull up their data if you click on their faces. Sex, age, height, weight, abilities, personal history—not of the actual club members, of course. The data is for the fictional characters."

"How do you come up with the data?" the detective asked.

"You're free to make up whatever you like when you join. Well, I do have to veto certain character settings that are too unreasonable, like the galaxy's most powerful supernatural being or reincarnation of God, that sort of thing."

"How many members do you have?"

"Right now about sixty. About half of them live in the Kanto area, while the rest are scattered around the country."

I went back a couple pages and clicked on MAINTENANCE this time. I scrolled down to the bottom of the page, and Shawn Mornane's face appeared. Four feet, seven inches. Eighty-eight pounds. Blonde mushroom cut. He was an innocent, genial-looking boy.

"This is Tanizaki's character. I believe he joined the club two years ago."

"He's just a kid."

"He's of the Damage race, whose maturation rate is slower than that of humans. He possesses anti-ESP abilities, enabling him to shield himself against telepathic and clairvoyant powers. No other abilities to speak of besides that. He's part of the maintenance crew, so he's good with machines and has a shuttlecraft license. That's about it."

"So what do you do after you create these characters? Play some kind of game?"

"We write relay novels. We all come up with the stories." I clicked on STORY to pull up The Doomsday Ship cycle currently in progress. "First someone writes the initiating event, which I upload onto the website. The members read it and email me the continuation they've written. Or they can throw out possible ideas in the members-only forums. In the end, it's up to me to decide how the story progresses. I keep stringing together the ideas everyone sends in to create a complete story."

"Do you end up with a coherent story doing that?"

"Well, we usually have to negotiate inconsistencies. But it's not like any of us are trying to become professional novelists. We just enjoy the act of creating the stories."

I clicked on RECREATION ROOM next, and out popped a humorous picture of Steward's Department Marie Ouka with a cake about to fall out of her hands.

"This is where you'll find shorter stand-alone stories. These are stories written by one member, not by relay. There are also some novels and manga here."

"Did Tanizaki write any?"

"Yes. He submitted two short stories." One was a skit in which the protagonist Shawn rigs an automatic door to slide open and closed too quickly, causing the long-haired characters (and the

were many on the ship) to get their hair caught in the door. The other was a longer slapstick about beauty contest aboard the ship. Both were light comedies. “He also wrote a lot of the story for the relay novels. Shawn writes well and always comes up with good ideas to get us out of a sticky situation, so he’s very helpful.”

I got carried away and even introduced the detective to several of the stories Shawn had contributed to: The Aeon Headline cycle, about a search through ruins to uncover the mystery of The Sower; The Solomon’s Gate cycle, a time-slipping adventure to the Earth of the past; The Pleasure Satellite cycle, which amounted to a whole lot of hijinks from beginning to end, etc.

“So it’s all in fun,” the detective said.

“That’s right.”

“To escape reality.”

I was offended, but I forced myself to swallow my anger. I answered calmly, “I suppose you could say that.”

“Uh-huh.” The detective nodded as if he understood everything. “Wouldn’t you consider that a negative influence?”

“A negative influence?”

“There are battle scenes in those stories, aren’t there? Ones where you kill the enemy?”

“Yes...” I realized where the detective was trying to lead the conversation and felt nauseated.

“You also identify with your fictional characters and call each other by your character names. That’s how much your stories are mixed up with reality. You go on killing people in your stories, and soon enough, you end up wanting to kill in real life.”

“That’s not true!” I could no longer remain calm. “We know the difference between reality and fiction! And in the first place, Shawn—I mean, Tanizaki’s character—isn’t the type to kill anyone!”

“But he has killed someone.” My protest was silenced completely by the detective’s heartless words. “Excuse me for asking, but how old are you?”

“I-I’m twenty-nine,” I stammered.

The detective’s lips curled into a contemptuous smile. “I don’t mean to be nosy, but aren’t you embarrassed to be playing pretend at your age?”

I couldn’t speak.

“It isn’t healthy for an adult your age to be so invested in this stuff. There was a university professor on TV just the other day talking about how the brain gets dumber when people spend hours and hours a day on games and on the Internet. It’s because these people only have faceless interactions over email and forums and don’t know how to engage in real face-to-face relationships that all the Internet dating site murders happen.”

“You’re not...” Finally I regained the ability to speak. “Are you saying that it was our fault that Tanizaki killed someone?”

“Well, I couldn’t say so for sure.” The detective smiled. “But you’d be hard-pressed to say that the game to escape reality is a positive influence on a young man’s psychological development. Am I wrong?”

The detective went on half-lecturing and half-questioning for another half hour. Then he said, “Let us know if you hear from him,” and left after leaving me his card.

“To be so caught up in this nonsense” was a phrase my parents often hurled at me. Sometimes it was uttered within the club in a self-lacerating way. But this was the first time a complete stranger had said something like that to me. Though I understood it to be a common sentiment, it was still a bitter blow.

I felt confused. I couldn’t accept it. I didn’t want to believe that Shawn had murdered someone, let alone that we were to blame for it.

I summoned the courage to call Shawn's house. I needed to hear his parents' account of the incident.

His mother answered the phone. She was distraught and confused, and I had a difficult time calming her down and getting her to talk. I learned for the first time that Shawn had lost his father when he was in grade school and lived with his mother.

Shawn was a victim of bullying. He himself didn't understand why. Somehow he always became the target in the class, according to his mother. It was utterly absurd.

The bullying didn't stop when he entered high school. The bully clique enjoyed taking out their daily frustrations on Shawn, who offered no resistance. The group's leader had been the murderer Ryosuke Namikawa. The bully group was thoroughly underhanded. They didn't shake Shawn down for money, nor did they put a mark on his body. They taunted him mercilessly, poured corn syrup in his shoes, scribbled graffiti on his gym clothes, and put sand in his bento box to torment him. Although his mother had pleaded repeatedly with the school, the school authorities continued to turn a blind eye. She had also talked to the police, but they had sent her away, explaining that they were unable to act unless there was an incident.

The bullying only escalated. With every means of escape cut off, Shawn felt driven into a corner. He had repeatedly said to his mother with a pained look, "Namikawa is going to kill me." Then finally yesterday, he had left the house with a knife hidden in his bag.

It was after eight o'clock. After a somber meal of instant dinner out of a box, I opened the window to get some air and looked up at the night sky.

Unlike in my hometown in Gunma, the nights in Tokyo were bright, making the stars in the sky sparse. I had looked up at those stars as a child and dreamed of going there someday.

But I now knew that was an impossible dream. With the developments in space travel all but stalled in real life, I couldn't believe that the age in which civilians could take a casual trip to space would come before I died of decrepitude. Traveling to another planetary system at speeds surpassing the speed of light was physically impossible, and the probability of an interplanetary visit attempting first contact virtually nil. The human race would likely continue to be bound by Earth's gravity, only to die in obscurity without having learned of the existence of multitudes of intelligent species.

I nearly teared up every time thinking about it.

Science fiction, an escape from reality? It wasn't anything anyone had to tell me. But was reality all that wonderful to begin with? Was it all that worth confronting? The papers were filled with news of murders and wars. The blood of innocent people was spilled needlessly in the real world. Justice was not always rightly served. Sometimes a bad man, who had tormented many people, went unpunished and was allowed to live in comfort for decades until his death.

Nothing like that ever happened in the world of *The Celestial*. No matter what the crisis, the crew was able to draw from their skills and belief in one another to overcome it. The story always had a happy ending. Villains were punished, while love, trust, and justice emerged victorious.

Wasn't that the world as it should be? Wasn't it reality that was all wrong?

It was probably the same for Shawn. His reality was all too cruel to confront. His life as part of the crew of the *Celestial* had to be much happier. It was the reason why the stories he wrote were so filled with life.

But in the end, he had succumbed to reality. He had been unable to escape it and had been crushed by its horrible weight.

I recalled Shawn's profile. Was that boyish exterior a representation of his desire to go back to his childhood? Did his anti-ESP barrier signify the reality that no one understood his soul?

None of us had understood his loneliness.

But even if we had, what could we have done—told him “cheer up”? “Don’t give in to bullying? What power would such hollow words have against the hard wall of reality?”

Would Shawn come to see me? I didn’t feel that he would. After he had committed an act his character would never have committed, he had to be thinking that he had forfeited the right to be part of the crew. Having lost his place in both reality and in his dreams, he was probably wandering helplessly with no place to go. A high school kid couldn’t have much in the way of savings. A ride on the bullet train and several nights in a hotel and it would be gone. Then what would he do? Where would he go?

Would he choose death?

I felt frustrated; neither could I accept what was happening. That one member of the club—no, that a member of my crew was faced with such a sad dead end was something that shouldn’t be allowed to happen.

But I was powerless to save him. In reality, I was not Captain Ginny Wellner but an office worker at a small trading company.

The next morning, I dragged myself to the computer and checked the forums mostly out of habit. There were already posts in response to Xevale’s story that had been uploaded only a half-day prior. Many members had likely accessed the site on Saturday night, especially because of the extended holiday weekend.

“What if the workers’ deaths were caused by a psychic attack?” It was Francois in the Steward Department. “If the *DS* is a living being, then its brain is a living part too, right? Then maybe it could send out psychic waves.”

This proposal initiated a debate. If the *DS* had a mind, wouldn’t it seem strange if none of the telepaths aboard the *Celestial* sensed it? No, the *DS* was too far away, and they weren’t actively trying to detect it. But did the *DS*’s killing the workers psychically have any significance? Maybe it wanted to take over the base’s mining facilities in one piece.

A psychic attack.

These keywords suddenly flashed in my head like an electric shock. They set off a series of word associations, and the plot quickly came together in my head. Yes, if we make it a psychic attack...

It was an unbelievable coincidence, a kind of improbable opportunity that only happened in the world of space operas. Rarely did it happen in the real world. I had to take advantage of it.

I quickly recovered from my depression and spun my brain into overdrive. Any contradictions in the plot? Any holes? Okay, everything seems to check out.

I began to type furiously.

“It’s the *DS*!” reported Genevieve Lace, who had been monitoring the scanners. Her voice sounded shrill, putting the bridge on alert.

“Where is it?” Ginny asked.

“The third quadrant of Choudbury 1. It’s been hiding on the other side of the planet!”

“On-screen and magnify!”

The main screen switched to a close-up view. The eerie conch-shaped silhouette of the *DS* floated up through the plasma storm. Like a deep-sea fish, it emitted a phosphorescent light as it began to cut a path across the surface of the reddish brown clouds of the planet’s atmosphere.

“It’s moving toward the mining base!” Genevieve shouted.

“Away team!” Ginny leaned forward in the captain’s chair. “Xevale! Get out of there now!”

But it was too late. The sound of the away team wailing in pain echoed from the comm.

“Xevale... go... get out of here,” said Nicole, cringing as she fell to her knees against the fierce psychic attack that jolted her brain.

“Not... a chance,” Xevale said through gritted teeth. “The security chief leaves no one behind.”

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