Disclaimer: Certain aspects of Japanese society have been exaggerated to create a story.
Hitori presses against the cold steel wall, then rolls around sleeplessly. Sleeping has always been difficult. Now, even more so with this assignment. It's a privilege to have received it. It's a first time mission: to perform a series of experiments to determine if our scientific models of black holes were correct; after all no one has ever even been close to a black hole. There exists a possibility to receive new data which could be responsible for new theories that could improve the corporation's propulsion systems vastly.

New observations indicate the possible presence of a black hole, and in our neighborhood no less, a mere quarter of a light year away. With the corporation's current technology, the trip will take about seven years one way. It seems none of the other corporations even know about it yet, and certainly none of the Earth nations are aware of it.

A first of a kind trip was not without great danger, and this Hitori knows. However, this isn't what keeps her awake. Fleeting thoughts of black holes intertwine with her thoughts of her home, the Union of Yamato Nations located on the terraformed planet Mars.

The predecessor to the Union of Yamato Nations is the Earth nation, Japan. The problems of overcrowding in concert with future population projections made research into terraforming another planet well worth the effort. The Japanese research scientists came up with a plan. Asteroids and comets could have their courses altered into colliding with Mars. The celestial bodies would be of a composition suitable for raising the atmospheric pressure, placing liquid water on the surface, and partially oxygenating the atmosphere. It would, however, take nearly a hundred collisions. The plan required vast resources, and citizens of the Earth nation Japan agreed to the debilitatively large tax that would be levied on them until the resources for terraforming and travel to Mars were purchased. No other nation would agree to join the venture. The Japanese government advised anyone ever wanting the opportunity to live on a new world to transfer citizenship. This advisement barely had an effect, however. A scant few transferred citizenship. Others were tempted, but most feared the barriers of language and culture.

Hitori presses her back against the cold wall in sleeplessness, grasping for Cubby, her fluffy brown stuffed bear. Her thoughts shift to her mother, Celette, and the stories she passed down. Celette was a woman who may have been cheerful and happy, if not for the misfortune in her destiny. Before the migration, attitudes in Japan toward outsiders were on the average negative, and the migration intensified these feelings with the non-participation of other Earth nations. Some called Celette the "Gaijin," the outsider. Even though she spoke their language, and observed their customs, she was still an outsider. She was the daughter of one of the few Europeans who transferred citizenship to join the migration. However a vote had decided no one over the age of fifty would make the trip to Mars, and Celette's parents would have to remain behind.

Celette was only sixteen when it came time to make the trip. Since her parents were forced to remain behind, Celette would be adopted, and she would have a new family. Mr. and Mrs. Sotohira were nice people; they showed nothing but kindness to Celette from the moment they met her. During the two years it took the small transport pod to get to Mars, she grew to love her new parents, and they grew to love her.

Finally, Celette and Mr. and Mrs. Sotohira arrive at the Kasei Arrival Center through which all citizens arriving at Mars would need to pass. Everything was already set up. The contracted corporations had already sent a wave of colonists to build up the planet for colonization.

Celette and her parents exit the pod, their faces lit with smiles. The sky was not the dull red seen in pictures, but now shines a light violet due to the new atmosphere. As they follow the path set before them, leading into the Arrival Center, a uniformed man stops...
them. Had the corporations established a militaristic presence already?

“It is required for you to present your paperwork before entering the Arrival Center,” he says insistently. He grabs Celette's wrist tightly, as if with suspicion. Mr. and Mrs. Sotohira notably upset, rush to get their paperwork from the pod, while Celette starts to panic and pulls her wrist from the man's grasp. Mrs. Sotohira hears a scream, and exits the pod to find Celette unconscious on the ground.

“Did you...? What have you done?” cries Mrs. Sotohira in a strained, shaky voice. “Here are our papers, what could she have done to provoke you?” continues Mrs. Sotohira. The only daughter she ever knew was unconscious.

“If her DNA matches the database, then an apology will be issued. For now she is a foreigner who doesn't belong here. She will remain in our custody until the test is done.”

Four hours waited Mr. and Mrs. Sotohira, for their daughter's release. Upon releasing her to them, they were informed to “keep her out of trouble.” The corporations running the planet definitely seemed to have an aversion to foreigners. They also seemed to have absolute power in ruling the planet. They could discriminate freely. Had the Japanese government permitted them this much control?

... Hitori rolls around and presses her back against the cold wall, holding Cubby to her face. Thoughts of her father fade in as thoughts of her mother fade out. Her father was a friend of the Sotohira family and met her mother at a family event. His name was Kajiro Ureno. Kajiro charmed Celette rather quickly. On their first date, Kajiro showed up to Celette's door with Cubby. Since Celette was accustomed to non-acceptance, Kajiro’s attention was something to be cherished, and since his attention took the form of the stuffed bear named Cubby, she would cherish Cubby also.

After they dated for a year, a wedding followed, and the product of the honeymoon was a girl named Hitori Ureno.

The bed is too hot. Hitori rolls around and presses against the cold metallic wall. “I'll never get any sleep like this...”

She walks over to the metallic closet door, opens it and removes a little bottle, again affirming that it was a good idea to bring a full supply of her sleeping medication. She swallows the little red pill and lies down again. These pills work very quickly. She would not even have time for her mind to wander before the peacefulness of sleep would take her.

火星新東京地方高校「Kasei Shin-Tōkyō Jikata Kōkō」「Mars New-Tokyo District High School」

She sees the sign in front of her high school. She sees the corridors. She sees the lockers.
She sees her friends. She sees her boyfriend, Toji. She runs up to embrace him, receiving his embrace in return.

“I've missed you.”

“It's only been about 12 hours since I've seen you. Maybe I should be afraid that you're becoming obsessed,” Hitori joked with a grin, as she squeezed Toji's hand.

“Well, I am obsessed,” he says grinning back. “How can I help it?” he says with his eyes glowing back at Hitori.

“Hey! Cut it out, that's disgusting!” interjects Satomi.

“You're just jealous,” returns Hitori with a smirk.

“We're still on for Friday right?”

“Definitely!”

“Great, great. I can't wait.”
Both the girls give each other a sincere smile, and wave goodbye.

“I'll see you for lunch,” Hitori assures Toji.

Alarms sound. Hitori opens her eyes. The walls glare with red flashes. Hitori
jumps up, touches the cold metallic wall, ejecting Cubby from her bed, and jumps out of bed to rush to the control room. The console informs her that an unexpected object’s gravity forced a course correction. A derelict planet perhaps, alone in dark space, seen through its effect on the cruiser, but not directly. It’s not the black hole yet; it’s not time.

She attempts to go back to sleep, and thinks about her dream and realizes it was distorted. If only it were the truth. She lies down. She presses her back against the cold metal wall, and closes her eyes, squeezing Cubby tightly.

She sees the sign in front of her high school. She sees the corridors. She sees the lockers.

She sees her locker. It says “外人帰れ!” It means “Go home, outsider!” She left it written there, she wouldn't bother to erase it anymore.

She takes her books from her locker, and heads to class. No one looks at her. Though she can occasionally hear references to herself. They use the word “ハーフ”, pronounced “haafu,” derived from the English word “half.” A derogatory word akin to words used by southerners of the Earth nation, United States of America in reference to African individuals. But this one means “half breed,” and discrimination is not illegal because the government will not acknowledge its existence. This word has been in use since the mid-twentieth century, and communicates as much loathing now as it did then.

Hitori sees Satomi walking down the hall, with her group. They look so happy. Hitori longs for that kind of happiness. As she passes Satomi she looks at her and smiles, but Satomi does not return even a glance. Hitori feels a little pain, and then a tear. She mustn't cry. Nothing can be done about it, and what good is it to cry?

Upon entering the classroom, she sees Toji there. His eyes are fixed forward, as she prays for their gaze to move to her. Her prayers go unanswered. She gently waves to him and says, “hi.” He looks at her. No, not at her, past her. Satomi walks in, and smiles. “I've missed you!” Toji tells Satomi with a sincere smile. Hitori feels a sharp pain, but she mustn't cry. She knows they aren't doing it to hurt her. She knows that most of the students won't go out of their way to get at her. A few will call her names to her face and write on her locker, and all the others will ignore her, but that combination of twisting pain resonates inside her, and like a glass, she may soon break.

Hitori presses against the wall, the cold metallic wall. The tears she would not shed then, have been shed again and again, and she will shed them still one more time. She squeezes her sheets in her hand, and subtly looks out the window, trying to hold her emotions. A tear breaks away, then another, followed by several more. She bites her dry lips, then buries her face into her pillow so that she doesn't have to hear herself cry; hearing herself makes it so much worse.

In the cruiser she is alone. Her pain from the past still haunts her, but there is no one else here to cause her new pain. She had hoped this would be sufficient. But pain from the past haunts her so much. Seven years of painful tears. The solitude of the cruiser has amplified the past. Now, the past is all she has.

Alarms sound. She walks to the control room, in her blue silk nightgown, slippers dragging on the floor, still shaking from her outburst. The panel reads, “Target approaching.” Hitori uses her shaking hands to press the buttons that will order the computer to deploy the probe for the first experiment. The probe will measure the mass of the black hole by attempting to orbit it. The probe ejects itself from the cruiser, and Hitori reads off the panel “mass: 6.704e+29kg SCHWR: 0.993E+0km.” That probe has performed its function, and plunges into the black hole. Hitori watches as it tears apart from the gravitational tides, watches as it turns bright red and fades out of existence at the event horizon, about one kilometer from the hypothetical singularity of the black hole.

Toji and Satomi flash before her eyes. They are happy. The pain claws at her soul. She wipes her wet cheek, then uses her damp, trembling finger to turn a dial,
deploying the second probe. The experiment will determine whether or not Hawking radiation exists, and whether or not the black hole will evaporate over time. The probe leaves the ship with a loud thud, since this particular probe has a large fuel supply. It will need to hover at the event horizon, on the cusp of possibility and impossibility. It radios back the existence of Hawking radiation. It has exhausted its usefulness and plunges into the black hole.

Her mother flashes before her eyes, a body beaten lifeless. Her father in tears. The pain tears at her chest. Tears escape from her eyes.

The final probe will determine whether or not there is a singularity at the inside of a black hole. Its inner workings are a secret of the corporation. Hitori lets out a quivering sigh, as she flips the switch that tells the computer to deploy the final probe. There is an even louder thud as the cruiser shakes, as this was the heaviest of the three probes. Hitori watches as the probe whisks about taking readings, making elliptical passes as near to the event horizon as possible without the probe's structure buckling under the gravitational tides. It radios back the existence of the singularity, and plunging itself past the event horizon, becomes one with the singularity which it has just discovered. Hitori depresses a red circular button on the console and, holding her voice steady, says, “Computer... Encode, encrypt and radio all data back to the corporation.” The computer beeps in acknowledgment.

Her father flashes before her eyes. He is sitting in his recliner, lying back, with his arms over the side streaming blood. His body is lifeless. Hitori screams.

The experiments are complete.

Hitori thinks about Toji and Satomi, of her mother and her father, and cries one last time. She lets out a whimper as she thinks of what could have been, had things been different. Tears flow onto the control panel as she presses the ignition for the propulsion system. As she notices the gravitational tides tugging at her ankles, she voices a panicked burst. She buries her soaked red face into her hands, with intermittent breath. She walks to her bed, shaking. She presses her face against the cold metallic wall, wetting it with her tears. The ship begins to shake and moan. She reaches for Cubby. She can feel her head being pulled opposite her feet. With her face buried in Cubby’s chest, she screams. The stuffed bear muffles the sound of her screaming. Cubby starts to tear at the seams. The ship goes into convulsions. Hitori gasps repeatedly as she tries to hold onto Cubby. As he rips apart, he can no longer contain Hitori’s painful screams. Hitori’s shrill voice resonates in the cabin.

*The singularity takes her...*
Afterword: Explanation and Analysis

-EXPLANATION-

The Japanese words and names used in the story were chosen to contain meaning. The name “Hitori” (独) means alone. From the Internet, I found a quote about the name which helped to confirm my decision to use it: “Hitori (meaning “alone”) is a rather uncommon name due to its somber connotations.” The name “Yamato” (大和) is the name for old Japan, demonstrating that the ways of the people who colonized Mars were outdated. The family name Sotohira (外平) means outward peace, being that they were peaceful to outsiders. Hitori’s father’s family name is Ureno (嬉野). The first part of that name means happiness, representing the happiness he brought to Hitori’s mother Celette.

The word gaijin (外人) literally means outside person. It is a shortening of the word for foreigner, gaikokujin[san] (外国人[さん]), which is literally person from an outside country. San can be added for politeness. My experience is that some prejudices do exist in Japan toward gaijin, but it is not prevalent. As stated in the disclaimer, this characteristic was exaggerated for the purpose of a story. My actual personal experience comes from an online game, which is played mostly by the Japanese, but has a North American following also. When trying to find a group, about 25% of the Japanese players are commented as “JP Only.” They will ignore people who aren’t Japanese. This is the extent for most of the Japanese players, but I’ve seen comments such as, “English countries leave!” I usually masquerade as a Japanese player however, and nine times out of ten they don’t figure out that I’m not Japanese. When or if I finally tell them, they are amazed to the point of excessiveness that someone who is not Japanese speaks their language. Occasionally they will say things such as “gaijin bakka” (外人ばっか) meaning, “stupid foreigner,” when they don’t realize I’m not Japanese.

The word haafu (ハーフ) taken from the English “half” refers to a person who is half Japanese, and half other. Knowledge of this word comes to me by way of my first Japanese language class in eighth grade. In a cultural video we were shown a half Japanese woman, who wanted to marry a Japanese man. His parents would not allow him to marry a haafu. I’m not entirely sure how widespread this prejudice is.

-AnALYSIS-

“Hitori presses against the cold steel wall of the sleep chamber and then rolls around sleeplessly.” The wall is the people whose lives she wants to be a part of. The coldness represents their denial to her want. She is not alone because she chooses to be, nor is she alone due to an anxiety. She is alone because others exclude her, and this is her pain in life.

As the story progresses Hitori’s pain increases, as if she is approaching the black hole, and the gravitational tides are ripping her apart the whole time. A single tear progresses into fitful outbursts. It eventually progresses to the point where even with her face buried in her pillow she hears herself screaming.

The dream sequence demonstrates what Hitori is missing, and that she knows she is missing it. This is what tears at her soul. It makes it possible for the reader to feel her pain.

As the strength of gravity from an object increases exponentially as you approach it, so does the knowledge that Hitori is going to die. The second paragraph hints at it, by stating the time for the trip, but only for a one way trip. Toward the middle, there is a line, “Now, the past is all she has.” Finally when the first probe’s objective is complete, it destroys itself in the black hole because it no longer has a purpose, much like Hitori does when her objective is complete.

The last line says, “The singularity takes her.” It does so in multiple meanings, and both mentally and physically. Her time for inner reflection on the cruiser has eaten her alive. She reflects on her unwanted solitude (her singularity), and it takes her.
-NOTES ABOUT REVISION-

In an attempt to invoke emotion in the reader at the end of the story, I added Cubby, the stuffed bear. I gave him a non-Japanese name so that the reader would better sympathize with Hitori. The bear shows she has a childlike heart. I also added a description of Hitori's clothing near the end. I always imagined her in a nightgown, and I wanted the reader to know she was wearing a nightgown. I wanted to convey a sense of vulnerability with it. I wanted the reader to sympathize with that vulnerability.

I changed several uses of pronouns into names, to alleviate ambiguity. I changed some passive voice sentences into active voice.

When she is realizing the correct version of her dream, I originally made it sound like the people at her school were mostly innocuous, but that was not in theme with the rest of the story, so I reworded some parts to make it fit better. After she was finished remembering the corrected version of her dream, I also originally had too strong of an emotional response, she was screaming, and I think that was too much too early.

Finally, the ending was very important to me, so I made several subtle changes in the ending.

There are other changes that I have not noted.