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Author

Hiroshi Yamamoto was born in 1956 in Kyoto. He began his career with game developers Group SNE in 1987 and debuted as a writer and game designer. He gained popularity with juvenile titles such as *February at the Edge of Time* and the *Ghost Hunter* series. His first hardcover science-fiction release, *God Never Keeps Silent* became a sensation among SF fans and was nominated for the Japan SF Award. Other novels include *Day of Judgment* and *The Unseen Sorrow of Winter*. Aside from his work as a writer, Yamamoto is also active in various literary capacities as editor of classic science fiction anthologies and as president of To-Gakkai, a group of tongue-in-cheek "experts" on the occult.

Translator

Born in New York, Takami Nieda has translated Japanese titles for English-language publication, including Hideyuki Kikuchi's *Dark Wars: The Tale of Meiji Dracula*, Koji Suzuki's *Promenade of the Gods*, *M's Death Note: L, Change the World*, and Hayao Miyazaki's *The Art of Ponyo*. In addition to her work as a translator and screenwriter, she teaches writing and rhetoric at Highline Community College in Seattle.

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*Called Ai no Monogatari (AI's Story) in Japanese, Hiroshi Yamamoto's The Stories of Ibis is a grand tour of science fiction and an excellent example of how science fiction as a genre is collectively self-aware.*

*The Stories of Ibis is a framed narrative; in a world where artificial intelligences rule and humans are a minority, a wandering storyteller is captured by Ibis and told seven science-fiction stories about the development of AI in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The stories themselves are often about storyteller, and the role SF itself takes in the way societies tell themselves stories. Allusions to Asimov, James Tiptree Jr., Star Trek, Japanese childhood entertainments in the form of digital companions, and other bits of SF history abound. Yamamoto, a virtuoso, shows off his skill with nearly every subgenre of SF there is as part of The Stories of Ibis's metafictional conceit. "The Universe on My Hands," named for the classic Fredric Brown short story collection Space on My Hands, the first of the seven stories Ibis tells our nameless narrator, is one of these stories about stories, and is itself presented as a story about story from one storyteller to another. Dizzy yet? Yamamoto understands that the future will be dizzying, even traumatic, but also that it can be glorious. The Stories of Ibis takes a genre that belongs to the world and uses it to talk about the future of that world for a worldwide audience.*

### **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 stunner 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 mine shafts," said Xevale.

"Understood. Be careful."

"Hmm . . .!"

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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 Doomsday 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 Baroudeur) 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 lured 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.

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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, François 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* as planned didn't provide much 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 at 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 Ilioka. 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?"

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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 all 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 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.

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"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 4 p.m., 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.

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"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 top page of The Celestial 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."



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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 are for the fictional characters."

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

"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 a 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. Blond 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 Web site. The members read it and email me the continuation they've written. Or they can throw out possible ideas in the members-only

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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 there were many on the ship) to get their hair caught in the door. The other was a longer slapstick about a 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 sticky situations, 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?"

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"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 these 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 this 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.

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"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 murdered 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 starch 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 also had talked to the police, but they 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 visitor 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 to "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 a 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

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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 François in the Steward's 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.**

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"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."

Out of the six members of the away team, only Xevale was left standing, and him only barely. Jian was already unconscious, while the remaining four writhed in pain on the floor. It was at least 150 feet to the hangar where the *Dart* waited. Xevale would not be able to drag the five crewmen to the shuttle no matter how strong he was.

I stopped typing. The drug needed a name. I turned to the bookshelf and came across the name "James Tiptree Jr." I decided to go with "Retoptism J."

"Nicole, can you hear me?" It was the chief medical officer Franklin Eagen barking in Nicole's ear on the comm.

"Inject everyone with three units of Retoptism J now! Then inject yourself!"

"Y-yes, sir." Fighting the pain, Nicole did as she was ordered. Her hands trembled as she grabbed an ampule from her medical pack and set it in the injector. She pressed the injector against the connector on the upper arm of Xevale's V-suit. The pneumatic shot sounded and Xevale instantly lost consciousness and crumpled to the ground.

Nicole mustered all she had to inject the other four. After she managed to carry out her duty, Nicole pressed the injector up to her own arm. Relieved of her suffering, the girl fell into a dreamless sleep.

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"What was that, Doctor?" Ginny asked.

Franklin turned around to face her. "A last resort. Retoptism J paralyzes all tissue function, putting the body in a state of suspended animation. It also lowers brain function, so they won't be affected by the psychic attack."

"But that would mean . . ."

"Yes," Franklin nodded grimly. "They can only stay that way for thirty hours. If they're not injected with the antidote within that time, they'll all die."

Now this was getting good! I licked my lips. The lives of the six members of the away team were hanging by a thread.

The plan to blow up the planet could not be carried out unless they were rescued. Who was capable of rescuing them? There was, of course, only one person.

"Me, Captain?" After being called to the bridge, Shawn was taken aback by the unexpected proposal. "But I'm just part of the maintenance crew. . ."

"I know that, Shawn," Ginny cut in. "It's a dangerous mission, so I can't force you. Even as your captain, I don't have the right to compel you to take on a mission that exceeds your assigned duties. But you're the only one who's capable of pulling it off."

"The *DS* remains positioned over the planet," Meyer said, pointing to the main screen. "Chances are we'll get hit with its psychic attack if we try to get close. Without a way to block its attack, it's impossible to reach the mining base."

"You have the ability to protect yourself with an anti-ESP barrier," Ginny said to Shawn. "You're also licensed to fly the *Javelin*."

"What about Mr. Sword in Security? As an android, he should be able to—"

"The plasma storm is too strong," said Meyer, shaking his head. "No android could withstand it."

"Please, Shawn." Ginny looked Shawn in the eye and pleaded, "You're the only one that can save the six of them."

. . . I'll think about it, Captain," Shawn answered.



I uploaded what I had written thus far onto the Web site. I chose not to write the part where Shawn accepts the dangerous mission.

Shawn would have to write that part himself.

The problem was whether Shawn would read this or not. He had supposedly taken his laptop when he left the house. Writing and connecting to the net were the only reasons I could think of for using a computer on the run. If his laptop were equipped with an internal modem, he should be able to get connected from a cell phone or a hotel phone. Hoping that was the case, I emailed Shawn wherever he was to tell him about his appearance in the story.

I didn't want Shawn to die. I could at least be assured that he wasn't going to kill himself while he was reading and writing the continuation. If everything worked out, he might even reconsider.

There was a glimmer of hope. It was also likely that I was just spinning my wheels. But this was the only thing I could do.

"Please, Shawn," I said to the monitor before turning off the computer. "It's up to you now."

Eight o'clock that night.

I started up the computer again to find that I'd gotten an email. It was from Shawn.

"Yes!" Having not expected to succeed, I couldn't help but do a little dance in front of the monitor. It was the continuation of the story sent only thirty minutes ago. He had probably taken half the day to write it, as it was quite long. I began to read intently.

After taking on the mission, Shawn heads for Choudbury 1 on the *Javelin*. The *DS* does not attack, perhaps sensing that the *Javelin* does not pose a threat. The tiny shuttle makes its way through the plasma storm and lands on the mining base, after which Shawn drags the six members of the away team to the *Dart*.

The story was moving forward as anticipated.

Then the unexpected happens. Shawn declares that he will set the *Dart* on autopilot so he can fly back on the *Javelin*. Both vessels are precious to the *Celestial*, and Shawn himself has become attached to them, having done the regular maintenance work for the two crafts. He explains that he doesn't want either vessel to go up with the planet.

---

I was struck with anxiety. This was an unnatural development, as if it were foreshadowing some kind of trouble lurking around the corner.

My fears were justified.

Suddenly the *DS* begins to pursue the fleeing shuttles. Shawn changes the *Javelin*'s course to intercept the *DS* as a decoy, allowing the *Dart* and its six passengers to escape. The *DS* fires a tractor beam. The tiny shuttle is drawn in toward the *DS* until it is swallowed into the bowels of the enormous sentient ship.

*Shawn!* I felt something like an electric shock inside my head. Did Shawn really intend to die? Did he mean to put an end to his imaginary life aboard the *Celestial* along with his real life?

The story went on. As frightened as I was, I continued to read, carefully, so as not to miss a word of what Shawn had written.

**"Any word from Shawn?" Ginny's voice was fraught with nervousness.**

**The communications officer Natasha Libro worked frantically on the control panel to reestablish communication with the *Javelin*. "Neutrino communications is still online!"**

**"Shawn! Shawn! Can you hear me?"**

**"Yes, Captain . . ." Shawn's anguished voice came through on the comm amid a burst of static.**

**"What's your status?" Ginny asked.**

**"I'm inside the *DS*. The tractor beam is locked on, so I can't move . . . Detecting a scanner beam . . . scanning the *Javelin* . . . Probably collecting data so it can evolve . . . It'll likely dismantle the *Javelin* when it's done."**

**"Is there a way to destroy it? Any weaknesses it may have?"**

**"Captain, please listen . . . It's weeping."**

**"What?"**

**"What?" I shouted along with Ginny in the story. What was he saying?**

**"What are you saying?"**

---

"I can hear its thoughts penetrating my anti-ESP barrier. It wasn't a psychic attack...Its thoughts were so intense that they only registered as pain to normal humans. Yes, Captain, it's weeping. It curses the day it was born, its horrible fate of having been created to fight . . . its existence as the hated *DS*." Shawn sobbed as if he were experiencing the *DS*'s anguish. "It can't escape its fate even though it yearns to . . . It's been programmed from the start . . . can't resist its program . . . to kill the enemy . . . to take the lives of other beings . . . It's been crying out, cursing such an existence. Those thought waves were intense enough to kill humans."

Ginny was stunned by the unexpected revelation.

I was stunned by the unexpected revelation.

Shawn was superimposing his own situation onto the hunted and persecuted *DS*.

I'd believed we'd have a happy ending only if the evil *DS* were destroyed. But it turned out that such a resolution was nothing less than a death sentence to Shawn.

**"Please, Captain," Shawn pleaded through his tears. "Whatever happens to me . . . ease its pain . . . end its agony by destroying it with the planet . . . A happy ending . . . it's what the *DS* also wants."**

No! This was not a happy ending!

Shawn's story ended there, which meant that there was still hope. He had chosen not to write the ending. He was waiting for me to finish the story.

I swore to myself that I wouldn't let Shawn die. I would bring about a happy ending! As captain, I couldn't allow a valuable member of my crew to die. Never!

**"Don't give up!" Ginny shouted. "We'll find a way to rescue you! Don't give up hope!"**

I added my own passage to the tail end of what Shawn emailed me and uploaded it onto the site.

Even so, I was unable to think of a way to save Shawn under such desperate circumstances. I would need everyone's help. I sent an email to every member of the crew other than Shawn:

"Check the Web site quick! Shawn's in trouble. Help me think of a way to save him."

After about fifteen minutes, the first post appeared in the forums. It was from Xevale. "What's Shawn thinking? Is he trying to play the hero by sacrificing himself to save me, Nicole, and the others? This isn't like him."

---

A post from Maki Saeda from the science crew popped up minutes later: "I'm against letting him die. Sacrificing one of our own to gain a victory goes against the spirit of the *Celestial*."

Combat Officer Jim Warhawk signed on next. "Agreed. This kamikaze stuff won't fly with me."

Sophie D. from the medical crew chimed in, "The *DS* is also a victim of a past war. It would be sad to have to kill it too."

This triggered another debate. The thread grew quickly as new posts popped up every few minutes.

The consensus was building toward sparing the *DS*. But there would be more victims if we simply let it go. And what do we do with Shawn? Send in another team on a suicide mission after him? No, the *DS*'s psychic attack made it impossible to even get close to it. Could we come up with a device that blocks the psychic waves? Not in the time we had. What if the science team had the device already finished? Then Shawn wouldn't have had to go rescue the away team in the first place.

Unable to settle on a solution, the debate was at a deadlock by midnight. Nevertheless the posts continued.

Thanks to the long weekend, the members seemed to be prepared to argue and brainstorm all night.

It was a little after midnight when François in the Steward's Department made a surprising suggestion. "Couldn't we try to reform the *DS*?"

Reform it? How? The debate heated up again. What if we hacked into the *DS*'s core and tried to overwrite its program? No, we wouldn't be able to hack into a warship so easily. Besides, we can't hack into a system whose OS or language we don't know the first thing about. Wouldn't the *DS* be freed from its fate if we could just destroy its battle program? Then how do we destroy it?

I wasn't just reading what was being posted. After editing everyone's posts, I incorporated their dialogue into the story, uploading the conversation as it unfolded. I decided to let the debate be waged in the actual story, believing that Shawn was out there somewhere reading it.

"Can you see, Shawn?" I sent Shawn an email. "Everyone is working to save you and *DS*. We don't want you to die. Can you see that?"

It was Titea, the science officer, who proposed a promising solution. "The *DS* has the ability to evolve, right? What if we used that to our advantage? We help it to evolve into an existence that surpasses its program."

Sophie, Jian, and Maki were in agreement. The problem was how to help it evolve. We could give it the data it needed to evolve. But where would that kind of data—

Suddenly I had a flash of inspiration. But would it be possible?

---

It would take too long to wait for a response in the forums, so I sent a message directly to Meyer's cell phone, despite the late hour. He would be working at the convenience store.

"Would it be possible to transfer all of the C's data to the shuttle's computer?"

His reply came in a matter of minutes.

"A neutrino transmission would take too long. It would have to be over laser transmission."

"Of course." As ignorant as I was about science, I knew that the transmission speed was faster over optical fiber cables than over telephone lines. We needed to transmit the data optically.

I immediately began to write.

**"Full-impulse drive! Take us to within two thousand kilometers of the *DS*!"**

"But, Captain, isn't that going to provoke the *DS*?" Rafale asked with some trepidation.

"Our shields can take a hit or two at long range," Ginny answered.

"But the dimensional blaster on its bow—"

"That's what we're counting on," Ginny said. "The *DS* needs at least two minutes to open its bow and power up its blaster. During that time, its interior will be exposed, leaving us free to send an optical beam. An energy beam might be deflected, but a low-energy laser should be able to pass through its shields."

"Two minutes . . . that's a pretty big gamble."

"Have we ever had one that wasn't?" Ginny said, smiling. Then she opened a channel to the *Javelin* and said,

"Shawn, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Captain," Shawn responded.

"We're going to position ourselves in front of the *DS* to fire a communications laser."

"Why?"

"We're going to transfer all of the *Celestial*'s data to the *Javelin*. Not just the ship's structural engineering, weapons, engines, and computers, but all of the crew's data, navigation logs, cooking recipes from the mess, records of beauty contests, Sophie's poems, Meyer's trivia, François's stories . . .

"The *DS* should scan all of it. Until now, it's only collected data from warships. But the *Celestial* is different. We're a peaceful vessel filled with the crew's memories. The *DS* would be acquiring an enormous amount of new data, new concepts, and ways of thinking it's never encountered before.

"It may not be able to understand everything, but we're going to give it everything we have . . . our joys and sorrows, surprises and fears, friendship and trust, courage and love—everything we've experienced during our four-year voyage. We're betting that the *DS* will experience a rebirth of consciousness.

"So please, I need you to open an optical channel! Now!"

I stopped writing and uploaded the new material, then emailed Shawn about it. All there was left to do was wait for Shawn's response.

The time crept by slowly . . . five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen . . . I grew anxious. Was I too late? Maybe Shawn had stopped reading. Or maybe he had already ended his life somewhere.

Twenty minutes after I updated the site, I finally received a message.

"Understood, Captain," answered Shawn. "I'm opening a channel now."

"Attaboy, Shawn!" I had tears in my eyes as I began to write the rest of the story.

The long-range beam of the *DS* shook the *Celestial*. The vessel had gotten too close, setting off the *DS*'s battle program. Though its attacks were weakened by the plasma storm, the ship's shields took a big hit.

"Shields down to 80 percent!"

"Hold shields for as long as you can." Try as she might to stay calm, Ginny could not hide her nervousness.

"The bow of the *DS* is opening!" Genevieve shouted. Onscreen, the bulbous bow of the *DS* began to open like the petals of a flower. "I've located the *Javelin*'s position!"

"Fire the communications laser!"

Natasha punched the key on the captain's command, and the *Celestial* fired a laser, which was sucked into the *DS*'s opening. A thin blue beam connected the two vessels.

The *DS* was bound to read it.

"I'm detecting an influx of energy in the *DS*'s core," Meyer reported. The *DS* was powering up its dimension blaster. A direct hit would reduce the *Celestial* to elementary particles.

Meanwhile the long-range attacks continued. Every shock wave sapped the *Celestial*'s shields.

"Shields down to 40 percent!"

"Engineering, stand by warp engines in case we need to jump to emergency warp," Ginny said, clutching the arms of the captain's chair as the ship shook violently. "Divert all remaining energy to our shields."

The *Celestial* was rocked by a tremendous hit.

"It's penetrated our shields," reported Bleriot, his face pale. "Damage on the starboard decks. Sealing off those decks now!"

Was this the end? Ginny gnashed her teeth. The dimension blaster was about to reach critical mass. If the *Celestial* took any more damage, they might not be able to warp out of here. Ginny was about to hand down an impossible decision when—

"The blaster!" Meyer shouted. "It's powering down!"

"The attacks . . ." Genevieve let out in surprise. The entire crew also took notice. The continuous barrage of the *DS*'s lasers had stopped.

Ginny took a breath. "How far along are we on transferring the data?"

"Currently at 94 percent," Natasha replied. "The transfer is nearly complete."

"Captain! Something's happening to the *DS*!" Genevieve shouted.

The eerie phosphorescent glow that outlined the *DS* faded as the vessel's body began to go dark and disappeared into a black silhouette.

"Is it dead?" Ginny asked.

"No," answered Meyer, "I'm detecting some high-energy activity from inside its hull. Temperature levels also rising."

"Is it evolving?"

"That would be my guess."

"Into what?"

"I can't imagine," said Meyer.

---

Countless cracks spread over the hull of the DS. Just as a white light began to spill from the cracks, the hull exploded into a million little pieces, and a heavenly light burst out.

The *DS* had accomplished an astounding transformation—though resembling the *Celestial*, it had metamorphosed into an elegant white vessel with wings like that of a bird.

The *DS*—rather, the radiant sentient vessel that was once the *DS*—shook off what remained of its hideous shell, spread its wings, and took flight. It slashed gracefully through the plasma storm past the *Celestial*.

In that moment, the entire crew, even the nontelepaths, felt its intense thought waves. Its thoughts were no longer filled with anguish or sadness. The radiant white vessel radiated its joy at having been freed from its curse, the marvel of having acquired its wings, and a deep feeling of gratitude.

However, that was only for an instant. The shiny new vessel spread its joyous thoughts as it jumped into warp for the Andromeda galaxy and vanished.

Ginny continued to look at the screen until a voice from the comm brought her back to herself.

"*Celestial*, please respond." It was Shawn.

"Shawn, are you all right?"

They quickly locked on to his position. The *Javelin* was drifting amidst the remains of the *DS* that the white vessel had expelled upon its departure.

"Yes . . . Uh, what happened? Everything went white all of a sudden, and then, I don't know . . ."

"Mission accomplished." Ginny smiled. "You did good, Shawn! We're coming to get you!"

By the time I finished uploading the ending, the sky was getting lighter in the east. I drank my instant coffee, basking in a deep feeling of fatigue and accomplishment.

The message from Shawn came quickly.

"Dear Captain,

"Thank you for everything. It was a fantastic ending. I had tears in my eyes.

"I'm embarrassed now to say that I lacked courage. I continued to run in fear when I should have faced up to reality. It was because I wasn't brave enough that I picked up a knife.



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"But I'm not going to run anymore. I know now that with a little courage, I will be reborn—that there is a way out no matter how terrible the circumstances.

"I'm going to turn myself in to the police. I may have to go away for a couple of years. But when I'm out, do I have your permission to come aboard?"

I smiled and wrote my reply.

"Dear Shawn,

"You will always be welcome aboard the *Celestial*."

An escape from reality? Laugh if you want. To be certain, no such vessel named the *Celestial* existed in real life. But the bond, faith, and friendship of the crew were undeniably real.

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