A cartoon of a child with an object

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Design by Shindosha

A black and white sign

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“What’s going on?” Marika asked timidly on the silent bridge, with only the faint sounds of the ventilation system operating and the occasional electronic beep.

“There's nothing I can do about it.” Hyakume replied while glaring at the display in the radar/sensor seat. “Electronic jamming, decoys, infrared rays, gravity, and other fake signals that can be picked up by sensors, that's all there is to it.”

“I see.” Marika, sitting in the captain's seat, nodded with a puzzled look on her face. “The situation is still as bad as ever, huh?”

The entire combat airspace is subject to strong electronic jamming. Even if you increase the radar's output as much as possible, it will only return reliable data at short distances, and if you carelessly increase the sensitivity of the sensor, it will overflow and burn out.

“How many survivors are there at this point?”

“Only the Karyobinga and the Barbaroosa.” Coorie replied. “All the rest of them have been declared sunk and are out of the line of fire.”

“There’s still some decent ships left.” Marika thought of Captain Blackbeard's pirate ship the Barbaroosa and Count Khan's Karyobinga. In her opinion, the Barbaroosa, which is one of the most experienced among pirate ships with a privateer’s license, and the Karyobinga, which is equipped with various non-standard weapons, will survive to the end of the war. “What about the enemy fleet?”

“Remaining strength is about two-thirds of their original strength.” Hyakume, who was still glued to the radar/sensor seat, answered. “In a melee under such adverse conditions, I thought that a highly flexible pirate ship that could perform many scuffles, or a guerrilla fleet of an invasion company with a lot of experience in actual battles would have an advantage, but... Anyway, there were a lot of enemies in the beginning.”

Hyakume quickly scrolled the list of the battles that had taken place on the main screen. “After all, the opponent is the Empire's Fifth Fleet, which includes two of the regular fleet's mobile strike fleets and a hunter-killer fleet that was specially organized for the occasion. We were able to put up a good fight so far against a cheater who has unlimited budget, personnel, equipment, and facilities.”

“We have three ships left, including our Bentenmaru.” Marika looked back at the fleet layout on the battle status display with a grim expression on her face. It's best to think of the display as an unreliable estimate of the location in situations where radar and sensors have little access. “The enemy has two whole fleets and their flagship is still alive and well.”

Marika let out an exaggerated sigh. “It's a total loss.”

“Well, by surviving this far, we'll get special bonuses and additional rewards, so we’re well past the break-even point and in the black...” Coorie turned to the captain's seat with an unenthusiastic voice. “What do we do? Maybe the hunter-killers are setting up a special fleet for a final attack on us. The longer we wait, the worse it's going to get.”

“I know.” Kane regained his grip on the helm.

It is a natural reaction to want to wait for the enemy to appear on the battlefield. People want to maintain the status quo if they are surviving and no danger seems imminent.

However, Marika had been taught by her mother that “The enemy you don't see will destroy you.”

“Do you know the current location of the Barbaroosa and the Karyobinga?”

Marika's question was answered immediately by Coorie, who was thinking about it. “It's just an estimate, but it’s reasonable. I can't be sure because of the radio silence on both sides, but I think it's somewhere around here.” Coorie showed the estimated current location of the Barbaroosa and the Karyobinga on the display. Marika looked up as if she had made up her mind..

“Can you open a communication line?”

“Well, it's easy enough to call out to them.” Saying this, Hyakume began setting up the communication line. “But you should know that if you call out in this situation, the location of the Bentenmaru will be revealed to the Imperial fleet that is listening in.”

“I know.” Marika looked at the battle status display, which didn't show any good information.

“And if the Barbaroosa or the Karyobinga reply, their location will be exposed to the Imperial Fleet. Once their current location is confirmed, they won't be able to escape.”

“I know that, too.” Marika flicked the communications panel with her fingertips. “But if we wait for the enemy to show up, we'll only end up losing a little later. On the other hand, if we fight back alone, we will only become the target. If the situation is that bad, I doubt anything we do will make it worse.”

“There are just as many up sides as there are down sides…” Hyakume lightly tapped the communication panel. “Okay, communication line setup complete.”

Marika picked up the headset and asked just to be sure. “Is the encryption secure? Can the contents of the call be decrypted?”

“Yes, I guarantee it.” Hyakume, facing the captain's seat over his shoulder from his seat, gave a thumbs-up. “I'm not saying it's absolutely impossible to decipher, but it's okay; by the time even an electronic battleship's supercomputer cluster can decipher it, the battle should have ended long ago.”

“That's all we need.” Marika put the headset to her ear. “Open the line.”

“Roger.”

The display on the communication panel changed. Marika opened her mouth without waiting for the connection confirmation sign, because she was under strong electronic interference and could not risk having the other party reply. “Barbaroosa from Bentenmaru, Karyobinga, can you hear me? This is the Bentenmaru, Captain Kato Marika. No response is necessary. This is Kato Marika of the Bentenmaru.”

Out of habit, Marika paused and waited for a sign that the line was connected. Marika continued with a wry smile as she remembered that she had said that she didn't need a response.

“I don't think there's any need to explain the situation now. As far as we know, there are only three pirate ships that can operate in this airspace: the Bentenmaru, the Barbaroosa, and the Karyobinga. None are unscathed. If we remain silent and wait for the enemy hunter-killers to arrive, it is obvious that we will be defeated individually.”

“I hope you are listening.” Marika continued, thinking of the faces of Captain Blackbeard of the Barbaroosa and Captain Kahn of the Karyobinga. “Either way, escape is not an option. So, I'm going to implement Plan B3, with the aim of making a comeback. The target is the enemy's main force, the first strike fleet.”

Marika, with her headset in her ear, used one hand to call up the formation of the first strike fleet on the display. The First Strike Fleet, which is waiting outside the combat airspace, has been on a wait-and-see basis after pouring its main forces into the initial battle, so most of its strength has been conserved.

“Of course, this is the Bentenmaru's sole discretion. I'll leave it up to the Barbaroosa and the Karyobinga to decide whether or not they'll go along with me. I'll leave the line open as it is, but if the Bentenmaru starts the assault, we won't be able to contact you due to electronic interference.”

Pausing, Marika waited to see if there would be a reply and wondered if there was anything else she should say. “The Bentenmaru will launch as soon as preparations are complete, without waiting for the hunter-killers to be dispatched.”

“What is Plan B3?” Kane, in the helmsman's seat, asked, seemingly unconcerned, while Marika checked on the condition of the Bentenmaru's hull

“I don't know.” Hyakume is manipulating Bentenmaru's radar and sensor systems to capture as accurately as possible the status of the enemy fleet outside its effective radius. “But if you start talking about Plan B, you're just going to have to go with the flow and take your chances.”

“Winning.” Marika returned the headset to the communication panel and sank deeply into the captain's seat. “However, it is not a matter of leaving things to chance, nor is it a matter of luck. The target is the Neuschwanstein, the flagship of the enemy's First Strike Fleet. Ignore the rest and as long as you can land a blow on the flagship, that's all that matters. The odds of winning are not good…”

“It's about seven percent, including opportunities and expectations.” Coorie in the electronic battle seat answered in a voice that didn't sound like she was on board. “I think it's a waste of time to calculate serious numbers that don't include expectations.”

“I'm not going to change my mind if you ask me.”

“It's an assault while performing combat maneuvers, right?” Sandaime confirmed this while adjusting the settings of the engine and the energy supply system. “How much energy do you need to put into the cannon?”

“Just a little.”

“What do you mean?” Schnitzer, who was in charge of combat command, raised a voice of protest.

“Because it's going to pass through the Hunter Killer fleet and fly right into the enemy's first strike fleet.” Marika explained as she sank into the captain's seat. “Our medium caliber main guns will not be able to penetrate the battleship's armor no matter how much energy is applied, and if the plan is correct, there will be too many targets. I think we should concentrate our energy on evasive maneuvers and use electronic warfare as our main weapon, and artillery fire should be used for disruption. Even if we hit the target, we can't expect any results, so can't you make do with that?”

“It's not fun to have a limited number of bullets even though there are so many targets, but it's the right thing to do.” Schnitzer communicated the new policy to the ship's armament officer. “Increasing the number of kills now will not affect many people. What about the missiles?”

“Ah, since we’re here, let’s use them up.” Marika got up from the captain's seat when she saw how many missiles there were still left. “I'll leave it to you to decide whether you want to leave the ship's guns or missiles for the final blow. Luca, do you have a good assault route?”

“This is the easiest way.” Luca, in the navigator's seat, projected a sloppy navigational route on the main screen. “This is the trajectory that can delay contact with Hunter Killer the most and reach the First Strike Fleet as quickly as possible.” Luca, who had both hands on the crystal ball on the navigation panel, added “I think.”

“I'm not going to complain about how bad the situation is.”

“It's time to get out of here.” Sandaime announced. Marika looked around the Bentenmaru’s bridge.

“Are the weapons okay?”

“Looking good.” Schnitzer replied. Marika picked up the headset again.

“All ships will attack as soon as they are ready. Is everything ready?”

Each section responds verbally or with a green sign on the display. "Electronic warfare preparations complete." "Final route determined." "Shipborne weapons are ready for combat." "No control system problems, ready to go."

Kane, in the helmsman's seat, turned to the captain's seat. “So, have Captain Blackbeard and the Count been informed of the details of this Plan B?”

“Of course not.” Marika shook her head with a smile. “If the communication from earlier was intercepted by the enemy, I'm just hoping that they can do some sloppy deciphering and cause some confusion. However, if I make a declaration and jump out, Captain Blackbeard and the Count should be able to understand my intentions.”

Marika looked at the layout map, which was so dense with electronic interference that she could not see the status of her fellow pirate ships. “Unless you have a very sneaky secret weapon, your analysis of the battle situation should be the same whether you're on the Bentenmaru or any other ship. If that's the case, if you don't counterattack while you can, you'll be defeated if you stay silent. Besides, if they disagree with our policy, I'm sure someone will say something.”

“We’re going to attack the enemy without any discussion.” Hyakume from the radar/sensor seat muttered in amusement. “What's more, no confirmation, just the expectation that they will accompany us. This would definitely be a military offence in the regular army.”

“We're not in the military.” Marika looked around the panels surrounding the captain's seat once again to check the situation. “We can't win if we fight the same way as the military, and they don't expect us to do that either. Well then, Bentenmaru, let's go. Begin the assault!”

“Roger, Captain.” Kane regained his grip on the helm. “We don't want them to observe our infrared response, so we'll advance at slow speed! After gaining distance, we’ll have a decoy emit a flare to disguise our wake.”

“Well, if you suddenly jump out at full throttle in a place like this, they're going to see us and shoot at us.”

Coorie finely tunes electronic jamming to the spatial situation. Because of the dense placement of the enemy's sensors, unless Bentenmaru and as many drones as the remote control can reach are well coordinated, the source of the jamming signal could reveal their current location.

“Oh, as expected of a pirate.” Coorie exclaimed happily. “There are some decoys following us.”

Marika quickly switched the display. “Does that mean the Barbaroosa or the Karyobinga's decoys are following us?”

Neither the Barbaroosa nor the Karyobinga have the electronic warfare or communication capabilities of the Bentenmaru. Although the number of their surviving decoys deployed on the battlefield is not as many as the Bentenmaru, some of them have begun to move to unite with the Bentenmaru’s goals.

“That's right. With this, the hunter-killers will definitely find out that we've started moving, but in return, they won't be able to tell which one is the real target. They are the ones who made the electronic interference so dense, so they’ll have to pay the price.”

“As long as we can hit the flagship of the first fleet, it doesn't matter who plays the decoy role.” Marika saw the pirate ships’ decoys superimposed on the battle display. A number of reactions are taking place under strong electronic interference. “Our main gun is not enough to hit the flagship, so I would like the Barbaroosa or the Karyobinga to make the final blow, if possible. But even if it is our turn, we should be able to manage by hitting it with anti-ship missiles.”

“You'd have to get very close to the target to get a clear shot.” Schnitzer replied, tapping on the control panel. “But if we could use the ship's gunfire to provide cover fire for the missiles, we could improve our chances of hitting them.”

“Data transmission from the Barbaroosa.” Coorie reported. “It was beamed at us. That means Captain Blackbeard knows exactly where we are.”

If a narrowly focused beam communication, almost like an attack, can accurately hit a communications partner, there is no need to worry about your communication being intercepted.

“They called us from there, even though we were closer than the enemy ship. Does the fact that we were targeted so accurately also mean that the enemy also knows where we are?” After mumbling, Marika looked at Coorie. The communication from the Barbaroosa has not yet reached the captain's seat. “What did they say?”

“Wait a minute, it was a bullet-like pulse beam, so the compression wasn't half bad. Let's see, I think this will work.” Because the data is highly compressed and strictly encrypted, it requires machine power to unravel it. Coorie transferred the decoded data to the main display and captain's seat.

“Get into our shadow?” Looking at the attack trajectory that followed, Marika nodded. “Okay, we're going to approach the Barbaroosa for close formation. Can we do it?”

“I was given the Barbaroosa's current location and future orbit, so I can get there.” Kane, holding the wheel, replied.

“And after that?”

“We'll follow our decoys as long as we can, and then the main body will break through the hunter-killer fleet in close formation with the Barbaroosa.”

Marika studied and considered the simplified future trajectory map and battle predictions. “The Karyobinga and the Barbaroosa will break through the thin areas of the hunter-killer fleet in a two-ship formation. I think the Bentenmaru should stick closely to the Barbaroosa and combine their reactions as one to disguise our whereabouts.”

“It's a scaled-down version of Captain Ririka's tactic of having pirate ships perform combat maneuvers in formation.” Schnitzer explained after glancing at the data from the Barbaroosa. “The two-ship formation with the Barbaroosa and the Karyobinga is as per the textbook, but with the Bentenmaru in cover at close range to the Barbaroosa. Given the enemy's skill level and density, even if two battleships are used as a diversion, it is unlikely that the Bentenmaru will be able to remain undercover. If the Barbaroosa is used as a shield, it will increase the probability of closing in on the first strike fleet.”

“Have the odds become a little more promising?” Marika asked Coorie, who was calculating probabilities on another screen. With a worried look on her face, Coorie removed her hands from the control panel and crossed her arms.

“I think the chances of survival will increase by about three times if we stick with the Barbaroosa, but we'll get hit hard by hunter-killers and strike fleets instead. I’d say our chances of survival after coming out of the shadows are about one-third.”

“If it extends our time to live, that's enough.” Marika said with a smile. “If possible, I would like a battleship with a large caliber main gun to deliver the final blow to the first strike fleet, but even an amateur can see that it will be impossible to maintain its strength the coming melee. Schnitzer, make sure you have an effective way to attack with what we have.”

“It's going to be extremely difficult for us to reach the attack position.”

“It's not the first time that we've had to work hard because of reckless behavior.”

Schnitzer slowly turned his head from the combat commander's seat to the captain's seat. “You're starting to resemble Gonzaemon in some strange ways.”

“What?”

“No, it's nothing.”

“Well, anyway, this shot should be the end of all this work.” Marika looked around the bridge. “The rest should be easy, so let’s take the first step.”

“Aye aye”

In order to minimize the infrared signature of the ship's wake, Kane approaches the leading Barbaroosa with smooth maneuvering that makes it hard to believe that they are in combat.

“We will be in Barbaroosa's shadow. If Captain Blackbeard gets a direct hit, depending on the orientation, we will be taken along with him. Please avoid it well!”

“The patterns of electronic interference are changing.” Coorie reported idly. “I think it's because they know it's the last united front of the surviving pirates. They are jamming us like they don't want us to know where they are.”

“Can you see them?” Marika asked simply. “Can you see where they are and how they are moving?”

“I can't count on it, but I can manage to get a vague idea. Hyakume, how about you?”

“No change in the situation.” Hyakume makes fine adjustments to each sensor to make them work together. “However, the enemy must also know that this is the final battle. And decoys and ghosts don't shoot beams or missiles.”

Hyakume carefully redraws the predicted layout of the enemy fleet. “There are a limited number of ships that can take the optimal attack position, and there is no problem in ignoring ships that are not in the attack position. It would be easier for us if they took advantage of their large number of pieces and dispersed them, since we would have fewer opponents to fight directly. It is the height of folly to deploy forces one after another.”

Hyakume stopped his hands after superimposing the current layout of detected enemy vessels on their planned trajectory and making a rough projection of the future. “However, we’ll have to deal with up to half a dozen opponents at the same time.”

“Two battleships and a cruiser would be a good match, wouldn't they?” Marika ran her eyes over Hyakume's hand-picked projections of their opponents. It was unlikely to go as predicted, since there would be a lot of revisions before contact. However, it would serve as a reference. “They have to sink us, but we just have to break through them. I don't think the conditions are as bad as they could be.”

“We’re in position.” Kain said as they pulled close to the Barbaroosa, positioning the ships with their hulls facing each other to minimize the blind spots of the ship's onboard armament. “The Karyobinga has already begun its assault. The hunter-killer's mobile cruiser should be shooting at it just as the Barbaroosa catches up and forms a two-ship formation.”

“They're not nice enough to wait until we're ready.” Marika sat back in the captain's seat in preparation for the combat maneuvers that were about to begin. Since the maneuverability of the massive Karyobinga is inferior to that of the lighter Barbaroosa, they have no choice but to cover for it.

“Direct communication from the Barbaroosa.” Coorie reported. “When you're this close, you don't have to worry about being intercepted.”

“I'll leave it to you.” On the battlefield, where the battle progresses at superluminal speed, there are not many situations in which the captain has to make direct decisions. Marika looked around at the displays around the captain's seat so that she could make a sound judgment at that time. “It’s an exchange of battle data, right?”

“Yes.” Coorie deftly set up a battle information line between the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru. “If we can't share combat information with each other, we can't cover our blind spots. Oh, and Barbaroosa seems to have left the settings from the last time.” Coorie connected complex information lines between the battleships.

“Okay, let's trust each other's information and take our shot. If we have to check the current position of every single mobile cruiser, we won't be able to hit them in time with our beams. Here we go, setup is complete!”

“*Barbaroosa to Bentenmaru.*” Captain Blackbeard's gruff voice echoed on the bridge. “*This is the usual Blackbeard. Can you hear me, Captain Marika?*”

“I can hear you.” Marika responded to the voice-only transmission from the Barbaroosa’s captain, Kenjo Kurihara, whom she had not heard from since the start of the battle. “Reception is good. It's almost over.”

“*Well, this is probably our final offensive. I'll take care of the anti-ship attack with my big Barbaroosa. I'll leave it to you to finish off the first strike fleet flagship.*”

“I accept.” Marika assured him. “Let's go.”

“*All right, that's the spirit. Here we go!*”

Disguising the three-ship fleet as a two-ship formation, the pirate fleet began to accelerate toward the empty airspace to avoid the attacking hunter-killer fleet.

The procedure for combat maneuvers in outer space is not that different between large battleships and small fighter jets. The basics of three-dimensional combat were established by early atmospheric aircraft, and have been refined over history, varying depending on location and scale.

A two-ship formation, which is the smallest unit of a fleet, is a classic tactic in which they attack while protecting each other. When faced with two battleships, even a mobile cruiser with superior maneuverability cannot approach it carelessly.

The hunter-killer fleet, equipped with mobile cruisers for anti-pirate ships, tried to overwhelm the two-ship pirate fleet by numbers. The cruisers, which had been scattered ahead to search for the enemy, approaches while intimidating it with long-range artillery fire, gathers its formation and prepares to attack.

The pirate fleet began its assault before the enemy could get into attack position. The hunter-killer fleet was forced to intercept before they could get into formation, and they did so without missing a beat.

The battle of the maneuvering fleets under the strong electronic interference became a battle between the pirate fleet trying to avoid direct combat and the hunter-killer fleet trying to inflict damage, even if only slightly. Reading the enemy's behavior, anticipate their movements, analyze their attack patterns, and respond with as much effective counterattack as possible.

Three mobile cruisers of the hunter-killer fleet were judged to be sunk, and two more were made unable to continue the battle, when the Karyobinga was judged to be sinking. As soon as the remaining Barbaroosa could no longer be expected to receive cover or protection from the Karyobinga, its mobile combat limiter was released, and after two more ships were determined to be severely damaged, it received a direct hit, making it impossible to continue the battle.

Up to this point, the Bentenmaru had successfully maneuvered in combat almost in unison with the Barbaroosa. Although the Bentenmaru had received a number of effective rounds from the ship's cannon fire, which were not of sufficient caliber against a maneuvering cruiser, the system determined them to be effective rounds against the Barbaroosa.

As soon as the Barbaroosa was judged unable to continue the battle, the Bentenmaru leaped out from its shadow. With the best speed of any pirate ship, it launched an assault on the first strike fleet.

The hunter-killer fleet and strike fleet, which had not been aware of the Bentenmaru's existence until then, were delayed in their response. However, the Bentenmaru's distance from the strike fleet when it began its assault gave the enemy sufficient time to prepare for battle.

The Bentenmaru, which had attacked the strike fleet with a fleet of hunter-killer "wolves" while releasing a number of decoys, voluntarily surrendered when it was judged to be medium damaged by several waves of attacks. As soon as the Bentenmaru, the last survivor of the pirate fleet, raised the white flag, Crossbow 22, a large-scale exercise conducted by the Imperial 5th Fleet against pirates, came to an end.

The comprehensive debriefing, or "review meeting," after the Crossbow 22 exercise was held aboard the TDS Neuschwanstein, which was the flagship of the 1st Strike Fleet and also served as the flagship of all three Imperial fleets in this exercise.

As a symbol of Imperial gunboat diplomacy, the strike fleet tours each star system and also provides a platform for meetings with high-ranking officials. The review meeting, which brought together the captains of all three fleets and the captains of the enemy pirate fleets, as well as commanders of carrier-based battle groups, was quite large.

The review meeting, which was attended by Captain Kato Marika, electronic warfare officer Coorie, and combat commander Schnitzer from the Bentenmaru, was held in the largest mobile chamber space of the Joint Strike Command battleship Neuschwanstein.

The mobile chamber is a collection of box seats that can be arranged in any way. The Bentenmaru’s crew were assigned the same box seats as the Barbaroosa’s.

“Here it is.” Captain Kenjo Kurihara of the Barbaroosa appeared with his XO, Nora, in the low-gravity environment of the conference hall.

“You survived again.” Captain Blackbeard raised his hand to Captain Marika with a grin on his face. “You've extended the Bentenmaru's unsinkable record again.”

“Unsinkable record?” Marika made a strange face. “What are you talking about?”

“Don't you know? Ever since Gonzaemon's time, the Bentenmaru has always surrendered before being judged as sunk when participating in exercises, so she has never sunk.” Kenjo looked at Coorie next to Marika. “You didn't tell her?”

“Not at all.” Coorie simply shakes her head.

“So, you guys are not making this up?”

Coorie turned her head to Schnitzer next to her. “Did you teach her?”

“No.” Schnitzer rose from his seat and saluted Kenjo. “Gonzaemon's reckless battle command is not something that can be taught.”

“Luca will tell you that you're just being lazy.”

“In the first place, I didn't expect Captain Marika to understand the difference between sinking judgment and surrender and use them properly since this was her first fleet exercise against the Imperial Army.”

“It seems like she understood it perfectly, didn’t she?” Still grinning, Kenjo turned his attention back to Marika. “Hey, Captain Marika, let me ask you something. Why did you voluntarily surrender before you were judged sunk?”

“Because...” Marika tried to remember her thoughts at that time. “Even if you hold out until the sinking judgment comes, you can pretty much tell if it's going to work or not. If that's the case, I thought it would be easier for everyone to just raise their hands instead of holding out for nothing.”

Frowning a little, Captain Blackbeard looked at the Bentenmaru's electronic warfare officer and combat commander. “I see, you're not like Gonzaemon.”

“Huh.”

“Gonzaemon said that he would hold out until the very last moment and not reveal what he was doing in case of an emergency.”

“It was just too much of a hassle.” Coorie replied in a whisper. “There were still plenty of moves to be made, but when it came to exercises, the previous captain simply cut corners because it wasn't the real thing.”

“By the way.” Since the back seat was occupied first, Kenjo kept his voice down as he sat down in the front seat. “The summons after the review meeting, aren't you there too?”

“...I'm coming.” Marika answered. “Are you going too? So, aren't you always summoned after exercises?”

“It’s a sit-down with a star system military force, so unless there is a serious irregularity, they don't bother to summon you for a separate message. If it's a large-scale exercise against the Imperial fleet that gathers this many pirates, the usual pattern is that after the review session, the bar is opened and they have a blast. Well, even the lowest ranks are free to join the party, so it won't affect the crowd if only the managers are summoned.”

Marika asked from behind Captain Blackbeard's broad back, looking at Coorie’s and Schnitzer's faces next to her. Only Coorie looked unimpressed. “Is there something on your mind?”

“I'm sure it's just my imagination.” Coorie replied gruffly. “Somehow, the Empire's tricks in this exercise were more sinister than usual, the annihilation battle was a different scenario than usual, and the situation was different from last time.”

“Really?” In her position as captain, Marika has also read the materials regarding the previous exercises and mock battles with the Imperial Fleet that the Bentenmaru participated in. However, she literally just skimmed through it, and it is hard to say that she understood the specific battle situation or its background.

“When it comes to regular exercises against the Empire, the scenario is more precisely determined, and the recent enemies are usually rebels or the East Army and the West Army with no background, and pirates aren't just rouge spaceships, but a joint enemy force with a private fleet of a military company, so a joint force needs to be set up accordingly.”

It is going to be a long story. Marika stole a glance at Schnitzer's expression. The mechanized combat cyborg did not interrupt Coorie.

“If you are gathering pirates for a battle exercise, it would be more effective to make it a battle against pirates. They spewed out all sorts of logic, like there's no need for regular fleets to conduct exercises against pirates after a mop-up war. Well, we were given an easy job. Only this time, it was a combat exercise in which the enemy was exactly set to be pirates, and on top of that, it was an open-ended scenario. The Imperial Fleet isn't supposed to be such a resourceful organization or able to change direction so easily. However, no matter how you think about it, it's strange to have an exercise like this in this setting. Either there has been a change in policy, someone has entered the chain of command, or is there a mastermind pulling the strings behind the scenes?”

“That's fine, it seems that the mastermind is willing to pay us generously.” Kenjo looked over at the faces of the ship commanders participating in the exercise gathered in the council chamber. “Thanks to you surviving until the end, you'll be paid a lot more for participating in the exercise. Maybe there'll be a reveal at the next call. Why not have fun until then?”

“The Empire pays well, but not generously.” Coorie grumbled. “When they are generous, they always have a good reason. When they have their own fleet and can move it, you should be careful when they try to use other starships.”

The post-exercise debriefing, also known as the "review meeting," which gathered the captains, skippers, and commanding officers of all participating vessels, was completed as scheduled with the usual procedure of explaining the overall movement using three-dimensional video and a summary by the Joint Chiefs of Staff Command, which wrote the scenario.

After the session was over, the command staff of the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa, who were in the same box, and the Karyobinga, who were in the next box, were led to a separate room by the cadets.

“Oh, my.” With a theatrical gesture, Captain Kenjo entered a circular conference room decorated with furniture that belied the interior of a warship. “Isn't this a special room for guests?”

“That's strange.” Nora responded without changing her expression. “I can't believe they would let pirates like us into a room that is at least used by ambassadors.”

“Incredible.” Marika's eyes were completely taken aback by the high-ceilinged room that made the presidential office of the Sea of the Morningstar executive branch, which she had visited to renew her privateer's license, look like the living room of a house for sale. “The flagship of the imperial fleet has such an amazing room.”

“The reception room for guests has another special feature in addition to the budget involved in the space and furnishings.” Coorie, guided by the cadet, sat down on the large chair provided at the round table with a bored expression on her face.

“What is it?”

“Although warships are already a place with strict secrecy, this place is probably the best. I think the anti-electronic defenses are better than the electronic battleship's central computer.” Coorie took out a card-like general-purpose analyzer from the work bag she had brought with her, ignoring the cadets' eyes. “Originally, when we boarded the Neuschwanstein, no mobile terminals or transceivers could get through, but here there's no electromagnetic radiation from the ship or anything. It's almost an anechoic chamber.”

“In other words…” Marika looked around the circular conference room, where classical art furnishings were arranged between columns carved from natural stone. “That means that the conversations we have here won't leak out?”

“The guest quarters of a command ship are famous for their facilities as well as their strict security.”

With the distinctive sound of his cane, Count Khan, the captain of the pirate ship Karyobinga, appears as the cadets guide him in. “The fact that we were summoned here must mean that there is something that needs to be kept confidential among us.”

“Only three ships?” Marika asked Count Khan, who came in with the black-haired first officer who always accompanied him. “Is it just the Karyobinga, the Barbaroosa, and the Bentenmaru?

“I haven't seen any crew members from other ships.” The first officer, who had black hair tied up high and was wearing a dress, bowed to Marika and Kenjo before being escorted to her seat by a cadet.

“These are the last three ships left in this exercise.”

Seeing Kenjo's face, Marika asked Coorie and Schnitzer with a look in her eyes. “I wonder if there will be a special bonus?”

Coorie cleared her throat and said “Sponsors who pay too much are dangerous.”

“Thank you for waiting.” Instead of military uniform, a man wearing a business suit and a white coat entered the circular conference room. He unfolded the large file in his hand and looked around at the faces of the pirate ship captains seated at the round table one by one.

Marika noticed that Coorie next to her made a menacing, cat-like noise.

“Captain Kenjo Kurihara and first officer Nora from the Barbaroosa, Captain Kato Marika, Coorie and Schnitzer from the Bentenmaru.”

“You...” Pretending not to hear Coorie's murmurs, the man in the white coat continued calmly.

“From the Karyobinga, the captain, Count Kahn, and the second-in-command, Lady Anne.” The elegant man slammed the large file shut. “The only ones who are here for the after-debriefing are the heads of the three pirate ships.”

In response to the elegant man's signal, the cadet at the tall door closed the conference room. He politely brings out a large key and locks the cylinder lock with a classic mechanical sound.

“Don't worry.” He went to the other side of the round table and took a seat. “As this is a highly confidential matter, we are taking extra precautions. It's not that complicated, so I won't take up too much of your time.”

With a professional smile on his face, he looked over each of the pirates' faces. His gaze stopped at Coorie, who was staring at him through a pair of glasses, almost directly in front of him. “Hello Coo-chan.” He raised his hand to Coorie in a friendly manner. “Long time no see. How have you been?”

“Don't call me Coo-chan!”

A person and person holding hands

Description automatically generated

Coorie stood up with such force that the heavy chair almost tipped over and bared her fangs. “You were the one pulling the strings back there, Nash!”

“Of course I was.” The handsome man called Nash winked at her.

“It’s impossible, there is no way that such a lowly person could have arranged all of that.”

Nash stood up from his chair, touching the polished obsidian table. “I'm late in introducing myself. My name is Nat Nashfall. I belong to the intelligence Department of the Imperial Fleet.”

“Intelligence Department!?” Marika was the only one who raised her voice, but quiet surprise spread among the pirates. Coorie is the only one who keeps her eyes on Nash.

“Intelligence Division with Joint Chiefs of Staff Command.” Coorie added. “You've come a long way.”

“Thanks to you.” Nash bowed and sat down. “The fact that you’ve been following me up to now means you’re at least a little concerned about me, right?”

“Bah!” Coorie sputtered and slumped back in her chair. Marika compared Nash with Coorie , who sat sideways in her chair, elbows on the table, looking away.

“First of all, I would like to salute the good work of the Karyobinga, the Barbaroosa, and the Bentenmaru in this exercise, Crossbow 22.” Nash opened the file he had placed on the table. “This time, at the request of the fleet command, the exercise was conducted in a more realistic scenario with more freedom than ever before. The situation was overwhelmingly in favor of the Imperial Fleet. Preliminary simulations showed that the enemy would be more easily defeated, and special bonuses would be offered to those starships that survived longer than expected.”

Nash looked around at the pirates with a smile on his face. “Congratulations. You survived 221% longer than we expected, and even managed to launch a counter-attack on the fleet center, even though it ended in failure. This is an unexpected result.”

“Thank you.” Captain Blackbeard raised one hand. “But the intelligence department, which is said to be the brains of the Imperial Fleet, didn't go out of its way just to congratulate some pirates. What's your main point?”

“That's right.” Nash touched the file page to update the display. “There's no point in trying to fool a pirate captain. Let's get straight to the point.” Nash looked up from his file. “It is fortunate for us that these three ships survived to the end. Because you have all received invitations from the frontier Pirate’s Guild.”

No one moved an eyebrow. Despite this, Marika felt the tension level of the pirates present suddenly increase.

An invitation to the Pirate Guild in the name of Muller Grant arrived along with general correspondence. And, at least until now, invitations from the Pirate’s Guild have never been discussed outside of their respective spaceships. As far as Marika knew, it was not known to outsiders that the Odette II and Kato Ririka had received invitations from the Pirate Guild.

It took willpower to keep her eyes fixed on Nash without looking at Captain Blackbeard or the Count. Marika waited for the next words from the man from the intelligence department.

Nash looked around at the faces of the pirate captains, who hardly reacted. “It was a personal invitation from the famous pirate, Muller Grant. There is no more perfect license to join the Pirate Guild.”

“Where did you learn that?” Kenjo spoke up. “It would be pointless to ask the intelligence department now.”

Nash nodded ceremoniously.

“However, if you know who received the crimson invitations, you should also know what we did after that.” Kenjo held out his hands to the Bentenmaru group on one side and the Karyobinga group on the other. “We've received the invitations, but the Barbaroosa, unfortunately, hasn’t sent a reply. I'm trying to figure out if it would be of any use, but I haven't come up with anything good yet. In short, we have no interest in the Pirates' Guild, nor do we wish to be associated with them on future voyages.”

After looking at his colleague's faces to make sure there were no objections, Kenjo returned his eyes to Nash. “I mean, the intelligence community must be aware of our intentions, right?”

“I am aware of that.” Nash nodded, placing his hands on top of the closed file. “That's why the intelligence department has come out to make a direct request, even if it's a lowly one.”

Nash nodded again, wearing a professional smile more reminiscent of a businessman than an intelligence officer. “I would like you to go to Skull Star.”

Silence fell over the conference room. Marika slowly looked at Coorie and Schnitzer's faces as she heard the name of the star for the first time. No change in complexion could be read. Neither Captain Blackbeard nor the Count moved an eyebrow.

“Skull Star.” Nash repeated to the pirates, who did not seem to hear him. “Skull Star, navigational registration Oceanos 7187g3. Also known as Pirate Island[[1]](#footnote-1).”

Nash's gaze moves slowly, as if to see each person's reaction. “Yes, the home of the frontier pirates, the home of all pirates, and the headquarters of the Pirate Guild.”

“I'm surprised to hear the name Skull Star coming from someone working in the General Staff Headquarters, even if it is the Intelligence Department.” Coorie opened her mouth, resting her chin on the palm of her hands as she rested her elbows on the round table. “Do you really believe it exists?”

“Don't you believe it?” With a smile on his face, Nash tilted his head slightly toward Coorie. “The invitation to the Pirate’s Guild you received should have included the name of the nominator, the pirate Muller Grant, as well as the coordinates of the Pirate’s Guild. Oceanos 7187g3.” Nash mentioned the star registration symbol, which he must have completely memorized. “Isn't that where the frontier pirates are based?”

“Unfortunately, I'm not a frontier pirate.” Kenjo raised his hands and shook his head.

“I don't know for sure that the Skull Star is real, or that it is really the home of the famous Pirate Guild, which is famous as Pirate Island? The Pirate Guild is not just a frontier pirate organization as they say, but a powerful connection that unites not only criminal gangs but also rebel forces as an anti-imperial force.” Kenjo looked up at Nash. “Doesn't the Intelligence Department, which is said to be the brain of the Joint Staff Command, which deploys fleets even to remote areas, have more reliable information?”

“So, yeah.” Coorie, who had previously turned away, glared at Nash. “So that's why the Intelligence Bureau came out instead of the Fifth Fleet.” Coorie turned her whole body towards Nash. “Pirate Island is outside the Empire, on the frontier. And the frontier is the responsibility of the Seventh Fleet, not the Fifth Fleet. The only one who can move across both sides is the Joint Chiefs of Staff Command, which is also the Intelligence Department, not the Fleet, which is tied to the star sector in their charge.”

Coorie stared at Nash through her thick, round glasses. “Will you answer honestly?”

“Oh, you want an honest answer from someone in the intelligence community?” Nash nodded happily. “Yeah, I'll answer anything, if that's what you want.”

Shrugging, Coorie began asking questions. “Is this exercise the brainchild of the intelligence department?”

“Without going into the details of the situation, yes it is.” Nash nodded his head in agreement. “It's an annual event for the Imperial Fleet to conduct exercises against pirates like you who have privateer licenses or star district business licenses. However, the reason this exercise took on an irregular form compared to previous years and greatly increased the degree of freedom for both enemy and ally is because the Fifth Fleet accepted our request.”

“What was the reason for changing the parameters for this exercise?”

“To gauge the exact strength of you pirates.” Nash answered smoothly. “But Coo-chan won't be satisfied with that answer.”

“Don't call me Coo-chan.”

“The ostensible purpose of this exercise was to improve the Fifth Fleet's readiness through a highly flexible exercise. And for us in the Intelligence Division, the objective was to prove to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that you are capable of the mission we want to accomplish.”

“Such nice words.” Coorie let out an exasperated sigh. “So, the Fifth Fleet and the Intelligence Bureau have achieved their expected objectives, right?”

“Yes, and with much better results than we had expected.” Nash nodded emphatically. “As the Imperial Fleet, it is not our intention to force our subjects to go into dangerous places. However, as capable as you are, you will definitely return safely no matter what difficulties you face.”

“Is that what the Empire is saying, to send good civilians to the Skull Star?” “Hmm,” Coorie sniffed. “So, what do you want to do by sending pirates to the distant Skull Star?”

Looking up, Coorie shifted her glasses a little and stared at Nash. “It can’t be, your job is to accept an invitation to join the Pirate Guild and gather information as a spy, right?”

After staring at Coorie's face for a moment as if he were looking at something unusual, Nash nodded and lowered his eyes. “When we go to the negotiation table, headquarters will instruct us on how much information to disclose to the other party, depending on the situation. The level of information we are allowed to disclose may vary depending on the other party and the situation, such as whether we are allowed to only hint at relevant information, whether we are allowed to give accurate information, or whether we are allowed to give random information.”

Nash looked up at Coorie. “What I am about to share is the highest level of information that my authority allows. If possible, I would like you to keep it to yourselves.”

“Even our crew members who aren't here?”

Nash turned his attention to the Count who asked him to confirm. “Yes. If you accept our job, that would be a different story, but you have not said that you will or will not accept this job yet. If it has been decided that you will sail to the Skull Star, then yes. Otherwise, I would like you to forget about this matter as soon as you leave this room.”

After looking at the faces of the pirates across the round table one by one, Nash returned his gaze to Coorie. “Intelligence wants to have a negotiation channel with the pirate guilds on the frontier.” Nash nodded lightly, as if that was all the information he needed.

“Huh” Coorie replied, looking bored, and raised her glasses, placing her finger between the lenses. “The Imperial Fleet, which has expelled pirates from the Empire in a mopping-up war and has publicly stated that it does not acknowledge the existence of pirates within its territory, is now negotiating with pirates even though they are outside the territory?” Coorie reiterated what those involved should have known. “Is that the general intention of the Imperial Fleet? Or is the intelligence department on its own?”

“If the pirates are a group of criminals whose main activity is illegal, of course, the Imperial Fleet's attitude toward them will remain the same as before. However, pirates on the frontier are not just a group of illegal criminals.”

“Have you checked all the charges against the pirates whose names are listed in the Pirate Guild?” Captain Blackbeard rested his elbow on the round table. “Not everyone in the Pirates' Guild are outlaws with pirate aspirations. Are they all the same, from popular bounty hunters to private fleets with criminal connections?”

“Unfortunately, the Intelligence Department also does not have an up-to-date and accurate roster of the Pirate’s Guild.” Nash shook his head with a smile. “So it's hard to say how many of the pirates in the guild are thug bounty hunters and how many are just spacecraft registered for the benefit of the Pirates Guild, a broad-based mutual aid organization.”

Nash continued, looking at each of the pirates' faces. “Some of them are criminals for which bounties have been placed not only by the Empire but also by the frontier, and some of them have never committed even a single act of piracy despite being members of the Pirates Guild. Of course, there may be some lawbreaking, but that alone is no reason for the Imperial Fleet, which advocates justice, to unilaterally annihilate them all.”

Nash shook his head with a plausible look on his face. “So, it's not convenient for us to collectively turn them against us.”

“That's a very different tone from the one you used during the mop-up war.” The Count said in a quiet voice. “Didn't the Imperial fleet at that time have a policy of eliminating everything in the galaxy that could be called pirates?”

“As you know, there are circumstances and exceptions to everything.” Nash continued, checking the pirates' reactions. “The reality is that the fleet does not interfere with pirates like you, whose activities are authorized by independent systems with privateering licenses, or pirates operated by independent companies as entertainers. As you know, you are not the only pirates operating legally in Imperial territory.”

“Opportunism is everywhere.” Coorie responded. “At least we know that the Intelligence Department isn't considering this job based solely on principles and dogma. But do you really realize that you are dealing with a much more complex and troublesome problem?”

“If all the pirates on the frontier were bad guys who needed to be wiped out, we wouldn't have any trouble dealing with them. However, the breakdown of the spaceships that actually belong to the Pirate Guild is not that simple. Just as not all frontier planets are allied with rebel forces, frontier pirates are as diverse in ideology as they are in arms, equipment, and behavior. If that's the case, there's no need to make all of them our enemy. If there are battles that can be avoided through negotiation, we should not be averse to negotiation. After all, the intelligence department exists to win without fighting.” Nash looked back at Coorie. “Are you satisfied with this answer?”

Coorie continued to ask questions without changing her expression at all. “Is the Intelligence Department as a whole aware of the problem? Or is it just a small group, including you?”

“Of course, all members of the Intelligence Department, which is the brain of our excellent fleet, are equally aware of the problem.” Nash answered with a smile and tilted his head slightly. “Well, if I could say that, our jobs would be a lot easier. However, I hope that our comrades are equally aware of the problem to the same extent as the Seventh Fleet, which is actually dealing with pirates in the Frontier Star District.”

“I can't trust you the moment you start calling me a comrade.” Captain Blackbeard glared at Nash. “Just because we have a connection with the Pirate Guild doesn't mean we have connections with all the pirates.”

“You are correct in your opinion.”

“If the Imperial Fleet wants to distinguish between pirates who should be eliminated as enemies and those who should not, doesn't it have to establish negotiations with all pirates individually?”

“If necessary.” Nash replied. “In fact, that is the ultimate goal of the Intelligence Department. If we can have a channel with each and every pirate who is not tied to a remote star district or government, that in itself will be a powerful weapon. Of course, maintaining the channel will not be an easy task, but the information we will receive will be well worth it.”

“If you are really going to do such a far-reaching and time-consuming job, why don't you just go directly with an Imperial Fleet ship instead of going to the trouble of talking to a pirate with a privateer's license?” Coorie suggested in a bored tone. “Wouldn't it be better to have the battleships of the Seventh Fleet raise a white flag and aim for the Skull Star directly?”

“The Imperial Fleet doesn't trust pirates that much.” Nash answered as if it were someone else's business. “And pirates probably don't trust the Imperial fleet either. Moving the Empire's ships at this stage could cause unnecessary commotion. Moreover, it is cheaper to operate your privately run pirate ships than to operate the expensive Imperial fleet.”

“I see.” With an exasperated voice, Captain Blackbeard scratched his cheek. “Well, it would be a big deal if an Imperial naval vessel, even in a remote area, was sunk by pirates, but a single pirate ship with a privateer's license would not be a big problem, is that your calculation?”

“I won't deny it.” Still smiling, Nash nodded to Captain Blackbeard. “The accounting department, which has the same computational ability as a major trading company, has come to a similar conclusion.”

“It would be interesting to see how our starships and lives are assessed compared to the Imperial fleet, but that's okay.”

Looking at XO Nora, Kenjo turned his attention back to the intelligence officer. “Even if we were to successfully reach Pirate Island, you would have to leave it up to us pirates to build such a complicated, two-sided story, in which the Intelligence Department would have to negotiate as an agent of the Empire.”

“Of course.” With a smile, Nash looked around at the pirates at the round table. “If you accept the invitation and go to the Skull Star, a person from the Intelligence Department with appropriate authority will be on board the pirate ship. For example, in the case of the Bentenmaru, I, Nat Nashfall, will accompany you to the Skull Star.”

Nash stopped to look at the Buddha-faced Coorie. “Coorie, would you please take me aboard your spaceship?”

“It seems like it was a troublesome conversation.”

The launch party after the review session took place on the central deck of the Joint Strike Command Battleship (TDS) Neuschwanstein, which boasts the largest single space onboard the ship, and invited the generals of all participating ships and all the pirates.

Hyakume, holding a huge navy-spec tankard in both hands, quickly spotted Marika, who had appeared at the venue with Schnitzer and Coorie.

“You see?”

From a passing self-propelled cart, Marika, dressed in her captain's uniform, carefully selected a glass of fresh juice that did not contain any intoxicants.

“That’s right.” Hyakume conferred with Schnitzer, handing him one of the mugs he had brought. “If only the captains of the three surviving pirate ships are summoned to the launch after the big review meeting, and they haven't been invited to the launch until now, you know it's not that simple.”

Hyakume called out to Schnitzer, who had emptied the mug he was given in one go. “As you would expect from a battleship that even has its own brewery, you can enjoy delicious beer.”

“I'll get a replacement.”

“Also, just look at the faces of the captain and Coorie.”

Coorie caught a self-propelled cart full of sweets and devoured the stacks of brightly colored sweets.

“What do you think, is this something we can talk about here?”

“No, I don't think so.” With a difficult look on her face, Marika sipped her juice. “I think it's something that I'll have to discuss with everyone later, not just you guys, but with the other captains as well.”

“Other captains?” Hyakume looked around warily, and then lowered his voice. “With Captain Blackbeard and the Count? Is this really such a big deal?”

“It’s definitely a big deal.” Marika took a sip of the juice, which had a refreshing citrus scent. The modest sweetness was pleasant. “...Also, maybe I should ask Ririka too.”

“It's a trap.” Kane spat out.

“It's a nasty trap.” Hyakume remains facing the radar/sensor seat and does not show his face.

“It goes without saying.” Luca holds her hands over the crystal ball.

“Well, it's a double trap, right?” Sandaime, in the engineer's seat, counted down on his fingers. Marika, in the captain's seat, looked around at everyone on the bridge.

“Everyone has the same opinion?”

“First of all, you realize that the invitation from the Pirate Guild could be a trap, right?” Misa, seated in the observer's seat, holds a crimson envelope between her fingertips. “It's hard to believe that a pirate like Muller would use such a sneaky trick, but she is known to do whatever it takes to get what she wants. It is even possible that she sent the invitation to lure an escaped Galactic Empire privateer's license holder to her territory and make him pay back his debt.”

“If that's the case, then Ririka is probably the one who is hated the most.” Marika murmured. Three invitations from the pirate guild arrived around Marika, two were addressed to the Bentenmaru and the Odette II, but one was addressed to Kato Ririka by name. “But, the Pirates' Guild invitations are only sent out after the captains' recommendations are approved, right? If they want to trap us for revenge, aren't there other ways to do it?”

“Just because you've never heard of it before doesn't guarantee that this invitation isn't a trap.” Rising from the observer's seat, Misa placed a crimson envelope on the control panel surrounding the captain's seat. “This may be the first trap, and we cannot confirm whether or not this is an invitation officially certified by the Pirate Guild. Even if it was an official invitation, Muller, the leader of the pirate guild, might be able to use it as a trap. And there is no way that the Imperial Fleet's intelligence department would not have considered that possibility.” Misa looked at Coorie, who was facing the captain's seat with a blanket on her lap. “Right?”

“The Pirates' Guild's crimson invitation is so famous that it's even used in stories.” Coorie responded with a mumble. “Even if the timing was right and a formal invitation was sent out, if the intelligence department got hold of that information, they would forge duplicates and send them to similar ships like the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa. We should be able to come up with a plan to train our staff and board the Skull Star. It would be easier for the military to do so without involving the outside world.”

“But that's only if the imperial fleet is thinking of something like crushing the entire Pirate’s Guild, right?” Marika tried to refute the argument. “This time, the main point is that the fleet wants to have a negotiation channel with the Pirate Guild. Isn't that why they went out of their way to approach the privateers who received the invitations?”

“The enemies of the Imperial fleet are not just the rebels and pirates on the frontier.” Schnitzer opened his massive mouth. “Some members of the Imperial fleet do not take kindly to pirates operating legally within Imperial territory. We shouldn't think that the Empire is monolithic and that everyone is on our side.”

“You mean they might be thinking that this is a good opportunity to destroy any privateers they can?”

“I'm sure there are people in the Empire who might think that way.”

“In other words, we're still not sure if it's the pirate Muller or the guild, but it's possible that the frontier pirates are trying to get revenge on us and the Imperial Fleet, after getting this information, is trying to destroy the pirates with the guilds or even the pirates with privateer's licenses.”

Marika tried counting on her right hand. She raises her remaining left hand. “And what is the reward for that?” Marika looked around at the bridge crew with her left hand extended. “Of course the Imperial Fleet will take care of all the penalties or substitutions for regular work that we have to do while we’re on this job, but the compensation, including hazard pay, is not outrageous, but it's pretty good, right?”

“It's delicious that the fleet guarantees that this matter is tax free.” Hyakume grumbled. “So, in addition to that huge reward, is the special Imperial blank exemption issued to you worth it? Is it worth it to miss this opportunity and ignore it?”

No one on the bridge crew made eye contact with Marika. As if to confirm, Marika continued. “Even though its use is limited to pirate work, if I use the blank exemption, I can replace the entire spacecraft, which is almost impossible with the current contract, and I can also appoint a captain who is not a direct family member, right? Isn't this a pretty amazing deal?”

Nash also explained to the pirates the rewards for special missions. No one was impressed by the fact that the fleet would be responsible for any cancellations or substitutes for contracted work during the mission period, and that there would be success rewards in addition to hazard pay, but the bonus at the end was amazing.

A blank exemption issued by the Empire. A blank exemption allows for a temporary override of almost all laws and contractual matters in Imperial territory.

Blank exemptions, which can even make illegal acts legal depending on how they are used, are not easily issued, and require an audit by the Empire for them to be effective. It is said that there are cases in which they are issued in plea bargains or other things, but their existence is not officially acknowledged.

The blank certificate issued as a reward for success this time was meant to guarantee the validity of the Empire's relationship with the governments of the star systems that issue pirate exemptions.

The bridge crew exchanged awkward glances. Misa was the first to speak. “The Empire is playing a big game. If they just issue a blank exemption, they don't need to prepare as much as a reward, just use the prestige of the Empire. And if we could temporarily override the privateer's license that makes us legally pirates in the Galactic Empire, it would be a huge benefit.”

Marika turned to Misa. “Right? I think the Bentenmaru is a good spaceship, but everyone keeps complaining about it.”

“Well, listen. If a blank exemption is enforced against a star system government, the Empire will be saddled with unseen expenses for the foreseeable future, even if it appears to be cheaper. The Empire will owe the administration a debt, because the Empire will be tampering with the relationship between the administration and the pirates for the convenience of the Empire. In other words, the issuance of a blank exemption, while seemingly inexpensive, is actually far more complicated and costly than a cash reward. The fact that they even dangled this bait in the air suggests that the fleet thinks this job is that important, or else…”

Schnitzer took over in place of Misa, who seemed reluctant to speak. “We must also consider the possibility that they have measures in place to avoid using the exemption.”

“So I don’t have to use my exemption…”

“Even if the work is finished, if there is no one to receive compensation, there is no need to worry about a blank exemption being used.” Misa said.

“As for the reward, it would be difficult to eliminate all recipients, but in principle blank exemptions should be handed over directly to the parties involved.”

“Are they thinking that far ahead?” Marika tilted her head and looked around at everyone. “If the Empire only had the intention of using the blank exemption as bait and was thinking of squashing it after the mission was completed, I think they would carry out their affairs in a more secretive manner. The people in the intelligence department told me to keep it confidential, but if they summoned the captain of a pirate ship with three attendants and talked to him, wouldn't they be prepared for a lot of things to be leaked?”

“It depends on the personality of the person speaking.” At Misa's words, the bridge crew's eyes focused on Coorie, whose twisted mouth and round glasses look off into the void.

“Is Nash that kind of person?” Marika followed up. “I mean, how do you know each other?”

With pursed lips, Coorie reluctantly returned her gaze. “There's no way someone in the intelligence department could tell an outsider to keep a secret, even if they're in the same department, and trust them to keep it. There's no way you could work as an intelligence officer at the Joint Chiefs of Staff Command if you weren't calculating enough to let things leak out.”

“Like playing chess, having to think up to 10 or 20 moves ahead is exhausting, isn't it?” Marika keeps her eyes on Coorie. “In other words, isn't it safe to assume that the Imperial Fleet is willing to issue a blank exemption regarding this matter as promised?”

Coorie looked down with a troubled expression on her face. Marika asked further. “That Nash is from the Intelligence Department, can you trust him?”

A more downcast Coorie grunts. “He’s always been very calculating, and quick at calculating profits and losses. I think he’s calculating whether it is better if he’s trusted or not.”

“Which way are you calculating?”

Coorie looked up at the captain. “I don't know. But I wouldn't trust him.”

“Why?”

“Because he will disappoint you.” Coorie turned her chair to face the electronic warfare panel. “Even if you ask me why or what happened, I won't answer, so that's it.”

“Hah…” Marika looked around at the faces of the remaining bridge crew members. With her shrugs and sighs, no one seems to be asking Coorie for further comment. “Well, then, Hyakume, please contact Mr. Show.”

“You want to talk to the insurance company?” Hyakume turned to his post and began setting up the communication line. Marika shook her head.

“No, that's not it, just a report on the end of the exercise and, if possible, information gathering.”

“*Congratulations on a great job on Crossbow 22!*” The afro-haired monster that appeared on the communication monitor clapped for the first time. “*And it seems that you survived the Imperial fleet more than twice as long as expected.*”

“Thanks.” Marika, sitting in the captain's seat, gave a salute to the insurance union agent. “The Harold Lloyd Insurance Union is already aware of the results of the exercise that just ended?”

“*It's been our policy since our founding to spare no effort in gathering information.*” Show said in a tone that sounded like he was disclosing a secret. “The fact that you can't make money if you're having fun is the same now as in the past. Thanks to that, the reward money for participating in the exercise has increased a lot, right? The fact that our customer's financial situation is going well is something we should be happy about.”

Marika gave up trying to read Show's expression through his flashy sunglasses. “Well, I think it's okay, but the conversation that follows will be highly confidential. Are you okay with that?”

“*Sure.*” Show drew a circle with his fingertips, as if checking the control panels around him. “*With a Class III encryption code designation and personal authentication, I know it's not just a regular timed call or a simple after-the-fact report. Harold Lloyd Insurance Union's best coded line is in operation. The Imperial fleet is probably listening in on your communication line, but I can guarantee that the contents of the communication will not be deciphered during the confidentiality period.*”

“Are they listening?” Marika asked Coorie, who had remained sullen since the end of the big review meeting.

“Probably.” Coorie, in the electronic warfare seat, replied in the same tone as usual. “I think the fleet's electronic battleships will be listening to the external ships that participated after the exercise ends while they are returning home. Especially since the circumstances are different this time...” Since this is Coorie, she must have taken steps to prevent eavesdropping. “Isn't it better for you to assume that if you're having a private conversation with your insurance company over a coded line, it's going to be discovered?”

Murmuring, Marika, in the captain's seat, turned her attention back to Show on her communications monitor. “Well, you seem to know the results of Crossbow 22, so I won't report on it.”

“*If possible, I would have liked to hear from Captain Marika about her great success in the exercise, but that's not going to happen.*” Show waved his hand lightly. “*No problem, just get to the point. You are talking about your next job, right?*”

Marika continued, wondering how much the insurance union agent knew about the situation. “Well, let me check first. If the Bentenmaru were to operate outside of Imperial territory, to what extent would it receive support from the Harold Lloyd Insurance Union?”

“*Your insurance will only cover the Bentenmaru in Imperial territory as long as it is operating within the scope of its privateer's license.*” Show answered smoothly, as if he had prepared it. “*If you suffer unexpected damage outside of imperial territory, unfortunately we can't cover it. What do you mean by asking me something that's not worth checking?*” Show's sunglasses glinted.

“I don't really understand what that means.” Marika feigned ignorance. Show bared his teeth in a grin that looked like he was going to bite.

“*Well, that's how it appears on the surface, but as you know, the Harold Lloyd Insurance Union’s business is not limited to Imperial territory. As you know, we have agents in the major star systems and stations in the outlying areas, and we do business extensively. The fact that the Bentenmaru's activities are only covered within Imperial territory is mainly a matter of insurance policies, and we are prepared to be flexible in this area. Now, are we any closer to the answer you want?*”

“Thank you.” Marika bowed to Show over the monitor. “It's enough for now to say that there is a lot of room for negotiation. Well, I have a few questions, if you don't mind.”

“*Oh, you’ve been a customer for many years. Ask me anything.*”

“Does Harold Lloyd Insurance Union's frontier work include insurance work for pirate ships?”

Show smiled at Marika's sudden question. “*They are not included. We are a long-established insurance association that prides itself on tradition and formality, so we are not allowed to do business with people who cannot be trusted, such as pirates.*” After nodding to his words, Show continued. “*Well, that's how it appears on the surface. And, as you know, there are actually very few spaceships that honestly register themselves as pirate ships. Pirate ships with privateer licenses aren't everywhere. Most pirates usually register their spaceships as transport ships, escort ships, observation ships, research ships, or other types of ships that can easily enter any port.*”

Even within the territory of the Galactic Empire, where security is excellent, civilian ships are allowed to carry self-defense weapons to a certain extent, although the scale is limited and legal fees apply. In remote areas where there are no uniform regulations for weapons, unarmed spaceships are rarer.

“*And if those spaceships ask for proper insurance through regular channels, we have no choice but to accept it. Even in remote ports, there are many places these days that don't allow entry unless you have a minimum amount of insurance.*”

“I'm sure Mr. Show's insurance association knows what the real deal is, no matter what name it's registered under.” Marika said. “Are there really that many pirate ships?”

“*Not many.*” Show answered easily. “*Besides, unless they are trying to get a big contract for a full-blown insurance scam, most of our frontier agencies offer inexpensive insurance policies that can get you into any port with no worries. Occasionally, we may have to take care of someone who has damaged port equipment or abandoned a spaceship that is basically scrap, but we do not provide insurance for full-blown piracy, at least not on the pirate side. And insurance against pirate attacks is much more expensive in frontier areas than in Imperial territory so, unfortunately, we don't sell that much.*”

Show added happily. “*What do you want? Did the Imperial Fleet tempt you to take a job as a pirate in the frontier area?*”

“Yeah, it's something similar.” Marika gave a vague smile. “Thank you. I will discuss the details once the situation has been determined.”

“*Oh, I'll be happy to discuss it with you. Call me anytime.*”

Leaving the end of the process to Hyakume, Marika cut off the communication. “...It's not like I don't know.” Leaning against the backrest of the captain's seat, Marika closed her eyes.

“That's right.” Hyakume, who had been silently listening to the conversation between the agent and the captain, turned his entire seat to the captain's seat. “It's common knowledge in the industry that the information gathering ability of insurance companies is on par with or better than that of the Imperial Fleet's Intelligence Department. In the frontier areas, the insurance company is probably better than the fleet. After all, the information they analyze and evaluate is directly connected to business.”

“It may have been a social call, but it didn't seem to stop him.” Marika followed with her own observations. “Well, I don't think he knew that we were suddenly assigned to go on a business trip to a frontier area, but even when I asked him about the situation with pirates in the frontier, his expression didn't change at all.”

“It would be a big problem if I told you that Show’s complexion would change.” Kane, in the helmsman's seat, folded his hands behind his head. “I'm sure you'll find it's a bigger deal than what's going on with the Bentenmaru.”

“Depending on how the conversation goes, we may be able to get some information.”

“If you say you'll pass on the information you have, I'm sure they'll be on board.” Coorie runs her fingers across the electronic warfare table. “When it comes to information about the Pirate Guild and the Skull Star, there are many people who want to hear about it, even if they're not part of the insurance union.”

“But that's only if you go and come back safely.” Marika sank into the captain's seat. “We're not information brokers, so even if we had information about the pirate guild, we wouldn't be able to do business successfully.”

“But, what if, by some mistake, the Bentenmaru were able to join the Pirate’s Guild?” After moving his chair to the helmsman's seat, Kane began checking the ship's steering system. “Well, since it means we’re a real pirate, the value of the Bentenmaru's name will go up a lot.”

“We’re busy enough with the work we already have.” Marika responded with a smile to Kane's joking comment. “Do we really need to sell the Bentenmaru name any further?”

“I'll leave that to the captain's judgment.”

“Well, we don't need it. Even though we only have one ship, the Bentenmaru, we have no intention of expanding our business any further.”

Laughing at Marika's words, the bridge crew returned to their regular duties.

The Bentenmaru's return to Sea of the Morningstar was at night, local time for Shin Okuhama City. Kato Ririka, who was on the day shift today, was cooking dinner and waiting for her daughter, who had taken the day off from school to work as captain, to return home.

“I'm home!”

“Welcome back.”

After the usual greetings, the topic at the dinner table turned to Marika's pirate work. After the main dish while explaining the development of the exercise against the Imperial fleet, Rika was drinking dessert juice and a glass of after-dinner wine, and Marika was thinking about the future.

“Ririka...” A different question than the one she was planning to ask came to her lips. “Why did you become a space pirate?”

Ririka stopped moving, still holding the half-empty glass in her mouth. “Where is this coming from?” Ririka took a sip and placed the glass on the table. “Maybe because I thought that was the quickest way to learn about the universe?”

“Huh?” Marika tilted her head jokingly. “Wasn't it because you could use the big beam gun?”

“There is that, too.” Ririka nodded with a serious look on her face. “But that's not the real reason. I thought that by becoming a space pirate, I would be able to see, touch, and learn about the galaxy with my own eyes faster than attending an aerospace school or pilot school.”

Aerospace schools are designed to train spacecraft crews. There is a wide variety of courses, ranging from short-term courses for owner-pilots to long-term courses with the ultimate goal of obtaining a captain's certificate for commercial operations.

“I could join the Space Force or a transportation company, but in the military, you have to obey orders from your superiors, and most importantly, the Space Force won't let you take a pilot course unless you have good grades in school.”

“Ririka, didn't you get good grades?”

“I did well enough that the teachers didn't worry about me but didn't expect anything from me. The pilot course of the Space Force attracts a lot of top elites who are the best or second best in their school, unfortunately my grades were not that good.” Shaking her head with a laugh, Ririka continued. “Even if I could join a transportation company and get on a spaceship, I would only be able to fly the route the company told me to. But as a space pirate, I thought I could fly the way I wanted to and learn how to do other fields as well as my specialty.”

“Everyone on your team is also very studious, aren’t they?”

Marika nodded. It's natural that Coorie and Hyakume are eagerly collecting the latest combat and technical information because of their profession, but the helmsman Kane is being taught how to aim the main turret by Schnitzer, or for Misa to give lectures on emergency lifesaving techniques to the ship’s crew. It wasn't until recently that Marika realized that this wasn't just about being eager to study, but about being prepared to deal with any emergency situation.

“If you're the captain of a pirate ship, you'll have to do everything from adjusting the operation of the converter to maintaining the beam cannon, right?” Ririka looked at her daughter with a nostalgic look on her face. “I was a captain in name only, so I was only taught the basics of captain duties, but I was still made to do everything from nursing apprenticeship to accounting work.”

“Did it help?” Marika asked, imagining her mother standing in a nurse's uniform next to Misa. Ririka nodded broadly.

“Yeah. I learned a lot about how spaceships work and how the galaxy revolves. Knowing that allows me to keep doing the tedious job of being an air traffic controller.”

Ririka works on the ground at Shin-Okuhama Spaceport, but her control range extends to orbit. When they are short-staffed at the relay station, she may also perform some of the orbital control from the ground.

Thinking for a moment, Marika asked. “So, after leaving the Bentenmaru, did you qualify as an air traffic controller?”

“Ah.” Ririka nodded, as if it was nothing. “There's no shortage of practical training on a pirate ship, from departure to battle handling, but if you want to get certified, you have to take a test at a designated location. I studied while carrying my big belly, and took the entrance exam with the students who had just finished training school. Those were the days.”

“Sounds difficult…” Marika muttered, thinking about it. Even when her daughter began serving as captain of the Bentenmaru, Ririka hardly talked about work. Looking at her changing affiliations and titles, Marika can see that the skills and responsibilities required of her mother's work are becoming heavier each year. However, since Ririka doesn't talk about it, Marika doesn’t ask.

“Let me tell you the most important thing I learned from being a pirate.” Ririka took an after-dinner glass of sake.

“Wow, thank you.” Marika put her elbows on the table and leaned forward.

“Everything in space moves according to the laws of physics. Even the military and outlaws like pirates cannot ignore the laws of physics. However, a spaceship operated by an intelligent being like a human is concerned with many things other than the laws of physics. Do you know what they are?”

Marika thought for a while before answering. “Navigation laws?”

Navigation laws are effective to some extent not only in the territory of the Galactic Empire, where main routes are well maintained and controlled, but also in outlying areas. If a spacecraft containing as much energy as a star were to fly around in an uncontrolled manner, any accidents that could occur would have an impact on the environment in the surrounding airspace.

“That's part of the answer.” Ririka took a deep sip of Sea of the Morningstar’s dessert wine. “However, that alone is not enough to get a passing grade.” Still holding a wine glass in one hand, Ririka looked at her daughter's face, who was still thinking about it. “Convenience.”

“What?” Marika asked again, as if she didn't understand.

“All spaceships fly for convenience and circumstances. Transport ships must deliver their cargo to their destinations on time, and warships fly for training, patrols, warning, and various other purposes. Even a sightseeing flight in a private cruiser has a worthy purpose of having fun. What is the purpose of a pirate ship?”

“To search for prey to pirate.” Marika uttered a passage she had read in some book a long time ago. Ririka laughed and emptied the rest of her glass in one go.

“That's right. Comets and planets fly in their current orbits due to the circumstances at the time they were created and what happened afterwards, and star systems also move along with the rotation of the galaxy. However, when people use a considerable amount of effort and energy to move a spaceship, they have their own circumstances, not just the laws of physics. If you know the circumstances of all the visible spaceships, control and combat aren't that difficult.”

“Huh...” Marika leaned back in her chair with an even more difficult look on her face. “Something like the difference between strategic goals and tactical goals that I asked Jenny and Schnitzer earlier?”

“You don't have to think about it that hard. Are you in a hurry or don't you want to go? Do you want to shoot or not? Where do you want to go and what do you want to do? Do you want to do it or not?” Ririka tilted the empty glass vertically and horizontally, then turned it around and placed it on the table. “The galaxy moves according to the laws of physics, but spaceships are also moved for the convenience of intelligent people.”

“Hmm…” Marika relaxed her upper body and laid down, her temples flat on the table. “I guess each spaceship moves for its own convenience.”

“Most spacecraft are not one-person ships, so you should expect every person on board to have their own convenience. And it is not only those in the sky who are involved with spaceships. There are people on the ground, too, who are working out all sorts of conveniences.”

“...That's right.” Before she could be scolded for bad manners, Marika looked up.

“Don't just think about those around you and forget about your own work and convenience. So, what is our family's convenience now?”

“Cleaning up.” In response, Marika stood up. “Come on, let's get this done quickly.”

“Oh, welcome home.” In the yacht club room of Hakuoh Women's Academy, where afternoon classes had just ended, the club leader, Lynn Lambretta, was alone, facing the information terminal at hand.

“I got home safely.” Marika doesn't hide the fact that this time off is due to her work on a pirate ship. Lynn turned around and faced Marika, who greeted her as usual.

“I'm sorry to interrupt you so soon after you get home, but can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Well, I don't mind.”

“It's time for the final check of your career preference questionnaire.” Without hiding it, Lynn pointed to the display displaying Hakuoh Girls' Academy's standard documents.

“You're going to college, aren't you?” Marika said, trying not to look at the display. “With your performance as president, I think you have a good shot at a good recommendation, don’t you?” After saying that, Marika thought about it. “President, you want to go to Space University with Jenny, right?”

Space University, the highest academic institution in the Galactic Empire, does not accept admission without exams. Recommendations are required just to take the entrance exam, and it is said that passing the multiple selection exams requires not only skill but also luck.

The previous president, Jenny Dolittle, is currently studying at Space University. Marika thought that Lynn was also aiming for the same university.

“Unfortunately, my head isn't as good as Jenny's.” With a shy smile, Lynn poked her head with her fingertips. “No matter how many times I take the mock exam, I still don't have a reliable chance of passing.”

“I think it would be amazing if we were dealing with Space University and the probability was shown as a real number on the mock exam.”

“Well, of course, there are various options, such as going to another school that will admit you and retaking the exam next year, or even take a year off to study for them.” Lynn looked up at Marika. “So, I have a question to ask, is the Bentenmaru hiring?”

Blinking her eyes, Marika reviewed Lynn's face. “What!?”

“No, I thought about it a lot, but if I could do the same job as Jenny in the future, it would be better to study the field now. Jenny's family is in the transportation business, so knowing about space and spaceships will be useful in many ways. And if I wanted to learn about that, space pirates are the quickest way.”

“Ah, um, Pres?”

“After all, space pirates are outside the law. Using their privateering license as a shield, they can operate a spaceship without the qualifications that would be required for a normal spaceship's crew. After all, they are pirates.”

“Well...” Strictly speaking, a pirate ship cannot operate as a spaceship without being crewed according to navigational regulations. All spacecraft, not just pirate ships, are obligated to abide by navigational laws and operate safely. Pirate ships simply rely on their privateering licenses to avoid the penalties that would be imposed on civilian spacecraft.

“You see, my skills are in this area.” Lynn turned to the information terminal and began playing the control board with a fluid touch. “No matter where I look, I can't seem to find a civilian qualification for electronic warfare. It would be a different story if I joined the military or an invasion company for things like getting a radio license or handling a large-scale energy launch system, but there's no place that would let me get a qualification and then say goodbye.”

“Well, pres…”

“That's why, if I’m looking for a place where I can hone my skills for actual combat and accumulate useful experience, I think the space pirates are the best. Isn't Marika's Bentenmaru recruiting crew members?”

“That sounds interesting.” Marika jumped when suddenly someone spoke to her from behind.

“Gruier!”

“I’m also interested in how you managed to gather such a skilled crew and then keep them.” Gruier, who now looks good in her junior high school uniform, continued talking with a smile on her face. “If you don't mind, could you tell me what system is used to recruit crew members for the Bentenmaru?”

“I don't know!” Marika shook her head vigorously at the president and Gruier. “Because I am the newest member of the Bentenmaru crew, and I am the captain! I was only recruited because our pirate's license would be invalid without me as captain, and no one else joined the Bentenmaru’s crew after me.”

Marika noticed that Lynn was pointing to her chest with a confident look on her face. Seeing Gruier with a big smile on her face, Marika held her head as she remembered that the girls had boarded the Bentenmaru after her. “...No, please forget it.”

“Aren't you recruiting new crew members?” Lynn asks further. “If you're the captain, wouldn't you know about the situation?”

“Well, pirate ships are constantly understaffed, and on civilian ships, it's normal for people to work two or three jobs at once, and Schnitzer says he wants to do something about it because they don't have enough combat troops. And Coorie also asked if there were any people who could analyze observation data and handle electronic warfare.” Marika suddenly came back to her senses after talking to them about her crew's circumstances. “But that doesn’t mean we can post recruitment for pirate ship crew in our school’s job information!”

“It's one of the sights I'd like to see if possible.” Gruier looked at Lynn and nodded to each other.

“I think it will be difficult to board our spaceship unless you are an immediate asset.” Marika blurts out an excuse. “The captain is the only one who can manage without being an immediate asset, the rest are all veterans busy with work, so I wonder if they have the luxury of training new employees.”

“Don’t you need a new recruit in electronic warfare?”

“Please stop it, president. You'll be working under me, right?”

“Well, there are plenty of other reliable seniors on board as well.”

“That’s why!”

“Gruier might also be interested in being a space pirate, right?” Startled by Lynn's conversation, Marika looked at Gruier's face.

“Fortunately, I am the seventh in line to the throne.” Gruier’s tone remains the same, as if she were talking about neighborhood gossip. “In other words, there are six heirs to the throne. My future path does not necessarily have to be limited to succession to the imperial throne.”

“I'm sure the chamberlain would cry if he heard that.” Marika sighed.

“I don't necessarily have to protect the throne, but fortunately I have a younger sister.”

“Besides, just because you board the Bentenmaru doesn't mean you have to be a space pirate for the rest of your life, right?” Lynn increases the pressure. “As long as she doesn't flee before the enemy or abandon her duties, she could get a new job after a few years on board, right? A princess with a history as a space pirate would be diplomatically strong, wouldn't she?”

“A pirate princess, huh?” Gruier chuckled. “That's an attractive title.”

“We are not looking for a decorative crew member or someone with too noble a lineage!” Marika raised her voice. “If everyone involved was on board, the Bentenmaru would be destroyed in no time, and not everyone has the talent to become a pirate!”

Marika turned on the main switch of the vacant information terminal and took a seat. “Please don't rely on me for your career path! I also want to go to college.”

After a moment of silence, Lynn and Gruier looked at each other and voiced their protest. “Eh!? That's a waste.” “Aren't you going to work as a pirate captain full-time after graduation? I think everyone is expecting that.”

“Who is ‘everyone’?” Baring her teeth at Gruier, Marika slid her fingers across the control panel of the information terminal and stood up. “An unreliable captain like me is a nuisance to everyone on the Bentenmaru!”

“Because of the privateer's license regulations, there is no replacement for you, is there?”

Marika's fingers stopped.

“You can become a pirate captain while still going to high school! You'll have more free time when you go to college, so there's no problem!”

“A college girl pirate, huh? I guess she's a little less eccentric than a high school girl pirate.”

“What are you talking about?” Marika hurriedly entered the necessary data and quickly shut down her information terminal. “Sorry for this, but I have to go around to the government office after this, so today's club activities will end early.” Marika gave a quick bow to Lynn and Gruier and ran away from the club room.

“Well, I've been an expert in dealing with electronics since I joined the club, but recently I've become more sophisticated.” Lynn waved goodbye as Marika left the clubroom after completing her errands in the blink of an eye. “Marika, what did you come here for?”

Gruier got into the seat of the information terminal that Marika had been using. “Okay? Just a minute.”

Lynn pulled back the career survey form on the main display and called up the usage record on the information terminal installed in the club room. ““I think she probably submitted an application for the use of equipment, but…here it is.” From the latest records, Lynn selected Marika's application for use. “The date is today, the time was just a minute ago, and the applicant was Kato Marika. If you didn't want people to know, you shouldn't have submitted an application, but you're strangely conscientious about things like this.”

“What is it?” Gruier watches Lynn's fingering as she manipulates the display, which switches from one to the other.

“An application to use the Silent Whisper.”

“Huh?” Gruier looked up at the ceiling of the clubroom. The Silent Whisper is stored on the onboard deck of the training ship Odette II, which is moored at the Sea of the Morningstar Relay Station's private dock. “It’s an electronic reconnaissance aircraft, right?”

“Oh, it's also a top-of-the-line product that's just begun test deployment in the Imperial Fleet. I hear that the star system military is making a lot of requests to see and try it out, but I don't know how our office can refuse their requests, no matter how firm they are.”

The state-of-the-art electronic reconnaissance plane brought in by Jenny Doolittle, the previous head of the yacht club, is used only for the occasional practice flight by a small group of yacht club members.

“We don't have any plans to go up to the station together for a while, right?” Gruier asked to confirm.

“Ah. There are no plans for practical training until the week after next.”

“When does Marika's application for use start?”

“Tomorrow for one week.” After making sure there were no omissions or mistakes, Lynn closed the application form.

“I wonder if they'll use it on a pirate ship?”

“You're in quite a hurry, aren't you?”

While thinking about something, Gruier turned on the main switch of the information terminal in front of her and looks for the notice of absence that Marika should have submitted to the school. “If it's an absence report, it won't be posted, right?”

At Lynn's prompting, who was maneuvering the control panel at high speed, Gruier turned to the information terminal next to her. “Marika's absence notice will be sent in the morning of the same day, or if I'm bad at it, it'll be a day late, and if I accidentally postpone it, it might arrive together with the person in question.”

“The application for use starts tomorrow, which means...” Repeating the search results given to her by Lynn, Gruier looked at the information terminal displaying notices from the school. “If she were to use the Silent Whisper, would it be after school tomorrow?”

A black and white sign

Description automatically generated

“Captain Marika from Bentenmaru, can you hear me?”

Due to the special circumstance that the captain is not permanently stationed on the pirate ship, the Bentenmaru does not miss regular contact with Marika. Twice a day, once during the day and once at night in the local time of Shin-Okuhama City, which operates in the same time zone as Galactic Standard Time, Marika reports and confirms her location and current situation to Bentenmaru.

Although the time is chosen to be during lunch break, regular contact is made whether the other person is at a girls' school under strict security or relaxing at home on a day off. On the bridge of the Bentenmaru, which was cruising through the inner planetary space of the Cetus constellation, Kain, who was on duty to communicate today, opened a communication line.

No response. Kane called her personal code again, hoping that Marika had turned on her high-power transceiver.

“Captain Marika, regular contact from Bentenmaru. If you can hear me, please respond.” At this time, it was lunchtime at the Hakuoh Women's Academy, and unless the last class was running long, there should be no reason regular contact cannot be made. While Kane thought about calling again after a while, a response was received.

“*This is Marika, Kato Marika. Sorry Kane, did I keep you waiting?*”

“Ah, just a little. Well, about that...” Kane’s eyes widened as he tried to confirm Marika’s current location, just to be sure. “...In orbit of an outer planet!? Where and what are you doing?”

“*Sorry, I think I need to explain, but it will take time. Silent Whisper is currently navigating the orbit of an outer planet, and will soon pass the orbit* of *Nijinokumo.*”[[2]](#footnote-2)

“What!?”

“Check the Silent Whisper's current location!”

Sandaime jumped from the engineer's seat into the radar/sensor seat, which is Hyakume's assigned seat.

“*It’s okay, Coorie is with me.*”

“What!?” Kane reflexively ran his eyes over to the electronic warfare seat. It was empty, of course.

“We have a current position!” It was easy to capture the Silent Whisper because its current location was attached to the communication data. The Bentenmaru confirmed the current location of the Silent Whisper, which is about to cross the orbit of Nijinokumo, a large gaseous planet that is the sixth planet in the Tau system.

“What are you doing in a place like that, Captain Marika?” As far as Kain can remember, Marika has never gone into outer space unannounced. The only time Marika leaves the surface of the Sea of the Morningstar is for captain duties on the Bentenmaru and for yacht club activities, but until now, the schedule has been made known to the Bentenmaru as well.

“*Ah, you know, I was thinking of going to Skull Star first.*”

Thinking he had misheard the words in the audio-only communication, Kane looked at Sandaime next to him.

“*The Intelligence Department wants to go to the Skull Star, and all they need to get there is an invitation from the Pirate Guild, and as long as we have the captain, there's no need for the Bentenmaru to rush in, right? In that case, I thought it would be best to go there with the minimum number of people necessary and gather information. If we’re lucky, this will be enough to finish the job, but if it isn't, we'll have to start over again.*”

“What are we going to do when the captain suddenly leaves?” Kane bit the microphone. “Gathering information is a job for those at the bottom, and I've never heard of a high rank person jumping into the Pirate Guild's Skull Star first!”

“Is Coorie with you?” In his usual low voice, Schnitzer joined the communication. “Coorie, are you there?”

“*Yes, this is the Silent Whisper, Coorie speaking.*” Coorie responded, sounding grumpier than usual. “*This craft is currently preparing for a FTL jump from beyond Nijinokumo’s orbit.*”

“Is there a problem?”

Coorie answered Schnitzer's minimal question bluntly. “*I'm sorry, the captain convinced me to minimize the damage in the worst-case scenario. Well, it's not just the captain and I, but also an Imperial Fleet's intelligence officer, so I think we'll be okay.*”

“An intelligence officer is with you!?” Kane exclaimed. Schnitzer confirmed. “Nat Nashfall?”

There was a pause for a sigh before a response came back. “*That’s right. Thanks to this small reconnaissance plane, we can make a long-range jump to the frontier. It's the latest model, so it's fast, and the jumping accuracy is pretty good, so if everything goes according to plan, we should be able to get there and back in no time.*”

“Don't miss your regular contact.” Schnitzer said. “We'll also prepare for long-distance jumping so we can rush in at any time.”

“*I'm counting on you.*” Coorie answered in a hushed voice. “*It's unfamiliar space, an unfamiliar reconnaissance plane, and an intelligence officer attached to central command. I think it's going to turn out to be a bad idea anyway.*”

“We wish you a safe voyage.”

“*You too.*”

“That's it!?” Kane stood up from his seat. “That's all?　You're really going to let her go?”

“Shall I jump to Nijinokumo now and stop the Silent Whisper?” Schnitzer is processing the termination of the superluminal communication. “If it was just the captain, I'd be a little worried, or rather, I'd be quite worried, but with Coorie and the intelligence officer, there's no need to worry. Rather, there's no point in worrying.”

“That's true, but...” Kane slumped into the helmsman's seat. “It's not just Coorie and the captain, but there's even a notorious Imperial intelligence officer. I wonder if Captain Marika understands how valuable they are as bait.”

“Coorie and the intelligence agent, Nat Nashfall, seem to be old friends.” Hearing the uncharacteristic line, Kane and Sandaime looked at Schnitzer's back with a startled look. The combat commander calmly continues his work. “If you knew even a little bit about Coorie, you would not make her your enemy.”

“Is that our only hope?” Kane peered at the display on the seat next to him. The Silent Whisper was captured preparing to leap far beyond the exoplanet's orbit. The electronic reconnaissance aircraft was preparing for its final jump before making a FTL jump.

“I have the jump plan.” Marika, seated in the pilot's seat of the Silent Whisper, passed the data to Coorie in the operator's seat next to her.

“Yes, thank you for your hard work.” Coorie took one look at the ultra-long jump setting on the display and returned it to Marika.

“Don't you want to check it?”

“You did, right?” Coorie, in the operator's seat. is busy checking the aircraft before the jump.

“Of course.”

“Then, even if I run the check, I'll get the same result. If this was the Bentenmaru, I could do all kinds of tricks with detailed settings, but the Silent Whisper is the latest model, the FTL jump is semi-automated, so there would be little point in showing off my skills, and since the first leap is set at a safe distance anyway, even a slight deviation would not be a big deal.” Coorie stopped and looked around the operator's seat where the 3D display was displaying multiple images. “Since it's a ship-based equipment, it's not designed for long-term voyages, and since we're over capacity, we want to shorten the flight time by even a second.”

“Hey, there.” Nash said apologetically, his tall body seemed cramped in the auxiliary seat that was installed behind the pilot's seat. “I did say that the sooner the better, but I never expected to be heading to the frontier in a single reconnaissance plane like this.”

“As long as we have a captain with an invitation, we can enter Pirate Island, right?”

Marika sent the jump plan she had created to the control system while thinking about whether she had overlooked anything. No problems were found during the final check. However, computer-based checks of the jump plan only check to see if there are any inconsistencies or mechanical limits have been exceeded, and do not guarantee safe FTL flight.

“As long as we can make contact with the Pirate Guild, we can accomplish Mr. Nash's request.”

“You don't have to call me ‘Mr.’!”

“Is it okay to do that?”

“I don't mind.”

With a sigh of disgust, Coorie glanced at the intelligence officer in the auxiliary seat diagonally behind her. “We’ll take you all the way to the Skull Star, but there is no guarantee that you will return. That's fine, right?”

“I'm getting a discount on the fare, so I think that's a reasonable deal.” Nash nodded. “I have arranged for the promised payment to be transferred to you after my return.”

“What if you can't return?” Coorie asked flatly. “I don't want to do a dangerous job and not get paid because you couldn't get home.”

“Even if my return is delayed for a little while, I have arranged that the payment will go to the Bentenmaru unless we are notified of a cancellation after the scheduled period has passed.” Nash answered with a smile in his voice. “That aspect of Coo-chan hasn't changed.”

“Don’t call me Coo-chan.”

Marika chuckled when she heard Coorie's line, her back still turned to Nash. Coorie, in the operator's seat, let out a tired sigh. “The captain, me, and an intelligence officer on a reconnaissance plane. Well, if we think we're going to finish things quickly and come back, a party like this is more than enough.”

“And, there's another advantage.” Marika said as she stabilized the trajectory for their FTL jump approach. “With only this many people, no matter what happens, the damage will be minimal.”

“You haven't done a very good job of calculating the potential for damage.” Coorie resumed her work. “That's why I'm on board.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Thanks to you, the mission seems to be progressing faster than expected, for which I am grateful.”

“You shut up.” Coorie threw out without even looking at the passenger behind her. Holding back her laughter, Marika placed her hands on the control stick and throttle.

“Well then, let's go.”

“The Silent Whisper is jumping.” Sandaime announced. The Bentenmaru's long-range sensors detected the gradual energy increase of the electronic scout in orbit of a far exoplanet. The Silent Whisper jumped from the Cetus constellation, leaving an energy pattern as a record.

“…It’s off.” Marika groaned as she compared the spatial coordinates obtained by automatic celestial measurements immediately after touchdown with the expected values ​​from her jump plan. “So, where did I go wrong? Even when I set it more sloppily before, it wasn’t this far off.”

The touchdown point is within the Empire's territory, but there is a considerable discrepancy between the jump plan, which must be carefully set to consider the future, and the actual jump. After confirming that there were no suspicious unidentified aircraft or obstacles in the surrounding airspace, Marika made a list of the planned and actual values ​​of her jump plan and arranged them on the display.

“The weight of the aircraft has increased.” Hearing Coorie’s murmur from the operator's seat, Marika looked at the numbers on the display in shock.

The current weight of the aircraft after the jump is approximately 40 kilograms higher than the weight that was entered before the jump. “That can’t be?! Most of the energy conversion is completed before the jump, so it should be lighter than before the jump!”

After letting out a sigh, Coorie began tapping the control panel furiously. “A heat source with a life reaction in the central rear cargo bay.”

“Eeeeee!!” Marika released the seatbelt in the pilot's seat with one touch. “Excuse me!”

Marika opened the hatch at the rear of the Silent Whisper's cockpit, straddling Nash, whose tall body was bent over in the passenger seat.

As is typical of the latest electronic reconnaissance aircraft, the Silent Whisper has no windows. All external information is shown on the display. In addition, it is equipped with a superluminal engine that can keep up with the fleet's long-distance jumps even though it seats two people, so it is equipped with the minimum equipment to be able to fly for long periods of time, measured in days rather than hours. There is a passageway that doubles as an airlock, and a simple toilet. However, there are no beds, so passengers must sleep in their own seats.

The hatch at the rear of the cockpit leads to a narrow passageway that doubles as an airlock leading to the side hatch on the left side of the fuselage. The right side and upper and lower access panels are used for servicing the electronic systems from inside the aircraft, and at the rear there is a locker-like closet that is only a luggage compartment.

As expected from a new model, the Silent Whisper's cabin layout has been designed with plenty of room for future equipment upgrades. By concentrating the extra space around the cockpit from the beginning, access is easy and equipment can be added later.

The Silent Whisper, which the previous president ran away with, is a two-seater version with the highest level of automation, but depending on the version, it can be expanded to four-seats. The two additional crew members will be pushed into the rear operator's cabin instead of the cockpit.

Thanks to the two-seater design, the rear space is filled with additional optional electronic weapons, but the remaining space is still used as a cargo compartment to store emergency spacesuits, food, spare parts, and other items.

Marika opened the hatch of the aft cargo compartment in the pressurized compartment at once. The interior lights were on.

“Gruier!”

“Oh, I was just about to leave.” Gruier, who was sitting on a trunk case still wearing her middle school uniform, smiled. “It looks like your first jump was a success.”

“You stowaway princess!” Marika looked around the luggage compartment, which was empty when she put her luggage in. “How did you sneak in!?”

“I visited the Odette II ahead of you.” On the trunk, Gruier closed the information terminal that she had spread out to pass the time.

“So you’re a stowaway?”

Coorie's voice came from the cockpit. “A stowaway!?”

“Judging from the increased mass and heat, the increased weight is that of a child. Moreover, she probably has a criminal record for being a stowaway.”

“Bingo.”

Gruier's weight, plus her uniform and luggage, would be just about that much.

“Okay, come out. How did you sneak in?”

“I want to hear that, too.” Coorie, in the operator's seat, turned to the cockpit hatch that had been left open. “This aircraft shouldn't have a duplicate key like the ID ring you used when you snuck into the Bentenmaru last time. How did you cheat the mass measurement before the jump?”

“It’s thanks to president Lynn Lambretta’s cooperation.” Gruier answered as she came out of the cargo hold. “It seems that Marika was using the Silent Whisper, so I told her I wanted to follow her secretly, and she happily set a trap in the measurement program.”

“How did the president know that I would be using the reconnaissance plane!?”

“You submitted an application for use in front of me and the president in the club room.”

“Aaaaugh.” With a desperate groan, Marika held her head. “I was planning on not letting anyone see it, but I should have realized that if the president and Gruier were there, they could look into it later.”

“She’s the president of the yacht club, isn’t she?”

In the operator's seat, Coorie checked the mass measurement program of the Silent Whisper's self-diagnostic sensors. “I thought there was some kind of strange shortcut set up, but it turned out to be that kid's doing...Okay, Captain, please come back here for now.”

“Yes.” Marika crawled through the hatch and returned to the cockpit. Gruier followed her into the cockpit, which remained weightless.

“Nice to meet you.” Gruier looked up to Nash with knowing eyes. She asked Marika and Coorie, who had returned to the cockpit. “May I ask for an introduction?”

Marika looked at Coorie's profile. Military intelligence officers rarely reveal their identities themselves. Coorie said without turning her head. “Introduce yourself.”

Nash, in the auxiliary seat, squinted at Gruier as she entered the narrow cockpit. “It is an honor to meet you here, Princess Gruier Serenity.” Nash unbuckled his seatbelt, straightened up, and saluted Gruier. “I'm Nat Nashfall, Intelligence Officer with the Galactic Empire Fleet Joint Chiefs of Staff Command.”

“He gave his name…” Coorie and Marika murmured in unison.

“This is a small space, so please excuse my rudeness.”

“I am Gruier Serenity.” Gruier greeted Nash with a graceful gesture that made him forget that he was in a cramped cockpit, weightless in space. “I am currently studying abroad, so I do not use the title of princess.”

“Uh...” Marika, who had half-floated from the pilot's seat to watch Nash and Gruier greet each other, called out. “So, although she says so, it does not change the fact that Gruier is one of the ten closest heirs to the throne in the Serenity royal family. Mr. Nash, if you don't mind, I would like to drop Gruier off at a relay station somewhere before heading to our destination.”

A group of people with a child

Description automatically generated

Marika looked around the control panel in the cockpit. Since she made a long-distance jump that was close to the power output limit of Silent Whisper, which could accompany a fleet, she could not return to her original coordinates immediately.

“In other words, do you mean stop somewhere else instead of going straight to your destination?” Asked for confirmation, Marika recalled the details of the prior meeting. The Silent Whisper will aim straight for the Skull Star. There will not be any waypoints at stations or stars, either in Imperial territory or on the frontier.

Aside from secretly landing on an uninhabited planet, there is an information network that connects any port with a navigation system, whether in the core or the frontier. If you feel like it, you can track the Silent Whisper's movements from the other side of the galaxy.

“We’ll be a little late, but I'm going back to Sea of the Morningstar.” Looking at Gruier, Marika suggested an alternative. “It will take some time for the round trip, but if the Bentenmaru takes Gruier, the Silent Whisper can start again without stopping anywhere.”

‘Because of the small size of the aircraft, we’ll have to wait a little while before making the next jump.” Coorie said while overlaying various displays on the control panel. “Still, it should be much faster than you expected.”

“Marika?”

“Sorry, I was just listening.” Marika, half-turned from the pilot’s seat, raised a hand as Gruier tried to interject. “Mr. Nash, I would like to ask you to do one more important task.”

“What is it?”

“Convince the stowaway to disembark.” Marika looked at Gruier. “I've decided not to argue with Gruier. I'm sure I'll lose.”

Gruier smiled with satisfaction.

“I believe that she has her own purpose for coming with us, requiring use of the emergency method of stowing away. Returning to Sea of the Morningstar is definitely not in line with her purpose, and Gruier will resist it with all the eloquence she can muster. I am sorry, but could you please just tell her to go home?”

Nash looked at Marika, at Coorie’s back who didn't even look at him, then returned his eyes to Gruier.

“Our destination is Skull Star, also known as Pirate Island, right?” Gruier spoke first. Nash raised an eyebrow slightly, neither confirming nor denying. Marika thought back to the conversation they had had after finding her stowaway after touchdown. The name of the destination had not been spoken.

“Where did you hear that?”

“In the rear cargo area, over the intercom.”

Marika, in the cockpit, let out a strange groan. “You were listening via wire?”

Muttering, Coorie moves her hands quickly. “Marika's club president has guts. Since it's a two-seater, the only wiring is printed, and an unused line is connected as a communications line to the back, and even rigged it so that we can't monitor its operation.”

“I should have taken the entire aircraft to the hangar and inspected it carefully before departure.” Nash turned to Gruier. “Do you know what Skull Star is like?”

“I hear it's the home of a frontier pirate guild.” Gruier answered smoothly. “During the eradication war, they would have been the most important target, but the pirates on the frontier were neither organized nor affiliated with the rebel army; rather, the imperial fleet was doing its best to deal with the rebel army to make it a strategic priority at the time.”

“Do you know where it is located?”

“No.” Gruier shook her head honestly and looked over at Nash. “You're surprisingly faithful to the basics, starting with a question and letting me do the talking.”

Nash gave a wry smile. Coorie, who had been listening, surreptitiously poked Marika on the left side and whispered. “Sneaky.”

“Because even Coorie is not confident that she can convince Gruier, right?” Marika replied in the same hushed voice.

“No.” Coorie answered easily. “If that is necessary, I’ll find another way.” Coorie glanced behind her. “This spaceship is too small to have a private conversation.”

“It would be useless to talk about the situation on the frontier or the pirates that once roamed the empire.” Nash looked Gruier in the eye and continued. “I’m asking you to go back because it’s dangerous, a responsible member of the royal family would not take an unconventional measure such as stowing away. I’m wondering what method I could use to make you listen to me.”

“Oh, if it’s just listening, I'll listen as much as you want.” Gruier also doesn’t take her eyes off Nash. “Whether or not I do as you say is another story, though.”

“If you don't mind, could you tell me why you stowed away on this aircraft without knowing the destination?” Nash asked with a gentle smile on his lips. “In the meantime, I’ll come up with a way to change your mind.”

Marika, in the cockpit, can’t hold back her laughter. Coorie raises her index finger to her lips. “This is serious, don’t disturb them.”

“Yes.”

Looking at Marika in the pilot's seat happily, Gruier turned her attention back to Nash. “Based on the situation I can see, I have decided that if we work together, we will definitely be able to help Captain Kato Marika.”

“Oh.” Nash said curiously. “What use would a princess be in this situation?"”

“What can you do?” Gruier replied with a gentle smile on her face. “As for the members of the Fleet Intelligence Department, what they can and cannot do is apparently confidential. Can you bring Captain Marika and Coorie back from a frontier planet?”

“Even if it costs me my life.” Placing his hand on his chest, Nash bowed his head. Gruier let out a disappointed sigh.

“I'm sorry, but you’re not serious, are you?”

Marika, who had been pretending to be working while facing forward, involuntarily turned back to the back of the cockpit. Nash looked up at Gruier. “Huh?”

“Because of my position, I am trained to be able to tell when people are lying. Of course, even if it's a lie, if the other person believes it, you can't judge whether it's true or not. But you can tell if the person in front of you believes the words they say.” Gruier stares intently at the intelligence officer in front of her. “I asked if you could bring them back. I have no doubt that you will do your utmost to do so, but when you speak of life, you know that there are things that are more important than your own life and death. If you want to be responsible for your words, I don't think you should talk about things like life lightly.”

“Ah…” Nash raised his hands slightly in frustration. “'I’m sorry. As an intelligence officer, I'm trained to mix truth and nonsense as naturally as breathing.” Nash glanced at Coorie, as if asking for help. Coorie is moving her hands actively while being buried in the multiple 3D displays.

Nash turned his head back to the negotiations in front of him. Marika, still half turned in the pilot’s seat, secretly whispered to Coorie in the operator's seat. “No matter how you look at it, Gruier is doing better.”

“Six to four, the intelligence officer is at a disadvantage.” Coorie moves her hands quickly and tilts her ears back. “That's why I told you to use another method from the beginning.”

“Isn't your job supposed to be highly classified?” Gruier asks, her head slightly tiled. “If an Imperial fleet intelligence officer is not using an Imperial spacecraft, and Captain Marika is not using her own ship but a small aircraft that belongs to the yacht club, isn't this work highly classified, to the point where even you don’t want your allies to know about it?”

“You're right.” Nash turned to Gruier with determination. “Regardless of how things are eventually made public, I don't want anyone to know what's going on at this stage. You'll know if I'm telling the truth.”

“That seems to be true.” Gruier smiled comfortably. “But if that's the case, wouldn't it be better to maintain confidentiality by not returning me to Sea of the Morningstar?” Nash frowned, anticipating what would happen next. Gruier pretended not to notice and continued. “If I go home like this, I'm not sure I won't tell all the club members that Marika is heading for the headquarters of a pirate guild in the frontier using this aircraft, which belongs to the Hakuoh Girls' Academy Yacht Club.”

Nash shook his head slightly. “Can I ask you a favor?”

“Do I have any obligation to listen to the request of someone who is trying to send back a bona fide passenger?”

“Unfortunately, it seems that the person to whom your goodwill is manifesting is Captain Kato Marika, and not the intelligence department.”

“As long as our goals are the same, I believe you will find value in me as well.” Gruier smiled at Marika, who was looking at her with her mouth half open. “Earlier, I asked if you could bring Marika and Coorie home safely, and you answered right away. I believe we can work together amicably, at least with the goal of getting them both home safely.”

“Thank you for believing me, even if only in part.” Nash bowed his head slightly. “I am still a member of the Intelligence Bureau, so my top priority is the success of the mission. In terms of military priorities, the survival of Captain Marika and Coorie comes next.”

“That's not true either.” Gruier said with a smile on her lips. Nash smiled bitterly.

“In any case, less work is easier to do. If we can ask the princess to join us, I believe that the damage in the worst-case scenario can be kept to a minimum.”

“Oh, you're even thinking about the worst-case scenario.” Gruier chuckled. “For the purpose of confidentiality, I think I should be allowed to go with you. I would not be confident in my words or actions if I were forced to go home.”

“Are you trying to blackmail the intelligence services?”

Gruier gently shook her head at Nash, who seemed stunned. “Not at all. I’m just offering a mutually beneficial proposal. Will you listen to me?”

“If it’s just listening.”

“He fell for it.” Marika heard Coorie mumble surreptitiously.

“If you let me ride with you, we can head for the Skull Star as originally planned. The secret that the captain of the Bentenmaru is heading for the Skull Star in the frontier with an intelligence officer of the fleet will be easily kept.”

“Indeed?”

Gruier smiled meaningfully, pulling her chin lightly. “I can be of help in many ways, right?”

“I see.” Nash lowered his eyes so as not to look at Gruier. “It is well-known among diplomatic circles that two young princesses from the Serenity royal family are studying abroad on Sea of the Morningstar, but the rumor that they are connected with pirates is not entirely untrue.”

Gruier looked at Marika and then back at Nash. “Oh, it's not just pirates. If you're in the intelligence department, you probably know what kind of connections the royal family has, right?”

“Unfortunately, I'm not familiar with the social affairs of the upper class, so I don't have any information about that.” Nash looked up. “However, I do remember that the Serenity Royal Family is not an area under my authority. If I can get the princess's cooperation, I am sure I will be able to complete this difficult mission.”

“Oh yeah.” Marika heard Coorie secretly muttering.

“I shudder to think about what would happen if something went wrong.”

“Oh, that's easy.” Gruier laughed at Nash's words. “If we're careful, we can pretend all the trouble never happened. Even if it does happen, there are many ways to keep it hidden.” She thought for a moment and added. “If we can get the cooperation of the intelligence department, I think the method will be more effective in a wider variety of ways.”

“I hope so.” Nash shook his head in an exaggerated manner. “No matter how things turn out, writing the report is going to be difficult.”

“Oh, don't intelligence officers have a duty of professional confidentiality?” Gruier said nonchalantly. “If you are trained to lie as easily as you breathe, writing will be easy.”

Nash looked down and put his hand on his forehead. “No, my boss is always yelling at me to finish my reports properly, so I guess he’s going to nag me again this time.”

“I hope you can return home safely and receive some compliments.” Gruier turned her body toward the operator's seat. “Coorie, may I ask you a question?”

“Me?” Coorie pointed her finger at her nose to confirm. Gruier smiled and nodded.

“If you don't mind, may I ask for details of what other measures the intelligence officer should have taken?”

“I won't tell you in case we need that method.” Coorie chuckled. “That's what I want to say, but I'll tell you something special.” While tapping the control panel with her right hand, Coorie held her left hand in the shape of a pistol and pointed her index finger at Gruier.

“Bang!”

“Huh?”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s a tranquilizer bullet or whatever, just put you to sleep and keep you quiet, so there’s no need to argue.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Emergency measures are almost always terrible.” As if blowing smoke from the tip of her index finger, Coorie returned to the control panel.

“Then, Captain Marika, is it correct that four people will head to the Skull Star instead of three?”

“If the client has been persuaded, then that’s what will happen.” Marika answered while also moving her hands. “If you come up with something better than emergency measures, please let me know.”

“I understand. Our plans have changed a bit, but it's not all bad.”

“What?”

Coorie glanced behind her. “In other words, thanks to the fact that a person with the rank of princess in the Serenity Royal family is accompanying us, even if the intelligence department wants to use the weak pirates as disposables to carry out their mission, they can no longer do so.”

“In other words, we have to succeed in this mission no matter what.” Coorie glared at Nash, who interrupted her.

“No. Regardless of whether the mission is successful or not, we have to return to the galaxy safely.”

“So that guarantee is for Gruier?” Marika looked at the two people at the back of the cockpit. Gruier bows.

“It's an honor to work with you.”

“Well, if it’s the fleet’s policy to do whatever it needs to for this job, without regard for an old royal family, then it can’t be helped.”

“We're dealing with frontier pirates who are currently recognized as the enemy.” Nash crossed his arms with a knowing look on his face. “If something happened to the Serenity Royal Family from the frontier pirates, that would be a scandal. But if it was the result of a mission led by the Imperial Fleet Intelligence Department, it would not be a scandal but a diplomatic issue.”

“Even if they succeed, it will be a scandal, and if they get into any trouble, it will be a nuisance.”

Gruier shrugged. “Let's make sure that doesn't happen.”

Coorie, in the operator's seat, burst out laughing. Marika mumbled with a serious look on her face. “Working with the Serenity royal family seems to be difficult.”

“I understand why a Methuselah is the chief chamberlain.” Coorie’s face returned to normal in the blink of an eye. “Otherwise, your lifespan will end now.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that the Serenity Royal Family has the right person for the right job.” Coorie stopped her hands. “It will take a while to charge the energy needed for the next leap. Now that all the glitches are out of the way, the next leap should be more precise.”

“The next touchdown point will be outside Galactic Empire’s airspace.” After scrutiny, Marika entered their current measured coordinates into her next planned jump. “I thought I'd never leave the Galactic Empire in my lifetime, but this is the second time this year alone.

Although the touchdown point was significantly off course, the first jump was along the navigational route. On the second jump, the Silent Whisper left the route.

There are many navigation routes throughout the Galactic Empire, centered on the core star systems. By following the navigational aids, one can fly around the galaxy from start to finish without ever having to measure their current position.

Routes of roughly the same standard as those within the Empire extend to the frontier, which is not yet officially part of the Empire’s territory. The navigational aids are not as reliable as those in the Empire, which are well-maintained, and there is practically no route control unless you enter a star system, but there is a lot of traffic. Whether in the Empire or on the frontier, the main routes are set up to connect transportation hubs safely, reliably, and efficiently, so naturally there are a lot of spaceships passing through.

The Silent Whisper deliberately avoided the shipping routes and took an path where stars were sparsely scattered.

The safety factor is lower than that of a route that aligns flight directions in a corridor, but if you fly in an empty area of remote airspace, where the stellar density is lower than in the core star systems and the interstellar material is sparse, the chance of an accident drops to a negligible level.

The second jump, after the self-weight trap been deactivated, was as accurate as advertised for the latest electronic reconnaissance craft. The Silent Whisper, which had jumped out of the Empire and into the frontier, touched down exactly as planned in interstellar space, where even hydrogen atoms were sparse.

Following Nash's request to be as invisible as possible, the transponder transmitting the aircraft's vector, name, and affiliation is turned off during the second jump. The transponder is required to be constantly transmitting when flying within Imperial territory, but there is no law enforcing this on the frontier.

The Silent Whisper checked its current coordinates without using its radar or active sensors, and after confirming that there were no suspicious ships in the surrounding space, it began charging up its energy in preparation for the next jump.

Choosing to fly through interstellar space, where the density of ships and planets is low, is a popular route for ships that want to hide their tracks. A large fleet can be detected from a long distance if it jumps at once, but a single, small ship can minimize the spatial anomalies that accompany the jump. Choosing a route that has only uninhabited star systems or stars with no planets nearby increases the distance and number of jumps, but minimizes the chance of detection.

The flight, which followed a particularly low-density path through galactic space, continued uneventfully, but the silence ended with the latest leap into Oceanos' airspace.

“A sudden interception!?” As soon as the spacecraft touched down, a loud alert rang out in the cockpit. Marika reflexively accelerated the Silent Whisper immediately after touchdown.

“I'll check it over here.” Coorie is already moving her hands. “Captain, please confirm our current position.”

“I'm working on it… again, as planned, and the margin of error is only a few tens of thousands of kilometers for a jump without any reconnaissance or a reliable gravity map.” Confirming the Silent Whisper's current position on the star chart, Marika looked at the information on the surrounding space superimposed on the 3D display. Because the Silent Whisper's mass is small, the spatial disturbance caused by touchdown dissipate more quickly than with larger ships.

“Two small ships, two medium ships. High-power radar from a medium-size ship is illuminating us!”

“Were we ambushed?!” Marika shook her head, remembering the predictive data before the leap. “There's a fire warning and electronic jamming alarm, what else?”

“It's a distress signal.” Moving her hands quickly, Coorie, in the operator's seat. responded in her usual tone. “Even if we enter stealth mode now, we'll be easily observed from the pre-jump.”

“They’re still within range, aren’t they?” Marika confirmed the observed energy response and the size of the four spaceships. They were not close enough to be detected immediately, but they were within the effective radius of radar and sensors.

“Huh?” Looking at the current positions of the four ships, Marika tilted her head. “This isn’t an ambush for us, is it?”

“Looks like it.” Coorie responded as she continued her observations, using her hands to change items. “Judging from their positions and movements, it appears that one small ship is being pursued by the remaining three.”

“Oh my.” Marika turned off the alarm that had been ringing in the cockpit.

“Sorry for interrupting you while you were busy. Um, do you know which one belongs to which organization?”

“How can you tell which organization a spacecraft belongs to when it doesn't even have a transponder?” Coorie compared the available data and found that the small ship was most likely a mass-produced assault destroyer, and the medium-sized ship was most likely a mass-produced old cruiser-class ship, but there was no corresponding data for the remaining ship, either warships or civilian ships. “Even in the Empire, there isn’t a complete catalog, let alone spaceships of the frontier. The three ships doing the chasing are probably battleships, and the one fleeing is probably a transport ship.”

“Are any of them pirates?” Gruier interjected from the auxiliary seat behind the operator's seat. “Isn't this pirate airspace? If so, isn't there a higher chance of encountering a pirate ship than something else?”

“At least the one they're chasing isn't a pirate.” Coorie superimposed the last trajectory and the projected future trajectory on the current situation, based on the observed spacecraft vector and the infrared response of the exhaust left in their wake. “Its equipment and the way it flies makes it seem like it's not a pirate or civilian ship. It seems like it's a regular military ship, or at least a spaceship from a military company.”

“If it was a regular military unit on operational duty, wouldn’t they at least have a transponder installed?” Nash asked. Coorie snorted.

“This is the frontier. There are plenty of operations that the military can't openly carry out. So, what are you going to do, Captain?” Coorie turned to Marika in the pilot's seat.

“Our transponder is off, so I can't say anything about other people, but they know we’re here, and we'll soon be within their range.”

“We were hit by radar right after touchdown.”

Marika looked around the 3D displays around the cockpit to get an idea of ​​the current situation. “We’re not running away. We received a distress signal, so we have to do something.” Marika looked back from the cockpit to Nash in the auxiliary seat. “Is that okay?”

‘Is what okay?” When Nash asked, Coorie clicked her tongue. Marika explained.

“Distress signals are universal. Any spacecraft that receives a distress signal has an obligation to rush to help.”

“We're outside the Galactic Empire. I don't think we're obligated to follow navigational laws.”

“That's true.” Marika smiled. “But this is Oceanos, where the pirate guild has its headquarters. And the reason why spaceship crew rush to rescue people when they hear an SOS is not because it's required by law.”

“Because you can help?” Nash began to fasten his seat belt in the auxiliary seat. “Depending on the situation, be prepared for a quick escape.”

“I'll do my best. Coorie, let's do some combat recon.”

“I don't mind doing some recon.” Coorie runs her hands over the control panel, releasing the Silent Whisper's electronic weaponry one by one. “Maybe we shouldn't do combat.”

“Why?”

“Look, this ship is so heavily armed with electronic weapons that it's almost cheating, but the only onboard weaponry it has is a beam rifle for self-defense.”

“Ah,” Marika opened her mouth. “I forgot...”

The Silent Whisper, which Jenny Doolittle, the previous head of the yacht club, brought as she was running away, had no onboard armament from the start. Despite being a genuine military aircraft, it was registered as civilian property of the yacht club because it did not have a single beam cannon for self-defense.

“Shall we run away?”

“If we’re about to lose.” Marika gripped the control stick again. “With Coorie's skills and this aircraft, it should be easy to fend off pursuers using electronic warfare alone, right?”

“It depends on the opponent. If we're near the headquarters of the pirate’s guild, it would be lame to run away just because we're about to lose.”

“Yes. We have to do it right so it doesn't happen in front of the audience.”

“Roger that.”

Marika aimed Silent Whisper's axis at the four approaching spaceships. The fleet was engaged in high-speed combat and would pass through nearby space without worry of a collision if they remained silent. The radar output of the two medium-sized ships at the rear of the fleet increased.

“Would it be okay to blind and deafen them?” Coorie confirmed the battle plan, and Marika nodded as she read the exact current positions of the four ships.

“I'll leave it to you. I think it would be better if they could at least hear our voice.”

“The three pursuing ships are communicating with each other, probably via a fixed line. The pursued ship is sending out a distress signal, but other communications cannot be intercepted at the moment. However, at this rate, I wonder if the pursuing ships are about to fire?”

“Are they within range?”

“Reaching the target and being able to accurately target them are two different things. If you fire a warning shot, you might hit them unless you get close enough to be able to fire accurately.”

“Is it really just a threat?”

“The first shot is a warning. Otherwise, warships would not be doing a three against one chase of an unarmed spaceship. If you want to kill them, it's faster to use long distance fire in the hope of a lucky hit and stop it from fleeing, with no need for three pursuing ships.”

“I see.” With the situation explained to her, Marika re-read the current positions of the four ships. “After blinding the pursuers, can you send out a decoy?”

“Should we switch with the pursued?” Coorie doesn't stop. “Without any real ammunition?”

Normally, the ship would launch unmanned probes set to leave the same energy pattern, radar response, and trajectory as the target ship as a decoy. However, the Silent Whisper, which has no onboard armament, has no missiles or unmanned probes that could be used as a decoy.

“At this distance, the pursuer can't even see the pursued. You’re good at cheating, so surely you could send out a decoy using just electronic equipment?”

Coorie quickly glanced at the back seat. “I'd rather not do that kind of trick in front of the customers, but if the captain orders it, I have no choice.” Coorie placed both hands on the control panel.

“Can you do that!?” Gruier cried out from the back seat.

“She's a very talented magician.” Nash looked happily at Coorie's controls. “Let's watch quietly so as not to distract her.”

The Silent Whisper, which was in cruising mode just after touchdown, opened all of its external antennas. Radar was hitting it, so its signature to the enemy should have changed, but Coorie declared that she didn’t care.

“Let's begin.” Coorie stopped what she was doing and turned to Marika. “Stop accelerating as soon as it starts. Keep your posture the same.”

“Roger.” Marika placed her hand on the throttle lever on the center console.

The Silent Whisper, which had not emitted any electromagnetic waves, including transponders, emitted powerful jamming signals at the four approaching spaceships. The jamming signals were precisely tuned to the radar frequencies of wide-area, short-range, and fire control radars.

“Got them!” Coorie murmured with satisfaction.

“Got them!” Marika cried out a moment later. The three pursuing ships simultaneously fired their beam cannons at the small fleeing spaceship.

“Don't worry, even if it was a threat, it missed the target. This level isn’t even worth bothering with. Ending radar jamming.”

“Huh, already?”

The 3D display, which had been filled with white noise thanks to the Silent Whisper's electronic jamming, returned to clarity. Gruier blinked and noticed that the number of spaceships on the 3D display had increased from four to five.

“We're sending dummy data about the preceding spaceship directly to the pursuing spaceships.”

“Eh?” Gruier asked, unable to understand what Coorie was saying. “Sending dummy data directly to the enemy ship?”

“With an antenna capable of accurately firing electronic packets and a system capable of analyzing enemy radar, it is possible to apply active stealth to send false responses to the enemy.”

The three ships in pursuit changed direction to pursue the dummy data that had changed course.

“I'll have to take care of the follow up for a while, but I'm glad they're simple. Captain, please contact the person who sent the SOS. We can still fool them for now, but if the person being chased and the dummy reaction get too far apart, they'll start reacting from two places.”

“Roger.” Marika ran her fingers over the communication panel. “Well, if it's directional communication, I guess it can't be intercepted by others. I hope the other person can understand standard, though.”

Communication methods are different between the core and the frontier. Marika tried to open a communication line tuned to the basic channel for distress signals.

“Oh, stop for a second.” Coorie, who had been fiddling with the sensor system, said. “Communications seem to be good. The person being chased just cut off the distress signal.” Coorie's tone changed. “Not only that, they also cut off propulsion, went into radio silence and cut off energy. At least, the person being pursued seems to be able to see the situation.”

“Oh my.” Marika removed her hands from the communication panel and crossed her arms. “I thought spaceships on the frontier weren't really used to electronic warfare?”

“I’ve heard they have a lot of experience in actual combat instead.” Coorie carefully tweaked the sensor system, trying to observe the spaceship that was being pursued. It was not easy to obtain data from the spaceship, which was under radio silence and inertial navigation, and which had even gone so far as to turn off its navigation lights to keep its energy emissions to a minimum. “Regular troops on the frontier probably won't have many opportunities to travel to the border, but civilian transport ships may fly from the Empire to the frontier.”

“So it's better to think of it as a spaceship with that much experience.” Marika looked at the 3D display showing the reactions of the four ships moving away and the one that had stopped. “What happened to our response?”

“We're sending dummy data to them so that we’ll be missed even if we're targeted.” Coorie responded. “If we increase the number of dummies unnecessarily, it will be difficult to make the numbers add up later, so if they do approach, I was planning to deal with them aggressively.”

“I made it look like we weren’t actively intervening. So, if a spaceship passing by seems to ignore them, it means that the mission at hand takes priority.”

Marika expanded the space projected on the 3D display. “How long do we have to wait before it's okay to move?”

“They should be chasing the dummy data for a while.” Coorie checked the details of the dummy data that Silent Whisper continues to send out. “It depends on the analysis ability of the pursuer, but the reaction of the data being pursued will eventually become weaker and disappear. The pursuer will either think that they have somehow been dazzled and continue the pursuit, or they will realize that they have been switched at some point and turn back. Well, it seems that they ignored us, so as long as they're not on a trajectory that would follow us, I think we'll be okay.”

“The Skull Star is a little further away.” Marika overlaid the coordinates of the Skull Star written on the invitation onto the expanded 3D display. There was only one short jump left to Oceanus 7187g3. “But there's nothing there?”

Coorie updated the long-distance observations with the latest data. She enlarged the 3D display to show the point in space represented by the coordinates believed to be those of the Skull Star. Since faster-than-light radar cannot be used, the conditions in the target airspace are several months out of date due to the speed of light, but nothing is displayed, including natural celestial bodies. “Interstellar space is clear, and there's no gravitational source or anything in sight.”

“Of course.” Marika cast a quick glance at the intelligence officer in the back seat. “If the Skull Star was where the astronomical symbols indicate, the Imperial fleet could have just gone there on their own without needing to bring an invitation. They don't know the exact location, so they hired a pirate who had received an invitation.” Marika began preparing for the next jump. “Right?”

“The Seventh Fleet's research ships have been dispatched to the location indicated by Oceanus 7187g3 several times.” Nash replied. “As you say, we have not been able to find the headquarters of the Pirate Guild, nor the celestial body known as the Skull Star. This is one of the reasons why we believe there is no such thing as a Pirate Guild.”

“If there's nothing, that's fine.” Marika checked the completed jump plan. “We accepted the invitation but it was a waste of time, so we’ll go home.”

“There must be some sort of procedure.” Gruier, who had been listening in silence up until then, suddenly spoke. “For an outsider to reach the Skull Star, there must be some kind of procedure to follow.”

“I guess we'll find out when we get there, right?” Marika passed the jump plan to Coorie.

“We can’t see anything on radar in that space from a few months ago, but maybe there’s something there now.”

“It would be an easy job if we didn't have to do anything.”

Touchdown. Marika confirmed their current position as per procedure. “Yes, we have arrived at our destination, Oceanus 7187g3.”

Oceanus 7187g3 indicates that it is the 7187th star in the Oceanus sector, the third planet of a spectral G type star. However, there is no star system with the number Oceanus 7187 in any astronomical catalog or star chart. Star charts sometimes have such gaps, which are corrected or removed from time to time.

Oceanus 7187g3, with only its spatial coordinates shown, was empty space with no star system or anything else.

“As expected.” Coorie said, turning up the radar and sensor systems to their fullest and observing as wide an area as the Silent Whisper's capabilities would allow. “I can't see any asteroids or spaceships or anything. What should we do?”

“Let's wait for a while.” After making sure there were no immediate dangers in the surrounding area that required immediate action, Marika let go of the stick. “Please keep your observations as wide as possible.”

“Roger.”

The change came quickly. The Silent Whisper detected pre-jump phenomenon at surprisingly close range.

“How many?”

“Probably one small ship.”

“Are they here to greet us? Umm, maybe I should get ready to run away.”

A spaceship touched down so close that it seemed as if it had been heading for the same coordinates. Though it was small, it was a transport ship much larger than the reconnaissance craft Silent Whisper.

“Oh.” Coorie displayed the results of her analysis based on the data obtained without taking active detection measures such as using radar. “That's the spaceship that escaped earlier. I wonder if it’s heading to the same destination?”

“I knew it, it’s a transport ship.”

Previously, they had not been close enough to be able to determine the type or model. The data obtained this time was several times more detailed, including external data from optical observations. Marika saw a pink spaceship that looked quite dirty and may have once been streamlined.

“It's a type of spaceship that can enter the atmosphere and fly, just like this one. Dual-use spaceships are less efficient than space-only ones, so they're not often seen in the Galactic Empire, but there are many planets without satisfactory relay stations on the frontier.”

Most transportation operations will be between relay stations, but for planets that don't have orbital stations to pick up and drop off cargo, it will be necessary to fly directly to the ground and then back into space.

“So the parts that look dirty are probably scorch marks caused by the high heat of atmospheric entry.”

“That's not all. There are also marks that look like they were grazed by an energy beam, and many places that look like they've been repaired after a direct hit. It’s in the shape of a ship, but it probably won't pass inspection in the core.”

The communications panel chirped lightly. “It’s calling.” Coorie reports the obvious. “The other person is sending a normal message without encryption. What should we do?”

“It's not data communication, but audio and video.” Seeing the communication standard the other party wanted, Marika thought for a moment. “Okay, connect. If things get complicated, it will be easy to get out of it.” Marika looked at the communications panel. A flat image appeared on the 3D display.

“*This is the Queen of Love, Master Myra Grant.*” A woman in a seductive dress with heavy makeup and a smile that seemed familiar winked at me. “*Thank you for saving our ship. Oh? A girl.*”

“This is Kato Marika of the Silent Whisper.” Marika answered affably, omitting to mention her affiliation and position. Coorie next to her quietly spoke and began quickly searching the name of the ship and the captain. “Don't worry about it. We received a distress signal as we passed by, so we did what we could.”

“*I thought I'd at least say thank you, but you left right away. Thanks to you, we were saved.*”

“Love Ship.” Saying only a few words, Coorie sent the search results over to Marika's control panel. “It seems like they do a lot of other things, too.”

“Love ship?”[[3]](#footnote-3) Gruier, still seated in the auxiliary seat, repeated the unfamiliar words. Nash answered briefly.

“It's a prostitution ship.”

“Wha...!” Realizing the meaning of those words, Gruier froze and turned bright red.

“Who were you being chased by?” Marika asked, buying herself some time to remember where she had seen the monitor's hostess. “Or should I not ask?”

“*The ones chasing us are the* *San Biento Autonomous Army. However, the orders must have come from the higher-ups in the network who control the area.*”

Coorie indicated the location of a frontier colonial planet on Marika's control panel.

“*I cannot reveal the identity of my customer because it is a private matter, but I am currently working to deliver a connection and a member of the San Biento government to the Skull Star.*” Myra answered smoothly and then looked intently at Marika from the other side of the communication monitor. “*If we're here, doesn't that mean we're heading for the same destination?*”

Long silver hair and large, narrow eyes brought up a memory. Marika couldn't help but look at Myra's face. “...Pirate Muller?”

“*Oh, you know my sister?*” With a charming smile, Myra tilted her head slightly. “*Maybe I shouldn't ask that, either?*”

“Myra Grant, Captain of the Queen of Love.” Coorie put additional information on display. “Their main business is a prostitution ship, but they do pretty much everything except direct combat, from smuggling to stealing information. They're wanted in five star districts on the frontier, and are on the blacklist in the Empire.”

“So you’re Muller's sister?” Keeping her smile as businesslike as possible, Marika continued the conversation. “Umm, I guess you could say we were acquaintances...”

“*It seems like a complicated relationship.*” Myra laughed knowingly. “*Don't worry, the Queen of Love has nothing to do with the pirate Muller's Chimera of Scylla. ...Are you here to pick me up?*”

Coorie announced at the same time that Myra looked off screen. “Pre-jump phenomenon, a large one.”

Marika glanced at the control panel. The Silent Whisper's sensors instantly reeled off the name of a spaceship that matched the pre-jump phenomenon they had detected. “Chimera of Scylla.” She read the name out loud without thinking. The same pirate battleship that she had observed jumping many times in the frontier star district was touching down.

“I received an invitation.” Marika answered over the noisy video communication as the large ship touched down. “From the Pirate Guild.”

“Are we running away?”

“We’re not running away.” Marika answered Coorie immediately. “The person who sent me the invitation must have come to pick me up. Or are they ready to fight?”

“The energy response is high. The radar waves are sharp as usual, but...”

“*Keep the channel as it is.*” Myra winked. “*From the Queen of Love to the Chimera of Scylla. This is Master Myra Grant. How is Muller?*”

“*This is the Chimera of Scylla, please wait a moment!*” The first radio operator was rapidly replaced by the captain. A silver-haired female pirate appeared on the communications monitor next to Myra. “*This is Muller from the Chimera of Scylla. You look well, sister.*”

“*Same as always. You're the one who's busy, but you took the trouble to come and greet me from Skull Star.*”

“*I was just asked to give you directions on my way home.*”

Marika shivered a little, feeling as if Myura had seen her on the communications monitor. Since they were using the same line, their message should have been received by both the Queen of Love and the Chimera of Scylla.

“*Oh, by the way, let me introduce our guest, Kato Marika of the Silent Whisper.*”

Marika instinctively straightened her back. On the other side of the communications monitor, Muller's eyes narrowed slightly.

“*I was just saved from a dangerous situation. I hope you don't mind if I show you around.*”

Muller smiled. “*All the way from the Galactic Empire to the frontier, welcome Captain Kato Marika!*”

Marika could only smile back.

“*Welcome.*”

“Data communication between the Scylla and the Queen of Love.” Coorie, who was standby to intercept, whispered the news. “Maybe exchanging navigation data?”

“Thank you for the invitation.” Marika finally spoke up. “The invitation was addressed to the Bentenmaru, but I came here because I thought the captain would be enough to handle the matter at hand.”

“*Ah, you saved my sister.*” Muller, who had instantly read the data from the Queen of Love, turned her attention back to Marika. “*Well, then, we can't not welcome you. I will take you to the Skull Star. Please follow me.*”

“Navigation data has arrived!” Coorie cried out softly. “Short jump settings and destination coordinates.”

“Roger that.” Suddenly, Marika checked. “Is Skull Star there?”

“*I hope so. I'll leave the line open.*” The communication ended. The Queen of Love's overly decorated heart-based pattern and the Chimera of Scylla's highly stylized pirate flag appeared on the communication monitor.

“What is our standby screen?” Marika checked, just to be sure. Coorie quickly called up the settings.

“It's the emblem of the Hakuoh Girls' Academy Yacht Club.”

“Ah, change it!”

“It's nothing special, but the manufacturer's product logo is good.” Coorie set the default standby screen, which combined the Liosen Gelyune manufacturer’s logo with the Silent Whisper product logo, and set communications to receive-only.

“What are the coordinates of the destination?”

In response to Nash's question from the auxiliary seat, Coorie blinked a spot on a magnified 3D star chart. “Around here. Will you report this to Fleet command?”

“No.” Nash shook his head. “The mission is not to pinpoint the exact coordinates of the Skull Star. If it were possible to find it, the reconnaissance fleet sent to Oceanus would have found it by now.”

The Imperial fleet has yet to discover Skull Star, home of the Pirate Guild.

“Finally, the Skull Star.” Gruier leaned forward from the rear seat and looked at the two crests displayed on the communications monitor. “And our guide is the pirate Muller.”

“We don't know yet.” Marika saw the coordinates of her destination flashing on the 3D display. It was interstellar space, where not a single planet existed on the star chart. “I don't think it's as simple as just jumping to the specified coordinates.”

“The energy responses of the Chimella of Scylla and the Queen of Love are increasing.” Coorie announced. “They are not synchronized, but both ships are jumping.”

“We're preparing to jump as well.” Marika passed the printed jump plan on to Coorie for cross-checking. “Let's follow the jump of the two ships and jump after confirming their destination.”

“Roger.” Coorie aimed her prepared sensors at the Scylla, which looked like she was about to jump first. “You're being careful.”

“If there's any danger I can avoid by being careful, I'll be as careful as I can.”

“Scylla, initiating jump.”

The Chimera of Scylla took off from normal space, leaving behind the characteristic energy emission of a hyperspace jump. The crest displayed on the communication monitor turned into static. Next, the Queen of Love also entered a faster-than-light jump.

While analyzing the jump data for the two ships, Coorie said. “The jump distance and direction match the specified coordinates. Of course, they are probably familiar with this space, so they could do whatever they want if they wanted to.”

“Don't scare me.” Marika gripped the control stick again. “Well, let's go. Silent Whisper, jump.”

As soon as they touched down, the standby screens for the two ships, Queen of Love and Chimera of Scylla, returned to the communications monitor.

The space there looked just like it had been before. The Chimera of Scylla, which had jumped ahead, was emitting strong radar, but that was normal, and the Queen of Love had touched down a short distance away, but the ship was navigating inertially without using radar.

As per procedure, they confirmed their current location, then confirmed the current positions of the two spaceships, the Queen of Love and the Chimera of Scylla.

“Do you see anything?” Marika asked, knowing full well that Silent Whisper's radar and sensors hadn't picked up on anything other than the two spaceships.

“There's not a single asteroid in sight within a radius of 1 million kilometers. There's not even a single floating buoy to serve as a landmark, so what exactly are they planning to do, coming all the way out here?”

“No movement by either ship.”

Leaving aside the Queen of Love, the Chimera of Scylla is a pirate-style battleship. It is loaded with more suspicious equipment than a regular military battleship, so it would not be surprising if it started something at any time. However, as far as the Silent Whisper's sensors can see, there is no sign of any movement, including preparations for battle, on the Scylla.

Marika dropped her eyes to the communications monitor, which was still showing the standby screen. “If we stay still like this, we’ll get a precision sighting even if we don't use radar, right?”

The distance between the Silent Whisper and the Chimera of Scylla is less than 3000 km. Given the range of a battleship, this is close range. They can pinpoint each other's positions using only passive sensors, without using radar or active sensors. And as long as the other side is in a passive observation posture, it is impossible for outsiders to know what data they are obtaining or analyzing.

“Well, just in case, I've got the energy sensors sensitive and focused on the Scylla.” Coorie casually begins to deploy the external antenna that had been stowed in preparation for the jump. “If their first shot doesn't hit us, it's easy to use electronic jamming and escape.”

“They're not the kind of opponent that will miss the first shot, are they?” Marika looked down at Scylla on the communications monitor, which showed the classic pirate flag on the standby screen. As if waiting for the right moment, the silver-haired pirate returned to the communications monitor.

“*This is Muller Grant from Chimera of Scylla. Gravitational waves will soon pass through this airspace, but please do not worry as they will not destroy the ship. After the gravitational waves pass, the airspace around Skull Star will be a safe zone where all combat is prohibited. Even if you make a mistake, if you engage in actual combat you will be sunk without question, so be prepared for that.*”

“This is the Silent Whisper, Kato Marika. Roger that.”

While Marika tried to formulate a response in her head, the communication was hijacked by Coorie from the side. “This is the Silent Whisper, operator Coorie. Could you please give me your definition of prohibited combat?”

“*The use of force to cause damage to an enemy ship and its crew.*” Muller answered smoothly. “*Electronic warfare can also be considered an act of warfare in some cases.*” Muller smiled at Coorie from across the communications monitor. “*Be careful.*”

“I understand.” Coorie replied. “I’ll be careful.”

The communications monitor returns to the standby screen. “It's a non-combat airspace.”

Coorie opened the gravity sensor to all directions. “If we were to actually fight, we'd be sunk instantly, so would that not count as a battle?”

“That's fine, if we can go peacefully that would be better.” Marika looked around at the control panels around the cockpit. “What gravitational waves?”

“There are currently no unknown gravitational sources in the surrounding area.” Coorie overlays the results of the survey on a 3D display. Since no gravitational waves have been observed, nothing appears.

“The ghost ship...” Gruier said quietly. “Queen Serendipity seems to have put out something like that...”

“Here it comes!” Coorie called out. A curved surface appeared from outside the detection range and approached their current position, its orange glow rapidly increasing. “Oh, gravitational waves that converge as they approach. What a nuisance.”

“Are we okay?” Marika asked tentatively. Coorie answered while moving her hands.

“It may be a little bumpy, but even at their highest convergence, the gravitational waves will not be strong enough to destroy the craft.”

Nash, who had unbuckled his seatbelt after touchdown, hurriedly fastened it back on. The gravitational waves converged as if a record was being played in reverse, and ran through the space where the three spacecraft were hovering.

Perhaps due to the power of the shock balancer and inertial control, Silent Whisper only shook slightly at the moment the gravitational wave passed. Immediately after the gravitational wave passed, a huge reaction was displayed in 3D.

“Huh? An artificial celestial object nearby?” With a cry of protest, Coorie scanned the suddenly appearing object.

“It's 40,000 kilometers away, can't you see it?” Leaving the data collection and analysis to Coorie, Marika switched on the optical observation camera.

The face of a skull was displayed on the external monitor. “30 kilometers wide, 40 kilometers long, maybe more in depth.” Coorie reads the data from the sensors one after another and gives rough figures. “The amount of energy is so great that the Scylla, which is supposed to be a battleship, appears blurred.”

“What is it?”

It looks like a giant skull floating in space, a pale, distorted sphere with two large holes drilled into it like eye sockets, and the lower hemisphere was covered in a jumble of mechanical structures piled on top of each other like crooked teeth.

“The estimated specific gravity is less than one, so the inside is probably a structure with many cavities, there are a lot of metal reactions of many different types, and a close-up shows a fine surface structure, but it is an artificial object.” Coorie zoomed in on what appeared to be a gaping eye socket in the white skull. As the image was enlarged, it became clear that what had previously appeared to be a skull was actually a massive structure made of overlapping mechanical parts. The pale skull, which even appeared to be faintly glowing, was made up of overlapping crystalline panels and relay station-like surfaces, and the dark, gaping eye socket was apparently a spacecraft landing area filled with detailed lighting and gantry cranes, robotic arms, and protruding piers.

“Artificial... I think.” The Silent Whisper is being bombarded with radar from an artificial celestial body shaped like a skull. “The skull design is intentional when viewed from the front, but it looks a bit harsh from any other angle. The overly decorated baroque style with lots of additions and modifications is common in old stations and space cities.”

“An artificial celestial body, huh.” Marika looked at the overall image reconstructed from the sensors in 3D. From the direction she was standing it looked like a skull, but from the side it was more like a teardrop. “With something that big, it wouldn't be surprising if there was an asteroid or something inside.”

“*Skull Star Control from Chimera of Scylla.*” A Scylla radio operator appeared on the standby screen. “*Request permission to enter the open port.*”

“Physical verification and port entry applications are done via data communication.” Coorie was looking at the data communication sent from the Scylla to the Skull Star. In the core, where automation has progressed and unmanned ships are not uncommon, all applications for station entry and departure are made only by data communication, with no voice communication being used in many places.

“When it comes to stations dealing with pirates, automatic response alone is not an option.” Marika then observes the communication between the Queen of Love and Skull Star control.

“However, if they are banning all fighting in the surrounding airspace, surely they must have the power to do so?” In response to Nash's question from the auxiliary seat, Coorie displayed a 3D image of the internal structure of the Skull Star, including the energy distribution.

“If we're talking about the amount of energy alone, it's about the equivalent of a fleet about to enter battle. I wonder how they can balance such energy generation all the time.”

“*Silent Whisper from Skull Star Control.*”

Upon being suddenly called, Marika straightened up in the pilot’s seat. “Yes, this is the Silent Whisper, Kato Marika.”

“*Please state your affiliation and purpose of port call.*” The operator, wearing a headset, made a formal request from the other side of the communications monitor.

“Yes, please wait a moment.”

“This is a private vehicle registered at Shin-Okuhama Airport.” Coorie sent the registration data he had prepared in advance that seemed the least problematic to the control center. “The purpose of the port call is for crew rest and supplies.”

“*Do you have an invitation?*”

“Eh...” Asked out of nowhere, Marika frantically searched the side pocket of the cockpit. “Here you go.” Coorie next to her swiftly handed her a crimson envelope. “Oh, thanks.” Upon receiving the envelope, Marika held it up to the monitor camera in the cockpit where it could be seen.

“*Yes, I have confirmed it.*”

After one look at the invitation, the operator nodded. Coorie shook her head. “I wonder how they confirmed it?”

“*This is your first time docking at Skull Star. There is an open port on the upside and a closed port on the downside. The open port is also equipped with an air shield, so even spaceships without airlocks can dock and board. The closed port also offers the use of a private pier and a full maintenance dock.*”

“Oh, um, I would prefer the open port then.”

“*Roger that. This way, please.*” The necessary data arrived along with a light chime. “*As you may know, combat is strictly prohibited in the airspace around Skull Star. Even provocative behavior will be considered combat, so please fly as calmly as possible.*”

“I understand.”

“*If you need anything, please contact the control emergency channel.*” The communication from control abruptly ended.

“Oh, there are several other ships.” Coorie said as she finished getting the necessary data from the Skull Star and opened the sensors in all directions again. “I couldn't detect any pre-jump phenomenon, so where exactly did they come from?”

“What kinds?” Glancing sideways at the number of spaceships that had been added to the 3D display, Marika checked the approach route sent by control. It was heading towards the Skull's Right Eye, on roughly the same trajectory as the Chimera of Scylla, the Queen of Love, which had received permission to enter port earlier.

“There are still no transponders, so I'll have to judge from the data I can get, but there are three medium-sized container ships, two more passenger ships, and a frigate. There are a lot of ominous energy reactions, and some of them have antennas spread out more than necessary and boosters hanging from them, so they don't seem to be normal spaceships.”

“If you say they're not normal, then I guess that includes us.” Marika put the Silent Whisper into motion. With the Queen of Love between them, she placed the craft on a trajectory that would allow it to enter the right eye of the Skull Star. “"If they aim at us with their main guns, they can hit us with just optical sights.” The triple aft turret of the Scylla, which had four auxiliary guns around the main gun, was fixed in a horizontal position and could not be elevated.

“At this distance, we can even see where the energy response is concentrated on the ship, so don't worry.” Coorie displayed a 3D image of the Skull Star between the pilot's seat and the operator's seat. “This is what you wanted. It's a rough outline, but this is the diagram of the Skull Star's internal structure that Control just sent me.”

“Oh.” Nash, in the auxiliary seat, leaned forward involuntarily. “So the left and right eyes open to a dead-end pier, and the area around the jaw is a closed port facility?” Nash frowned as he took in the whole scene. “It's a wonderfully well-equipped port.”

“It's called Pirate Island, so I imagined it to be some kind of pirate guild stronghold, but that's not the case.” Coorie demonstrated by rotating the displayed Skull Star vertically. “I don't know what the original was, but at least now the port facilities are taking up too much space. If it's a fortress that is meant to be used for nearby battles, it would be better to armor the entrances a little more, even if it makes it a little more inconvenient to get in and out.”

“The Queen of Love doesn't look like a pirate ship, but what about other spaceships?” Marika took a closer look at the other five spaceships that had appeared out of nowhere.

“A transport ship with a decent amount of engine power could imitate a pirate, but if you want to compete professionally against the military, there's only this one escort ship.” Coorie pointed to the smallest of the five remaining spaceships.

“So the rest of the spaceships aren’t pirate ships?”

“The Seventh Fleet estimates that there are several thousand pirate ships belonging to the Pirate Guild.” Nash said. “Not all of them are dedicated to piracy all the time, and certainly not all of them are stationed at Skull Star.”

“Then what exactly are spaceships coming to Skull Star for?” Gruier asked. Nash answered.

“The main reason so many spaceships gather here in this universe is for business.” Nash does not take his eyes off the 3D image, which has stopped in a position that shows the skull's face. “Ports involved in commerce therefore place top priority on safety.”

A black rectangular object with white text

Description automatically generated

As the distance to the port decreased, the surface of Skull Star became visible without having to enlarge the monitor camera image.

Looking closer, it is no different from an old space city that has become overly decorated due to repeated additions and renovations over many years of operation. The entry and departure of spacecraft from the left and right eyes on the upside and around the chin on the downside are centrally controlled by air traffic control, but small ships can also be seen working on the vast exterior surface, and some transports move from the eye sockets to the jaw.

We intercepted the communications flying in and out of the station, and found that they were mostly business radio and private communications, no different from those of a normal space city or station. To my surprise, I was also able to receive a few radio and video broadcasts, both internal and external.

“The news channels are probably just broadcasting data straight from the key stations.” Nash is zipping through a large number of channels, both imperial and frontier, at high speed on the sub-monitor in the auxiliary seat. “I had the impression that the Skull Star was some sort of secret fortress at the edge of the frontier, but it's a surprisingly mundane place.”

“Do you notice anything else?”

Nash looked up at Coorie. “What do you mean?”

“I didn't notice it because it's controlled like a normal station, but this station is very different from the stations we know.”

“It’s not the shape, is it?”

The styles of space stations vary from the classical donut-shaped or cylinder-shaped, which generate pseudo gravity using centrifugal force due to rotation, to those that prioritize efficiency by using artificial gravity, freeing them from design constraints.

“What about you, captain?” Coorie asked, changing the target of her question. “Have you noticed anything around the Skull Star?”

“Hmmm” Marika looked around the 3D display where there were only a few floating spaceships, including the ones that were leaving the port at different times.

A cartoon of a child

Description automatically generated

“For a port of this size, the surroundings are kind of tidy, but that's because, well...” With her own words, Marika realized the true nature of her discomfort. “Well, I can't see any spaceships parked offshore!”

“That's right.” Coorie reduced the scale of the 3D display to show a wider area of space. “Normally, at a port of this size, there would be a swarm of spaceships parked offshore.”

Spaceships don't have to enter the port to unload or load cargo. Separating and connecting standard containers is possible on a single spaceship, and if the cargo is sealed or can be exposed to space without a problem, it's not uncommon to rendezvous with cargo bays butted up against each other and transfer cargo.

Also, while entering a port incurs a certain amount of cost, if the spaceship is simply fixed in nearby space with coordinates that have been partitioned in advance, the mooring fee is almost negligible in most cases, and is often free. Spaceships that are moored offshore will have to take their crew and cargo to the port by barge or shuttle, and in that case the port entry fee is much cheaper than for large ships.

“So, are all the spaceships in port?”

“I’d guess so.” Coorie zoomed in on the port in the right eye, which was approaching quickly. “It would be inefficient to store all the spaceships that wanted to call at the port, but in return, all the spaceships could move together. A simple relay station would have to deal with the excessive amount of energy, and the spaceships that are anchored offshore would be visible. The reason why the location of the Skull Star has not yet been identified in this airspace is probably because it is a mobile station.”

“When you say mobile, do you mean a station of this size, along with the spaceships inside, are moving faster than the speed of light?” Marika reviewed the size of the Skull Star, which has an estimated mass similar to that of natural celestial bodies. Many space cities and stations are designed to be able to move on their own. However, this only allows for some orbital changes if the acceleration is low and the time is long. Space cities that can travel faster than the speed of light are classified as extra-large spaceships.

“I don't know what system it uses to move, but I think it's somehow moving or changing its location periodically through those converging gravitational waves.”

“I see.” Nash said. “In today's universe, it is highly unlikely that a station or star could go undetected for such a long time. If it is a moving star, it makes sense why its coordinates have not been identified until now.”

“But even so, who came up with such a design?” Coorie began collecting data from within the port, where various data was coming in even through the air shield. “The maximum diameter of the opening is nearly 10 kilometers, the depth is over 15 kilometers, and the shape is so detailed that it is difficult to follow, but all of the inside of the cave-like structure appears to be a port facility.”

The gaping eye sockets on the white face were a gigantic spaceport with an air shield maintaining the atmospheric pressure inside. The interior walls, lined with countless piers and gantry cranes of various sizes and flashing warning lights, were decorated in dark colors, which is unusual for a spaceport.

“At this size, most spaceships would fit inside.”

The Chimera of Scylla, which was ahead of them, slipped through the air shield and entered the harbor.

“Large commercial ships are not expected to enter the port in the first place, as they are specialized in offshore mooring. There must be barge companies in a spaceport of this size.”

Next, the Queen of Love, a sleek, winged aircraft, entered the harbor.

“What kind of spaceships are there?” Marika asked, gripping the control stick so as not to shake the aircraft.

“There are transport ships, passenger ships, various military ships, harbor work ships, robot ships, service ships, and more spacecraft.” Coorie said as she rearranged the data coming through the air shield. “The fact that not all the spaceships are in our catalog is just because of the location, but the proportion of civilian ships is higher than in other places.”

The Silent Whisper passed through the air shield. Marika shifted control mode from outer space to atmospheric. The environmental sensors outside the aircraft quantified the situation inside the harbor on the monitor.

“Atmospheric pressure 87%, temperature 20 degrees, humidity 26%, oxygen partial pressure normal, harmful substances below standard levels.” Marika checked the monitor to make sure there were no flashing measurement results requiring urgent attention and returned to piloting. Data sent from ATC designated the mooring pier for small and medium-sized aircraft at the back of the eye socket as the parking spot.

“It's a little dry, but it's impressive.” Coorie checks the results of a detailed analysis of rare gases and toxic substances in the port's pressurized atmosphere. “A poorly run station would be happy to use air that was even dirtier than this.”

“They seem to have money.” Marika looked around at the bustling port displayed on the external monitor.

The data from the control center also included speed limits and prohibitions in and around the port. Coorie looked for the list of fees and displayed them. “Parking fees and port entry taxes are expensive.”

“Don't worry.” Nash pulled a stack of credit cards from his inner pocket. “These are necessary expenses.”

“Don't be careless and use the First Imperial Bank credit card.”

“This aircraft was registered at Sea of the Morningstar for personal use.” Nash picked out an Orion Bank card that Marika was also familiar with. “If you can pay in advance, pay it now.”

“I don't care if it gets stolen.”

Coorie, in the operator's seat, removed the wireless keyboard for the remote control and handed it over to Nash in the auxiliary seat. Nash moved from the tariff to the payment page, confirmed that the communication line was under commercial protection, and then began payment.

“It's an unknown station, so it's the same even if we connect with a wired connection after landing. Yes, payment is complete. I won't register the card.”

“Oh.” Marika cried out from the cockpit. “They've changed the parking spot for our prepaid service.” Marika put the Silent Whisper into a gentle turn. “We're changing to a spot closer to the entrance. Cash service.”

“Maybe they thought we were a sucker?”

“It's easier to escape if we're closer to the exit.”

“Wow, what's this?” Coorie scrolled only the titles of the data communication, which suddenly jumped up on the communication panel.

“The most efficient weapon? The spaceship you want? The fastest system in the galaxy---?” Marika asked as she searched for the newly designated parking space.

“Well, I guess they're all just automated advertising spam. I paid the parking fee in advance, so they thought I was a good customer, and they sent me all these messages at once from all sorts of places, but this amount is just too much...”

“It's like a free trade port with a strong commercial spirit.” Marika chuckled as she held the control stick. “Unless it's a military port, those things will come in no matter where you go.”

“Well, that's true, but a normal station wouldn't advertise strategic weapons or biological weapons so openly.”

“May I see it?” Even though they hadn't yet docked, Nash unbuckled his seat belt and leaned forward. As if not wanting to get too close, Coorie displayed a 3D list of communication titles on the center console. “I see.” Nash scrolled the 3D display with his fingertips, opened several messages, and read a number of them laid out with images.

“Be careful.” Coorie said while quickly sorting through the information coming in from the sensors and the information coming in via communication. “Many of these messages come with bots, viruses, and other weird stuff.”

“They're trying to take over if they get the chance, as you'd expect from a pirate island.” Nash closed the list spread out in front of him and returned to his seat.

“The black market, right?”

“What is it?” Gruier, next to him, asked again. Nash repeated.

“The black market is a market that deals in illegal goods that do not go through official channels.”

“Ah.” Gruier looked around the spaceport inside the eye socket, displayed on the external monitor. “This is the place.”

“Within the Empire, there are various restrictions on strategic weapons, especially those with high destructive power. There are various loopholes, such as ships registered with the Imperial Navy or with a military subsidiary, but these restrictions are the reason why privately owned ships cannot be equipped with powerful weapons.”

“If it's an independent star system on the frontier, there are no such restrictions.” Coorie said while sorting through the data. “I've heard that on the frontier you can buy dangerous weapons that you can't get in the Empire.”

“That's just a pretense. For example, energy beams and antimatter bombs can be made as large as you want in principle, but if they are made large enough to destroy a star, they will be practically useless as long as you are fighting a conventional war.”

“So, what use is there for them in an irregular war?”

Nash answered Gruier's question with a question. “If there was a bomb that could wipe out an entire star, what use could it be used for?”

Thinking for a moment, Gruier replied. “I think it can only be used for terrorism or hatred.”

“Yes, such a big bomb can only be used as a threat. And neither the Empire nor any interstellar nation that is not part of the Empire wants such a powerful weapon to exist. But if a weapon is possible to make, people will make it, and once it's made, it becomes a product. It seems that there are many businesses here that specialize in products that cannot be sold openly in public.”

“An illegal free trade port?” Coorie muttered as she stopped what she was doing. “This really feels like a pirate island. Captain, if you look around carefully, you might find some interesting purchases.”

“We don't need such powerful weapons!”

“It's not just weapons.” Coorie displayed some eye-catching advertising messages. “Things like hidden weapons that are strictly restricted in the core, or jammers to pass security checks. Look, if you take this jammer home with you, even Schnitzer will be treated like a living human and can go anywhere.”

Marika let out a sigh as she recalled Schnitzer's mechanical appearance, more like a robot than a cyborg. “I'll leave it to you.” Marika answered weakly, and confirmed the exact distance and speed to the parking space. “We're docking. We’re opposite The Queen of Love.”

A section of the pier rose vertically from the inner wall of the eye socket, a blinking cube surrounded by guide beams. The Queen of Love, which had arrived first, was approaching the adjacent parking space, aligning the axis of its pink hull with the docking surface.

Marika extended the landing gear and prepared for landing. The port area was kept in a weightless state, so the axis of the aircraft could be aligned with the parking space.

Marika pointed the belly of the Silent Whisper at the hexagonal parking area, which looked like it could land an aircraft two sizes larger. While watching the monitor camera on the underside of the aircraft, she touched down the landing gear in the center of the individual parking space, where the marker lights were flashing in concentric circles.

The landing gear, equipped with small spherical wheels that move in all directions, touches down on the parking deck, and standard electromagnetic locks engage special points on the front and rear of the spherical wheels, securing the aircraft to the parking space.

“Yes, landing complete.” Marika looked around the cockpit to see if there was anything left to do. “We have arrived at Skull Star.”

“You may stop the main engine, but please do not turn off the main switch.” Coorie said.

Normally, when a spacecraft lands on a parking area or docks at a pier, it shuts down its main engine and receives power from the port. The connection also has a data cable, so if it is connected, you can access the network without the need for radio.

“IS that okay? If we let the spacecraft collect information the whole time it's parked, won't it consume a lot of electricity?” Marika begins parking procedures.

“It's not flying, and as long as we don't initiate anything it should last for a while on just the batteries.” As she said it, Coorie also began to turn off all unnecessary displays. “We should lock the doors carefully.”

Marika stood up from the cockpit, slipped between Nash and Gruier in the auxiliary seats, and opened the hatch. She opened the luggage compartment at the back of the airlock and rummaged through the equipment.

“Are you looking for something?” Gruier asked, peering into the airlock from the cockpit hatch.

“This.” Marika turned around and handed a small walkie-talkie to Gruier. “I don't intend for things to fall apart, but you can keep this for contact in case of an emergency.” Next, she takes out a small beam gun. “What about this one?”

Gruier looked at the beam gun in Marika's hand with a complicated expression, then looked up with a grin. “I'd rather not. Everyone here can probably handle it better than I can.”

“I understand.” Marika put the beam gun back in the cargo bay and opened the port hatch.

Even though the external environmental monitors showed that there were no toxic substances in the air, Marika was careful when breathing in the air that had flowed in from outside. Inhaling the air, which was slightly cooler than the air inside the cabin, Marika noticed that it had the same familiar smell as other spaceports.

The spaceport, equipped with docking bridges, piers, and parking decks in all directions, is in a state of weightlessness. Marika went out to the spaceport first.

“Welcome.”

Hearing the voice, Marika quickly looked up in the direction of the sound. A beautiful silver-haired woman in an old-fashioned red dress, her long skirt spreading out like a parachute, descended headfirst onto the parking deck of the Silent Whisper.

“Welcome to Skull Star.”

Marika placed her left hand on the outer hatch to stop her body, and reflexively put her free right hand behind her waist, searching for the beam gun that she rarely wore. “Pirate Muller ...or rather, Myra Grant?”

The Queen of Love, which is much larger than the Silent Whisper, is still in the process of landing, aligning its fuselage to the parking deck. Myra flew into the dimly lit spaceport with the Queen of Love in the background, a brilliant pink that shone brightly in the dimly lit spaceport, and gracefully changed her attitude to land next to the Silent Whisper. “Kato Marika from the Silent Whisper, right?”

Her facial features were so similar that she could be mistaken for the pirate Muller who she had seen countless times on the communications monitor, but with a childlike smile on her face, Myra raised her hand to Marika. “I really wanted to meet you in person and thank you.”

“Thank you so much for taking the time to come and meet me so politely, even though your ship hasn't even landed yet.” Marika landed on the same parking deck as Myra. She noticed that Myra, with her soft, flowing silver hair, is slightly shorter than she is.

“Yes. Here you go.” Myra handed Marika a small business card printed on high-quality paper. “Will you accept it?”

“What is it?” Marika received the card. Myra Grant’s name, the ship's registry, and the unique contact information were typed in Galactic Standard.

“You've been through a lot with my sister, and this is your first time here, right? I think I can be of help to you in many ways.”

Marika turned the card over. There was a microchip contact point. It seemed to contain a lot of other information as well. “Oh, thank you.” Marika looked up at the Queen of Love, which was parking overhead from her current position, then turned her attention back to Myra. “Sorry, I didn't think this would happen, so I didn't make any business cards.”

“I don't mind. It's kind of my job to remember people's faces.” With a thud, Myra kicked the parking deck and floated up again. “Our ship is always short-staffed, so we have plenty of work to do and you're always welcome.”

Thinking about the Love Ship's work, Marika hastily shook her head.

“It's okay, take your time.”

“I'd like to extend my greetings to your fellow passengers. See you soon.” With a flick of her frilly sleeve, a walking stick magically appeared, with a large gem set inside. Compressed air spewed from the tip along with a fine powder of light, and Myra waved her hand as she moved away.

“Thank you. Safe voyage.” As she sent her off with the standard lines, Marika noticed that the Chimera of Scylla had arrived at port in the direction Myra was flying to.

“Her image is quite different from that of the pirate Muller.” Gruier climbed out of the plane and onto the tarmac.

“But being Muller's sister, she's a long-lived, Methuselah species.” Marika said as she looked off at the flowery red dress flying through the spaceport. “Besides, it seems like their job is even more dangerous than a pirate ship.”

“What did you receive?”

Marika showed Gruier the card that Myra had given her. “She said I’m always welcome.”

“Oh, you got a very nice gift.” Coorie came down next and peered at the card in Marika's fingertips while suspended in the air. “I did a little research, and as expected, the information I get is completely different from what I had found outside.”

“What’s different?”

“It's the Queen of Love. The Love Ship is just a front, and what it does is intervene in interstellar conflicts, gather intelligence, and apparently this time it was delivering important people from rival criminal organizations and the star system government here. Unlike Muller, they don't call themselves pirates, so they might be more troublesome.”

“I wonder if they're a member of the Pirate Guild?” Marika looked at Myra's business card. “So, where's the intelligence officer?”

“He’s still in there, trying to locate the Pirate Guild.” Coorie looked up at the windowless nose of the Silent Whisper. “Oh, he's coming out.”

Nash climbed out of the Silent Whisper. “Sorry I made you wait.”

“So, did you get the address of the Pirate Guild?”

“That, unfortunately, is not the case.” Nash gave a bitter smile and shook his head. “I checked the phone book and the address book, and it doesn't seem like there's any Pirate Guild registered, at least on Skull Star.”

Coorie looked around the spaceport with a quizzical look on her face. “You mean there's no pirate guild here?”

“Maybe it's just that you can't find it if you search for it in the normal way.” Nash looked around at the group with amusement. “We are still outsiders here.”

“Maybe the fastest way is to go over there.” Gruier looked in the direction the red-dressed Myra had flown. A bright crimson pirate ship stood out in the dark pier.

“Is that the pirate Muller's Chimera of Scylla?” Nash said with emotion. “I never thought I would not only set foot on the Skull Star, but also have the opportunity to see the crimson pirate ship with my own eyes.”

Coorie looks at Nash suspiciously. “Are you going out like that?”

“And reveal your identity?”

Nash extended his arms to Coorie. “Speaking of the pirate Muller, isn't she always one of the top names on the Imperial Fleet's blacklist?”

“Isn't that the reason you came here?” Coorie sniffed in disappointment. Nash shrugged.

“I'll save that for another time. After doing some research, I found that there are a lot of bars and stores with the name Pirate Guild, so I'll start looking around there for now.”

“Just for reference, how many stores are there on Skull Star that have signs saying Pirate Guild?”

“Roughly a thousand.” Nash scanned the display on the mobile device he had taken out of his jacket pocket. “By the way, there are about 50,000 properties that have the word ‘pirate’ in them, and there are about 2,500 guilds.”

“Oh really.” Coorie looked around the spaceport with a weary look on her face. “You're not planning to go around to all of them, are you?”

“I intend to do it efficiently.” Nash pointed around. “Aren’t you curious to know what the place known as Skull Star and Pirate Island is like?”

Marika and Coorie split up to complete the aircraft check after landing, and confirmed that the Silent Whisper was safely secured on the parking deck.

When entering a port for the first time, no matter how carefully you lock the doors, it is not enough. Even if you lock the aircraft, activate remote security, and have a 24-hour watchman or house-sitter, there are many ways to circumvent it.

Locking the Silent Whisper without even connecting the power cable, and setting it up to continue recording the situation inside the port and communications in a passive mode, the group left the port area and landed on Skull Star.

The data sent from port control included 3D data on the structure of Skull Star and a basic guidebook.

“They're quite friendly considering they're called Pirate Island.”

“That means they value business over piracy.” Coorie checked the surrounding structure through her round glasses. “If it's a free trade port, the latest data is given to incoming spaceships. All spaceships that come to the trade port are customers, so if you think of it that way, you can make more profit by offering them something like a guidebook.”

The open port designated as the parking space for the Silent Whisper was near the entrance to the skull's right eye. The port area inside the eye socket is kept in a weightless state, and taxis and buses patrol within the port.

The base of the pier had become a huge market for spaceships and parts. Some of the spaceships that had arrived and were moored at the pier or docked in the parking spaces had huge logos with promotional phrases like "For Sale," "Special Price," and "Quality Guaranteed" written on them, or were decorated with flags and banners.

“Hah” The group descends through the enormous weightless space, relying on the propulsion of gas guns and propeller lights. Coorie lets out a voice of admiration as she sees the three-dimensional shopping street with parts shops, exhibition halls, temporary warehouses, and overflowing stands at the base of the regularly-spaced pier. ‘If it was just the size of the market, I wouldn't be too surprised, but if the advertising that flooded us when we entered the port was real and all of them were selling illegal goods, it's a terrifying market.”

“Can you trust illegal parts and spaceships?” Most of the exhibition halls and stores are rapidly changing their three-dimensional logos and signs. Most of the text that switches between them is in galactic standard language, which Marika can manage to read, but sometimes ancient characters and frontier languages ​​that she'd never seen before were also displayed. Many of them advertise parts and their functions by moving them around in 3D images. “I suppose the quality assurance is questionable, but even so, are things like battleship main guns, recoil boosters, and wait, turbolasers still being sold as practical items?”

As they approached the surface of the harbor, Coorie's voice grew restless. She started to blurt out technical terms she'd never heard before, and Marika exchanged glances with Gruier, who was descending next to her, matching her speed. “I think Kane and Hyakume would be happy if we brought them here.”

“I think even Sandaime and Schnitzer would change their minds. Hey Nash, didn't the guidebook say something about an electronics district?”

“Yes, yes, wait a moment.” Nash returned the gas gun, which was used to travel in the weightless space filled with pressurized atmosphere, to the holster on his waist and took out his mobile terminal. “The docks in the port area are for spaceships, exterior parts, and weapons-related equipment. The land rents around here are high, so there are a lot of items that are quite valuable. Junk and uninsured bulk goods are in a different place, and the electronics district is also a place where you can find a variety of items, from military luxury goods to uninsured ore piles.”

“They're selling a lot of stuff at this rate.” Coorie muttered in awe as she looked around the spaceship market. “...I can improve the Bentenmaru's electronic warfare capabilities in many ways.”

“Just keep it reasonable.” Marika called out, knowing it would be useless. “We can't take home more than we can fit in our aircraft, right?”

“Don't worry, if you arrange for a separate shipment at a port like this, a carrier can deliver it to the other side of the galaxy. Besides, the rule of thumb for electronic parts is that the more powerful they are, the smaller they are.” Gruier said quietly to Marika. “It seems like it would be a big problem if we brought president Lynn here.”

Just imagining it made Marika's body shudder. “I think she’d say she wants to live here.”

Skull Star is said to be an old space city with an energy system that does not rely on a home planet or star. The guidebook only states that the original prototype mobile fortress was built several thousand years ago. It does not explain where it was built or how it got here.

As with any large structure with artificial gravity, the direction of gravity varies from block to block. The spaceport is in a weightless state for both eyes and the jaw, just like other space cities and relay stations, but recently the direction of the artificial gravity has been aligned.

If the spaceport's air shield were to fail for any reason, the pressurized atmosphere would be lost in an instant. In preparation for such an emergency, the shaft leading from the spaceport to the interior was equipped with a huge shutter. The shaft, which large trucks and cargo ships enter directly for transportation, always leaves a gaping hole in the surface of the spaceport, and it seemed that exhibition halls, shops, and other port facilities are attached to the edge of the spaceport all the way to the interior.

“If that's a shutter that separates the port from the inside in an emergency,” Gruier looks around the area with interest as she enters a huge tunnel-like shaft with a shopping district attached to the inside. “If a real emergency were to occur, all the surrounding outdoor stalls and shops on the Garden Terrace would be gone, right?”

“Even before that, if they were forced to close the shutters, I feel like they would get caught on things and wouldn't be able to seal them.” Marika's eyebrows furrowed as she looked at the inside of the shaft, which, if there was even a little space on the surface, would be used as a loading dock or storefront, whether it be a fire hydrant or an emergency escape exit. “Is this okay? I wonder what the safety standards are like in this city.”

“At the very least, the core standards don't seem to apply.” Nash, who was ahead of them, watched as a trailer pulling a large container accelerated and headed out into the port. “The speed limit seems to be relaxed, too, so either they really believe in their safety, or they're confident in their operations.”

“It may look uncontrolled, but there's a lot of stuff flying around.” Coorie, ahead of us, switches the visualization mode on her glasses. “There's a low-powered but highly accurate radar at the entrance to the shaft, which should be able to track not only living beings but even small pieces of debris. In the middle of the shaft there are a lot of guidance beams and other lights whose purposes I don't know, and of course there are all kinds of electromagnetic waves flying around the stores and I don't know if they're for surveillance or safety systems. If they're just looking to keep thieves away, I think it's about as good as in the core.”

Nash caught up with Coorie, who was ahead of him, with a light burst of his gas gun. “Are we being followed?”

“Probably.” Coorie answered, still facing forward. “I don't know if they're tracking all the crews that came ashore after entering the port, or just us, but the electromagnetic waves that we received after leaving the parking area were relayed, so there's no doubt they've identified us and are now tracking our location.”

“Are we alone?”

‘The output isn't that great, but there are a ridiculous number of different signals flying around.” Coorie looked at Nash again. “Have you learned anything?”

“That's your job.” Nash gave a vague smile. “So, it's probably best to assume that our actions and conversations are also public knowledge.”

“It's the basic rule when you’re landing for the first time.” Coorie said matter-of-factly. “We're outsiders here.”

The shaft from the spaceport seemed to continue on forever, branching out in complex ways inside. Even thinner shafts were connected to the shaft, creating a three-dimensional maze.

Both thick and thin shafts are equipped with numbers, connection destinations, and a 3D display showing the current location at key points, but it is easy to become spatially disoriented when flying through a shaft whose surface is densely populated with shops, signs, connecting pipes, and air holes, which can easily make you lose your sense of direction.

Using the current location displayed on their mobile devices as a guide, the group headed to the electronics district as requested by Coorie.

“Even though it's called an Electric Town, it's quite large.”

Approximately equidistant from the two spaceports on the left and right, behind the skull's forehead, was an area known as Electric Town.

“Spaceships these days are practically flying on electricity, and they seem to sell a wide range of things, even things that aren't related to spaceships.”

“I know that.” The stores are clustered roughly by specialty, but the range of products they offer is wide. “For now, computers and electronics. Spacecraft electronics, especially military and electronic warfare related. If we limit it to that, doesn't that narrow it down a lot?”

“What about radar and sensors? Apparently there are separate streets for radars depending on the frequency band they use.”

“Are they doing that detailed of a business? Well, then, high-frequency radar for fire control and its defense.”

“Something like this.” Nash typed in a few necessary details into his mobile device and held it up to Coorie. The scrolling list never seemed to end.

“Captain.” Coorie said, peering at the device in Nash's hand. “I'd like to go around and investigate the actual state of electronic weapons in the frontier, see if there are any parts that can be used for our spaceship, and also to research prices. Is that okay?”

“With that look on your face, you wouldn't listen if I told you not to.” Marika looked at Nash. “It looks like the investigation into the Pirate Guild will take quite some time, is that okay?”

“Yes, we welcome the gathering of information.” Nash answered as he checked the nature of their destination. “Even in the past, when Coorie has a face like that, she won't stop even if you try to stop her.”

“Wow, that’s amazing!” Coorie let out a cry of joy that Marika had never heard before. “Being able to separate the enemy's frequency under strong electronic interference and still receive it properly is at the level of performance of an astronomical observation sensor.”

“*That’s natural.*” In a parts store that resembled a huge shopping mall, the 3D image of a shopkeeper leaning forward from his mobile device answered in standard language with a dubious accent. “*What's more, it's shock-resistant and designed for electronic warfare, so you don't have to worry about it burning out or going silent even if you encounter crazy inputs in real combat. However, there aren't many people around here who can do such delicate electronic warfare, so it's a waste of a valuable item.*”

Since it's impossible for a human to deal with all the customers, there are automated sales assistants, also known as companions or advisors, everywhere. Coorie was used to these kinds of stores, so as soon as she entered the first one she saw, she called up a guide program on her mobile device and makes a list of orders that even Marika can tell are unreasonable to the automated store owner.

To my surprise, the store owner easily guided Coorie to the shelf where the order was placed, and even recommended another store on the same block for parts that were not in stock.

After hearing the other party's price, Coorie quickly ended the negotiation and reported to Marika in the cluttered store, which was under the same artificial gravity as on the ground. “Well, the prices are about the same as the decent stores in the core, but the stock is amazing. If you have a generous budget here, you can build a first-class electronic warfare ship using only the parts they sell.”

“Can you trust them?” Marika had only been to an electronic parts store once before, accompanying president Lynn to the Electric Town in her hometown of Shinokuhama City. She looked around the vast parts store, where parts and packages were piled up to the ceiling with such force that she was about to develop space phobia. Electronic parts containing chips may be tiny, but the sales floor area is incredibly large. “I often hear stories from the president about products that claim to have exceptional performance, but then when you buy them, go home and start using them, they break in an instant and the warranty isn’t honored.”

“Of course, I can't deny that possibility.” Coorie looked around the large store hesitantly. There were many customers. “A store that serves anyone can be destroyed by making careless business decisions. If all goes well, we can improve the performance of our electronic weapons, which we're struggling to get spare parts for, without too much trouble.”

“Will it be okay?”

“I think it's definitely worth a try.”

“What do you think, Nash?” Marika called out to Nash, who was walking around looking at the shelves with a serious look on his face.

“I think it's fine if you can balance budget and performance.” Nash answered while looking at Coorie with a serious look on his face. “As you know, Coorie is a genius at this sort of thing, so it's usually best to leave it to her.” However, Nash lowered his voice. “If possible, I'd like you to do it without me knowing what you're doing.”

“Why?”

“It's illegal.” Nash looked around the store with an apologetic look on his face. “I don't know how it got here, but it certainly doesn't meet the Empire's safety and security standards. Well, the Empire doesn't disassemble and inspect every single spaceship that comes from the frontier, but the Bentenmaru is a spaceship that operates within the Empire.” Nash pointed to the shelf lined with data cards he had been looking at earlier. “The electronic warfare programs on that shelf are most likely pirated copies.”

“Ah…”

A group of people standing in front of a building

Description automatically generated

The shipbuilding area, where spaceships can dock and be repaired or newly built, spreads out to fill both the upper and lower jaws of the skull. In a large area where countless closed blocks are piled up, there is a battle district where arms dealers gather.

The main means of transportation on Skull Star are shared buses and unmanned commuter taxis that run along the large shafts that serve as arteries. When traveling within a space city with its complex three-dimensional structure, the distance traveled can be long even if the straight-line distance is not that great. Once a space city or station reaches a certain size, developing a personal commuter vehicle will shorten the total travel time, rather than building a public transportation system with fixed stations and routes.

Along the way, they check out restaurants, multi-use buildings, coffee shops, bars, art and antiques shops, electronics stores, and other establishments that have pirate guild signs.

Also along the way, between the skull's eyes, there was a jewelry district that sells fine art and jewelry.

“Wow, doesn't the atmosphere seem noticeably different?” Compared to the high-end boutiques in the duty-free shopping mall at Sea of the Morningstar's relay station, glittering stores that look several levels more luxurious line both sides of the corridor. Marika looked around at the jewelry district, which even had trees planted along the corridor, unlike the electric town, which seemed to be all about business. “It looks like a high-end shopping district in a core star’s relay station.”

With a calm demeanor, in stark contrast to the electric town, Coorie looked at the rows of show windows and elaborate signs that lined both sides of the old cobblestone paved walkway. There were fewer people coming and going than in the electric town. “There are places like this, too.”

As she walked along casually, Gruier peered into the display window of the first store. Antique jewelry was lined up in a display that resembled a fountain in an ancient ruin. “Oh…?” Curious, Gruier stopped in her tracks. “Wow, it's beautiful.”

Peering into the glittering shop window, Marika muttered in horror. “But there's no price tag...”

“Coorie?” Gruier turned to Coorie. “Do you understand?”

“The precious metal is real. Probably solid.” Looking at the display in the shop window through her round glasses, which not only contained a display but also various analytical functions, Coorie adjusted the displayed information by touching the temples of the glasses with her fingertips. “But as for the gems, apart from the small ones, the larger ones are all man-made imitations.”

“What?” Marika, who had been listening, relaxed. However, she was shocked by Gruier's next words and looked back at the display.

“I see. So does that mean this store is real after all?”

“I guess so.” Coorie looked at the storefront around the window and the structure behind the display. The entrance had an automatic lock with an intercom, but the staff inside noticed customers peering into the window and waved amiably.

“How can you say it's real when there are so many fakes lined up?”

“It's like a cruise ship with high-end passengers.” Waving to the clerk, Coorie left the show window. “I told you that celebrities on luxury liners with first-class cabins don't wear real jewels or accessories to parties or events.”

That's one of the basics Marika learned after taking on the role of captain of the Bentenmaru, a ship that does pirate work. On luxury cruise ships that the general public board, many customers take the opportunity to wear real jewels and accessories. However, when they become part of the upper class with the financial means to move the stars, they wear elaborate imitations, and the real ones are kept safely stored.

Hearing Coorie's words, Marika reconsidered the accessories on display. “So, even though the ones on display here are fake, they sell the real thing inside?”

“Real luxury stores don't deal with customers who shop by looking at the price tags. If the display at this store had the real thing in stock, that would be enough to buy a battleship.”

“What?” After taking one last look at the classic accessories set with clear colored gemstones, Marika chased after Gruier and Coorie, who were ahead of her. “So, this place is...”

“I can't say for sure without going inside and seeing the real thing, but in today's world, it's not that difficult for even an amateur to carry around analytical equipment and perform appraisals with just a little background knowledge. The security is solid, and judging from the atmosphere, the things they deal with are probably genuine.”

“The real thing...” Marika's eyes widened as she saw the next store's display, where large fruit-like gems were displayed like fruit on a platter. “Hey, isn't that amazing?!”

“I think it's amazing.” Coorie turned her face to Nash who was following behind her. “What do you think?”

“I'm not familiar with this industry, so I can't say for sure.” Nash replied with a wry smile. “I don't really want to think about how the products here got here.”

Marika couldn't help but look around at the jewelry stores on either side of the wide cobblestone walkway lined with trees, which ended at stone fountain spurting real water. “Aren't all of them from legitimate sources...?”

“Of course, we can't know that without examining all the products, but I doubt that customers who come all the way to Skull Star would care how the products are obtained.” Coorie turned her back on Nash and started walking again. “What will you do, Captain? If you look, you might find some elusive treasures that were supposed to have disappeared into the darkness of history.”

Marika looked into one show window after another, feeling more like she was looking at exhibits in a museum than window shopping. “It's a very tempting offer, but unfortunately I don't think I could afford it with my pocket money, and even if I could, I wouldn't have anywhere to wear it.”

As if suddenly realizing something, Gruier, who was walking ahead of us, turned around. “Mr. Nash? Are there any art galleries or museums on this station?”

“Geh.” With a strange groan, Nash opened the display of the mobile device he had taken out. “...There are apparently museums with apt names like the Drifting Art Museum and the Museum of Lost Art.”

“Ah...”

Marika looked at Coorie and Gruier.

“Are there libraries?”

At Gruier's question, Nash switched the display on his mobile device. “There are two. The Forbidden Library and the Burned Book Library.”

“There must be real paper books there.” Gruier mused. It has been a long time since books and other written information have shifted to electronic media. Since the commercialization of electric paper, which does not tear, does not burn, and does not use electricity to maintain the display, electronic media have become cheaper than paper in terms of cost, and paper books are becoming a relic of the past in the core.

However, if handled properly, books can last for decades or even centuries, and there is no need to worry about running out of batteries or malfunctioning when displaying or reading them, so they are an actively used medium on the frontier and outlying planets of the Empire, where space efficiency is not a concern.

“And considering the names, it seems that they store banned or forbidden books in their original form.”

Nash used his mobile device to check the volume each facility took up on Skull Star. Not only do the Drifting Art Museum and the Museum of Lost Art take up a considerable amount of space on their own, but there are also annexes all over the place. The libraries also have branches and annexes scattered across almost the entirety of Skull Star.

“Shall we go?” Coorie said with a mischievous look on her face. “If you go to an art gallery or museum on a pirate island, you're sure there'll be all kinds of interesting things to see, right?”

“I am now grateful for my good fortune in not being in charge of art or cultural artifacts.”

“Is it okay if I don't search for a list of missing art pieces?”

“It's better than finding something missing here.” Nash's voice trailed off.

“What if there are famous masterpieces that should be on display at the Imperial Art Museum?”

“Ah, it's true that many masterpieces in famous art museums are suspected of being counterfeits.”

Coorie looked around to make sure no one was listening. “If someone accidentally touches it and causes a commotion, it could become a major scandal that threatens the prestige of the Empire.” Coorie turned her attention back to Nash. “But isn't the mission to find treasure?”

“Of course, investigating the Skull Star is part of the mission.” Nash replied in a confident tone. “If this is really all the treasure the pirates have been hoarding since before the founding of the Galactic Empire, then we wouldn’t have received such an important mission.”

“Is it just art and cultural assets?” Gruier began to walk slowly again. “If the Forbidden Library and the Burned Book Library do contain books as their names suggest, they would be a great asset to all sentient beings in the universe, but how did they get here?”

“What do you mean?” Sensing a disconcerting undertone in Gruier's words, Marika jogged over to catch up.

“If Skull Star is an illegal free trade port and a pirate den, then people who were chased off their planet for various reasons must have fled there. If the artifacts in the museum and library are those brought by such people, what if Skull Star still plays a similar role today?”

“Certainly, being a refugee agent is one of the jobs of a pirate.” Coorie said.

“There are plenty of VIPs and rich people who somehow go missing, but there are also ordinary people, is that right?”

“Probably.” Coorie looked up at the blue ceiling, lined with lights that appeared to be sunlamps. “There are plenty of people in the universe who are supposed to be missing.”

“Yes, that's true.” Coorie glanced at Nash, as if to say that he had asked all he needed to know. “What are you going to do?”

“Hmm.” Nash growled. “The intelligence department had considered the possibility that they might be dealing in illegal weapons or drugs, and from the large amount of advertising mail that arrived when we entered port, we knew that this place was dealing in the kind of goods that couldn't be overlooked, but if people like that are also infiltrating, it's honestly beyond the capacity of a mere intelligence officer.”

“It would be one thing if it was just illegal goods and weapons, but does this mean that there are places of asylum or temporary hiding places here?” Marika asked. Coorie nodded.

“Probably, but that's not all. In order to deal in illegal goods, you need the facilities and personnel to develop and produce them. I hadn't thought of that until I came to Jewelry District, but if that's what's gathered here at this station...”

“Let's check it out.” Nash quickened his pace. “The data sent down from the control station didn't include that information, but if we go to a good internet cafe we should be able to find out at least that much.”

“Wouldn't the library be quicker?” Touching the temples of her swirling glasses, Coorie searched for a nearby information station. “As expected of the Jewelry District, there's a jewelry museum up ahead. The reference room is apparently a branch of the Forbidden Library.”

“Are there any banned books relating to jewelry?”

“As many as you want.” Coorie answered simply. “There are gemstones whose origins are unknown, processing methods that have been lost, recipes for artificial gemstones that can never be replicated no matter what, techniques that have been lost along with the craftsman, techniques that have been intentionally wiped out or lost in war, and in some cases, techniques that have been destroyed in order to increase their value. Nash, do you know what I'm thinking right now?”

“Yeah, I’m probably thinking the same thing.” Nash said. “Even gems and jewelry are like that. If the same thing were to happen in other areas, not just the electronics district we just talked about, but also the armament district and the hospital district...”

The entrance to the jewelry museum, which is an annex of the Drifting Art Museum, is not much different from a specialty store in town, and in the show window, an old jewelry craftsman's workshop from before the Industrial Revolution is displayed. The check-in counter is located inside a storefront that looks like it is made of large, well-used, old pieces of wood, either real or made of new materials to resemble the real thing.

“Isn't it great, free admission and no security checks?”

Though the Jewelry District was not as crowded as the Electronics District, the stone-lined walkways were filled with tourists, both wealthy and not so wealthy.

“It's just made to look that way.” Coorie said as we walked along the cobbled walkway leading to the exhibition halls. “This place has security on par with a first-class jewelry store in the core. It's full of cameras and sensors, and they're probably identifying individuals, and if you have a metal lump bigger than an accessory, even if it's not a weapon but an ingot of precious metal, you'll be tracked.”

“Really?” Marika looked towards the entrance to the exhibition hall, where there was no sign of any security guards.

“There are also reactions from anti-personnel radar and energy sensors, and various mechanical devices other than the exhibits can be seen. If you just take out a weapon here, at best it will send out a paralyzing bullet, and at worst it will send out a death ray.”

“That's what it says, anyway.” Nash pointed to a warning sign printed in several languages, including Galactic Standard. “We take the utmost care to ensure safety, but in the event of an emergency we cannot guarantee your life, it says.”

“If they warn you, that's a pretty good job for a pirate.” Looking at the written message, which seemed to be written in a deliberately stiff manner, Marika shrugged.

The museum was built inside a station that requires effective use of all space, including above, below, left, right, front and back. Also, since the exhibits do not require a large space, the Jewelry Museum has a structure in which the exhibition rooms are not very large and are connected by numerous corridors and stairs. It seems that you can get around efficiently by following the route, but it is so large that it is easy to get lost.

The attached reference room was completely empty. You could only browse the digitized materials at the old-fashioned information terminals in the rows of booths. To view the originals on paper or other physical media, you had to register and go through the necessary procedures, and they also provided photocopies for a fee.

The four of them entered a small two-person booth and immediately began researching the information they needed. Coorie and Nash each occupied one old-fashioned information terminal connected to the network, displaying information one after another on the flat displays as if they were competing with each other.

The information terminals in the reference room could connect to a dedicated database that could only be accessed from here, as well as to the outside world.

“I'll leave the strategic-scale weapons research to you.” Coorie taps on the control panel at her usual fast pace. “I'll look elsewhere over here.”

“Got it.”

Since the search was limited to Skull Star and did not involve FTL connections, the search results were displayed immediately. Coorie started by looking at research institutes that were researching biological weapons, including bacteria and microorganisms, and then expanded to research in life sciences, picking out one research institute after another.

“Wow, it's all black...” Coorie muttered as the text on the display scrolled by at a speed that Marika could barely read. “This is amazing!”

“What's so great about it?”

“There are a lot of restrictions on biological weapons, but most of them are decided by treaties or humanitarian considerations, or for the convenience of the users. Life sciences are directly connected to medical care, so there are plenty of loopholes if necessary, but even so, there are many researches that are banned or criticized.”

As Marika looked at the long string of text, she suddenly realized something. “You mean all of the research institutes here are like that?!”

“I've only looked up their names and brief descriptions, so I don't know for sure what scale they're doing, but even I know the names of some of them, like biological weapon experts and body modification demons. I'm sure if I could get someone like Misa to take a look, they'd be able to make a more accurate judgment, but I heard that this doctor went missing after causing a superhuman commotion at a hospital somewhere, so I wonder if he's still alive.”

“Within the Empire, even if the research is ethically questionable, it can be kept under strict supervision or kept secret.” Nash took over, also tapping away at the control panel at a fast pace. “In the end, prohibitions and illegality are just for the convenience of the government, so you can just go somewhere where there are no restrictions.”

“Are you saying that there are prohibitions on intelligence, but not on knowledge?” Nash nodded in response to Gruier's question.

“That's right. Do you know where in the Empire all the facilities that do research that is forbidden or proscribed are located?” Gruier tilted her head slightly and exchanged glances with Marika. Nash continued. “It's the Space University. It's an ivory tower that represents the prestige of the Empire, so any research that is deemed meaningful or necessary will be carried out there. Space University has the most black projects and dark factories. Of course, they're not made public, so even if you investigate using legitimate means, they won't come up,”

“You mean they're all here, too?”

“Yes.” It seemed he had finally reached the end of the list, as the scrolling on the display in front of Nash stopped. “And it's probably on a scale larger than the Space University.”

“That's a frightening amount of think tanks.” The display in front of Coorie hasn't stopped yet. “I just did a quick search, and there are a lot of research institutes and archives not just in science but in the humanities as well. There are also many research institutes for the study of ethnic cultures that are on the verge of extinction, language collectors, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, economic and legal research institutes, which is probably due to its location.” Coorie gave Nash an amused smile. “What are you going to do? It would be one thing if it was just the intelligence department, but is it really okay for the Joint Chiefs of Staff to open a negotiating channel directly with such a shady place?”

“That's a difficult question.” Nash replied with a serious look on his face. “Even just wanting to have a channel with pirates could be considered treason, and with the station that has so many dark facilities as their home base...” Nash sighed. “I'm really grateful that I'm not an expert in that field. I wonder how the legal people will come up with an excuse for negotiations.”

“Ah, isn't it the legal people's specialty to distinguish between true intentions and public appearances?”

Marika looked at Coorie with a shocked look on her face. Nash waved his hand.

“It's not the military who is doing that, but people higher up. The military attacks targets and basically leaves it up to the higher ups to decide whether something is right or wrong, so the job of the intelligence department is to gather information to make the decision of whether something is right or wrong.” Just to be sure, Nash erased all search records and restarted the information terminal to erase any traces of its use. “The problem is, everything has a certain degree of policy decided in advance...”

“It's hard enough for the Galactic Empire, which claims to be an orderly, unified galaxy, to even have a negotiating channel with pirates, but with all these illegal things lined up, it must be even harder.” Coorie also quickly erased her usage history. “Are you done with your research? If so, I'll reboot.”

“Let's go.” Nash pulled the curtain back and stood up. “There's a place called the Pirate Museum nearby. It might be a branch of the guild.”

Deep inside the skull, near the brain stem, ancient mechanisms remain that are as old as ruins. A huge fortress cannon that was used in the first mobile fortress that became the foundation of the Skull Star and a former closed dock are open to the public as museums.

The spaceship dock, sealed in the deepest part of the skull with several blocks stacked on top of each other toward the outside, has been isolated from the outside for a long time. In a huge space that could no longer be used as a dock, a spaceship equipped with an early FTL engine is on display.

“What is that?” Gruier looked up at the black spaceship, lit by the work lights of an old dock where few tourists were in sight. The old-fashioned spaceship, equipped with a spinning ram on its bow, appeared to be similar in size to the Odette II.

“It is said to be the ship of Captain Jinn, the most famous pirate in the galaxy, who played a major role in the Great Purge.” Nash read the dais at the entrance to the dock, which was kept in a weightless state, perhaps to avoid putting unnecessary strain on the hull and structure, even though it was deep in the station. “The Demon King.”

“Is it real?”

Even though it was weightless, that was only nominal, as the neighboring blocks were generating artificial gravity in completely arbitrary directions, so the balance was not as good as in the port area. Coorie looked around the exhibition space, where not only the Demon King, but also small spacecraft and atmospheric aircraft were docked or suspended by wires.

“Unfortunately, it is not the real thing, which is said to have evaporated after being hit by concentrated fire from the Imperial fleet. It is a replica made from a spaceship of the same type.” Nash began to slide along the boarding bridge connected to the inside of the ship. “There are several memorial ships left in the fleet, and it's similar to those.”

Entering the ship from the old hangar, we were greeted by a space fighter that was stored, scrapped but with all its parts still intact. As is typical of an ancient spaceship, the interior had been arranged with the most efficient use of space possible, with no aisles, and old space craft equipment lined up like the front of an antiques shop, as well as antique weapons from before the space age.

“Thank you for this.” Nash was quick to ponder the display, which resembled a military museum on a rural planet. “I was hoping that a ship commemorating a famous pirate would have some sort of pirate guild event or party, but it seems like I’ve wasted my time.”

“I guess an Imperial fleet needs history and tradition.” Coorie looks bored ash she gazes at the models of famous space pirate ship from all over and throughout history on display in the dining room. “Pirates are a bunch of people who are currently just running their business, so I don't think they care about past traditions or glorious history.”

Nash looked at Coorie and Marika, who were following him. “Is that the case for you too?”

“You mean me, too?” Pointing at her nose, Marika remembered that she was the captain of a space pirate ship. “Umm, well, for now I have a mountain of work that I have to do, so I don't really have the time to study history or anything like that...”

“Pirates who have privateer licenses and operate within the Empire are among the more stable pirates.” Coorie says plausibly. “A pirate who has insurance, and is associated with the star system military and the Imperial fleet, and has a schedule that will keep him busy for a while, wouldn't be considered a pirate by a professional pirate.”

“Professional?” Marika repeated. Coorie continued.

“A real pirate doesn't have a home port, and doesn't have the protection of an army or a fleet. He has to search for and attack prey himself, or find and get work done, and maintain his spaceship and crew. It's hard enough being a transport or passenger ship with a proper job, but being a pirate is even harder.”

“…Well, history and traditions will have to take a back seat.” Nash looked over at the bar counter in a corner of what used to be the diner, where a whole section was filled with piles of liquor bottles and cartons. “I guess it's probably best to go see the pirate Muller, who sent us the invitation.”

“Please be careful.” Gruier called out. Nash turned to face her.

“"What do you mean?”

“If we were to negotiate with the pirates, Nash himself would be the most powerful bargaining chip.” Gruier looked hesitantly around the deserted dining room. “Are we still being monitored?”

“It's okay in here.” Placing her fingertips on the temples of her glasses, Coorie looked around with her swirling glasses in scan mode. “The security cameras are working, but that's it. If you're careful not to let the cameras read your lips, I don't think anything you say will be leaked somewhere.”

“So, I won’t worry about it.” Gruier looked up at Nash. “I don't know what the Pirate Guild and Muller really think, but being an intelligence officer attached to the Imperial Fleet's General Staff Headquarters is a valuable bargaining chip in itself, isn't it?”

“I see.” Nash looked at Gruier's smile again. “As expected, you have a different perspective.”

“I wonder how much value they would place on a low-level field worker, let alone a department head doing clerical work at headquarters.”

“I think it depends on the content of the negotiations.” Gruier replied to Coorie. “However, the fact that we've been moving around inside Skull Star so far and have been left alone without much attention means that we may not be recognized as having much value as information to begin with.”

“It would be nice if these pirates and guilds were that peaceful and laid-back.”

The information that Bentenmaru's captain, Kato Marika, and her companions had landed on Skull Star was known, at least to the pirate Muller. Since she had given her name to port control along with the spacecraft number officially registered on the Sea of the Morningstar, it would not be strange if the information had been shared throughout Skull Star.

‘After all, if Mr. Nash was willing to take so many detours, doesn't that mean he was hoping someone would contact him along the way?”

“That's right.” Raising his hands in defeat, Nash bowed to Gruier. “I was hoping to make contact as peacefully as possible, but since no one came out, I won't deny that I came to a place with fewer people.”

“What should we do?” Gruier asks. ‘Would you like to walk around this station for a while longer?”

“Let's go back to the port and rest.” Nash took out his mobile device and checked the current time. Like most space cities, Skull Star operated on Galactic Standard Time. The station operated on a 24-hour basis, with no distinction between day and night. “There must be some good hotels around there.”

“Palace Hotel!?” Marika couldn't help but shout when she saw the logo in the same standard language she had seen in the free trade city of Meiya. “Does the Palace Hotel have hotels in middle of nowhere!?”

Skull Star had hotels of all ranks, from budget lodgings offering only beds to luxury hotels with their own resort facilities. With the philosophy that no expense should be spared for safety and security, Coorie easily found the Palace Hotel in the luxury hotel district, where even the composition of the pressurized air was different.

Even though it was a luxury hotel district, it is not a vast open space lined with huge buildings on the ground, as in Meiya. There's a logo engraved on the high-ceilinged corridor below the gravity zone, and beyond that seems to be the exclusive area of ​​the Palace Hotel.

Gruier easily booked a room for four at the Palace Hotel, a place that would be impossible for a first-time visitor to even get a reservation at.

“Don't worry.” It wasn't the kind of hotel that required advance payment. Nash checked the payment method on the information terminal in the lobby and slapped his chest. “Most cards are accepted. Skull Star Palace Hotel, huh? I wonder if anyone in my office has ever gotten a receipt from a place like this.”

Nash disappeared the next morning.

A black rectangular object with white border

Description automatically generated

The Palace Hotel's motto is to provide the finest food and rest anywhere, anytime. Just like a space city that is constantly active 24 hours a day, all restaurants, bars, and other entertainment facilities are always available upon request and will not close unless there is a special reason.

The guests' schedules are just as variable as those of the city and the port. After getting a night's sleep, Marika meets up with Gruier at a nature-themed restaurant that serves all kinds of food, in a lounge that is bright 24 hours a day, even though it is morning in Galactic Standard Time.

“Good morning.” Gruier, neatly dressed in her Hakuou Girls Academy Middle School uniform, greeted Marika with a refreshing smile. “Did you sleep well?”

“Thanks to you.” Marika, also wearing her school uniform because she thought it would be better than work clothes, sat down at a table on the garden terrace, which was modeled after the forest of a natural planet. She quickly ordered a suitable breakfast set from the robot waiter who came over to her. “I thought I shouldn't have been able to take a rest in the middle of enemy territory, but I was sleeping so soundly. The last time I stayed at the Palace Hotel, I didn't have as much time to rest as I did this time.”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

“Yes, good morning.” Coorie appeared wearing work clothes, not caring about what other people thought, and looking extremely sullen and in a bad mood.

“Good morning.” Gruier greets her with a smile. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“I didn't have a bad dream.” Coorie ordered a large breakfast set from the robot waiter who came over. She sat at the table and looked around at Marika and Gruier. “I have good news and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?”

Marika looked at Gruier. She nodded with a look that said "please," and Marika turned her eyes back to Coorie. “Well then, let’s start with the good news.”

“I think our work here is done.” Coorie said bluntly. “It's up to the captain's discretion, but we can go home now.”

“Huh?” Marika looked again at Coorie's face, her expression hard to see thanks to her round glasses. “So what's the bad news?”

“Nat Nashfall, that bastard, ran off.” Coorie reported in a monotone.

“Huh? Nash ran off?”

“He took off without even saying goodbye.” Coorie spat out. “He only left a message. If he doesn't come back after half a day, we can go home. He left his card number with the hotel, so we can use their services and shop as much as we want.”

“...That's generous.” Marika was deep in thought, remembering the wide selection of items in the high-end boutiques attached to the hotel. “Wait? Didn't Coorie say before that sponsors who are too generous are dangerous?”

“I did.” Coorie gulped from the mug of freshly squeezed fruit juice that had arrived earlier. “Generous sponsors are either stupid or have a reason to be so generous with their money. Even if we spend a little bit on shopping in addition to the regular room rate at the Palace Hotel, I’m willing to bet it’s a small amount of money for a mission like invading Skull Star.” A large plate of sandwiches was delivered. Coorie started munching on them as if they were the enemy of her parents. ‘That idiot isn't coming back.”

“I see, so that means the job is done.” Marika remembered Nash's situation the night before. Returning to the Silent Whisper at the port's parking area to retrieve her luggage, she made sure there were no suspicious intruders or vandals, then took an unmanned taxi straight to the luxury hotel district between the two ports.

Marika looked around the nature-themed restaurant at the Palace Hotel, which seemed oddly out of place on a station called Pirate Island. A soft light that mimicked sunlight filtered down from the ceiling, filtering through the leaves of living trees, and she could hear the chirps of birds. It seemed like the ecosystem was being maintained to some extent, and not just real birds.

Glancing sideways at Coorie, who looked like she was just eating in frustration, Marika picked at her own sandwich. “Nash, do you know where you went? Have you found the pirate guild?”

“I don't think the Pirate Guild would ignore the captain of the Bentenmaru to make contact with an outsider who didn't even have an invitation.” Coorie didn't stop munching on her sandwich. “Have you heard anything from anywhere?”

“Not at all.” Marika shook her head. “I fell asleep because of that, but where did Nash go?”

“The security system in the port area can be checked from the outside, right?” Coorie washed down the sandwich with a mouthful of fruit juice and put the mug down. A robot circulating between the tables with several pitchers came over to pour more. “As expected of the Palace Hotel, not only are the rooms equipped with information terminals, but the Skull Star network is also impressive. It's probably for crime prevention purposes, but you can even view the monitor cameras in the harbor area from your room.”

“Wow.” Marika was so tired that when she entered the room, she quickly crawled into the king-size bed and fell asleep. However, Coorie apparently tried out all of the room's facilities.

“Of course, our Silent Whisper is locked and monitored in real time, but we can also operate cameras outside the parking berth we use, and we can see any ship if we know where it is.”

“Well then.”

“However, the only ships currently in port whose names we know are the Chimera of Scylla and the Queen of Love. The Scylla's angle of view is limited and the spaceship itself is optically camouflaged, but there is no problem in identifying the crew and visitors entering and leaving.”

“Can I assume that they're all being watched?”

“So, in the image records from early this morning” with an exaggerated sigh, Coorie reached for the pile of sandwiches “that idiot, after a polite salute to the camera, boarded the Chimera of Scylla’s pier.”

“Oh.” While sipping her fruit juice, Marika watched Coorie furiously stuff a sandwich into her mouth.

“I checked all the image records for the Scylla’s pier.”

“So, Nash is on the Chimera of Scylla now, isn’t he?”

“Unless he was thrown out.” Coorie grabbed her mug and gulped down the sandwich. “The Scylla left Skull Star about an hour ago.”

“Oh.”

“Where to?”

“Unknown.” Coorie answered simply. “As expected of a port called a pirate island, the next port of call was not written on the Chimera of Scylla's departure application. I don't know how that idiot got on the Scylla, but I wonder if he was thrown out afterwards.”

“Do you know where Scylla is now?”

“It jumped.” Coorie replied, still munching on her sandwich. “I don't know where it jumped to.”

“I wonder if it'll come back?”

“There is nothing scheduled.” Coorie answered, without looking at Marika. “However, since the Skull Star is a station that moves erratically, it is not fully booked like other ports that are fixed in a fixed location.” Coorie looked around at the two of them. “Have you noticed? It seems like this station moved again while we were sleeping.”

“Huh?”

“When I woke up this morning and checked the news, the current location information had been updated, so I thought that might be the case.”

“What!?” Looking at Gruier’s and Coorie's faces, Marika put her fingertips to her forehead. “Ah, I thought since I was at the hotel, I didn't check my current location. The news...”

“You can see the news from the core and the internet on the information terminal.” Gruier answered as if it was obvious. “Of course, there's local news and event information. Because it's a big station, it seems like there's a festival going on somewhere every day. Today is also a special sale day in the electronics district.”

“Sale day!” Coorie exclaimed cheerfully. “I definitely need to go and get some supplies. Ah, but Nash only pays for the hotel, so I can't send the bill to the Intelligence Department.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Marika, is there anywhere else you'd like to go?” Gruier asked. “Like the Drifting Art Museum or the main building of the Museum of Lost Art. They seem to be quite large, so I don't know if we could finish in half a day.” Gruier turned her attention to Coorie. “If we wait half a day and he doesn't come back, that's the message, right?”

“That's true, but unless your means are extremely limited, you can receive messages no matter where you are.” Coorie began to actively shovel another sandwich into her mouth. “I'm sure they know the personal code for your mobile device, and if they call the Silent Whisper, it will be forwarded to you. So it's not like you necessarily have to be here.”

“Even so, if the message says to wait half a day for them to return, I think we should wait at least half a day.” Marika tried to read Coorie's expression. “Or don't you want to wait?”

“I'll leave that up to the captain.” Coorie replied brusquely. “However, the Chimera of Scylla doesn't call on the Skull Star very often. If it was just for a test flight in the surrounding airspace, it would probably have come back quickly, but it hasn't come back for a while after jumping.”

“I looked it up.”

‘If you check Scylla's activity history, you'll find it.” In response to Marika's muttering, Coorie quickly made an excuse.

“Then Mr. Nash isn't here right now,” Gruier confirmed. “The Chimera of Scylla has departed and is not at the port. So there's no need to wait at the hotel, is that right?”

“Isn't that okay? If he’s just coming back, he can hitch a ride on a ferry or another ship, not just the Scylla.” Marika looked at Coorie again. “Well then, let's wait for half a day. Is that okay?”

“I'll leave it to the captain.” Coorie repeated, without looking at Marika’s face. Marika asked.

“Are you sure that's all you want to do?”

“Touchdown.” The operator's voice echoed through the bridge, where the normal lights were turned off for battle mode, and only the lights of the displays, both flat and 3D, were visible. “Currently observing position…”

“That's right.” As if to conclude the conversation that had been continuing during the FTL voyage, Pirate Muller Grant, captain of the Chimera of Scylla, known as the Crimson Pirate Ship, said. “That's mostly correct. The Pirate Guild doesn't have a headquarters like a command center.”

“I see…” Nash, who is assigned to the observer's seat behind Muller in the captain's seat, frowned. Behind him stood a guard holding a hand-to-hand combat assault rifle with a shortened guided barrel.

“Even at the Joint Staff Headquarters, there are various theories about the existence of the Pirate Guild, right?” As Muller speaks, the three-dimensional displays that appear around the captain's seat change one after another.

“There are surely some who say that the Pirate Guild doesn't exist. If such an organization really did exist, we would have found a lot more information.”

“Current location confirmed!” As the operator reported, the three-dimensional displays around Muller changed. “Oceanus 3185k, measurement error is within the acceptable range.”

“However, even before the Great Purge that wiped out pirates from the Galactic Empire, the name of the Pirate Guild appeared in various places.” Nash said. “It is so famous that it appears in everything from classical plays to the latest entertainment productions. And there is no doubt that pirates on the frontier have their own connections from time to time. That is why many believe that the Pirate Guild still exists and wields hidden power.”

“I’m honored.” Muller, still looking forward, seemed to laugh through her nose. “The Imperial Fleet has always been good at creating virtual enemies.”

“I'm sorry.” Nash again recalled that the name of the pirate Muller appears in both the Great Purge, which wiped out pirates from within the empire, and the Hundred Years' War, which followed long afterward on the frontier border. “I also believe that the Pirate Guild exists and continues to operate even now.”

“Do you know how the Pirate Guild came about?”

Muller asked without turning to face Nash. Nash carefully watched Muller's back. “To the extent that it is known to the public.” It's an old story that's now part of history.

“They weren't even pirates at first. They were immigrant fleets that had lost their home planet or home port, or their destinations, or they were a mutual aid organization for spaceship crew members who lived in space without settling on a planet.”

“In an era when there was no well-developed interstellar network like we have today, it was a liaison organization for free people who were not protected by national systems or independent star systems to share information.”

Nash felt a strange sense of incongruity when he heard Muller's girlish voice. Muller is said to be a long-lived Methuselah species and has appeared many times in the long history of pirates, but no one knows her exact age.

“What kind of food, medicine, and resources are needed on which planet? At first, this information was just information needed to survive and spread, but it soon became information about what items sell for high prices and where, and what products are popular in which areas. If information about planets that will accept immigrants and the surrounding political situations also becomes available, it will become a more reliable information network than trading companies or the military. If such an information network were to develop without the control of a country or planet, it would cause all kinds of friction in various places.”

“And against that friction those who benefited from the information network responded decisively. Sometimes with information manipulation, sometimes with organized sabotage, and sometimes with force. At first, it seems to have been a very mild form of commerce interference.”

“The establishment, not happy about this, began calling them pirates. At first, it was probably just a joke when unregistered spaceship crews compared themselves to pirates, but commerce interference is exactly what pirates do. So spaceship crews without a home port or national registry came to be called pirates, and their group came to be called the Pirate Guild.”

Nash watched the other crew on the bridge for their reactions, there was no apparent tension from the guards behind him, and the bridge itself was unfazed. A well-trained crew going about their business as usual.

“The more powerful the enemy, the more difficult it is to fight.” Muller said, looking forward. “When the pirates had to fight the Imperial fleet head on, they needed a command center to organize the ragtag fleet of pirates. And they had a powerful information network called the Guild.”

“And so the Pirate Guild was born, with the Imperial fleet its enemy.” Nash took over. “After fighting the Great Purge and going through the Hundred Years war, it is said that there are no more pirates in the territory of the Galactic Empire. But pirates are not uncommon in the frontier, and there are even more illegal businesses that are similar to pirates. And information is still an important weapon for survival in this universe. Even if it's not the same organization or style as it was in the past, the Pirate Guild has survived in this universe, albeit in a different form. That's what I believe.”

“Enemy ships spotted!” The operator reported after spotting a small fleet of two small and two medium-sized ships near a spectral type K orange star.

“What a careless bunch to assemble so close to a star.”

“Now, the Chimera of Scylla will attack the escort fleet of the San Biento Autonomous Army.” Muller turned her face to the observer seat at the back. “Do you know the situation?”

“San Biento is a frontier star nation.” Nash answered smoothly. “It is a colony planet and belongs to a small federation along with its host star. The mines on the colony planet are well known, but there is an asteroid belt with promising mineral resources in the outer planetary system, and the military-industrial complex and even larger interstellar criminal connections are in the midst of a cold war over the development rights.”

“As expected, you are well informed.” Muller turned her face back to the front. Nash added.

“'It's all in a night's work. Myra told me a little about it, and I thought it might be of some use to you.”

“Currently, VIPs from the San Biento Autonomous Government and related parties are staying on Skull Star.” Muller said while checking the battle information that Chimera of Scylla had obtained. “To be more precise, the daughter of the president of the San Biento Autonomous Government eloped with the second son of the head of the Gonzales family on Myra's spaceship and fled to Skull Star.”

“Oh... it's a bit of scandal.”

“If you're going to go missing, there's no better place to erase your tracks than Skull Star, but seriously, Myra just brings so much trouble.” Muller's voice contained a smile. “And the Connection, more afraid of information leaks than the cover-up of the scandal, tried to demand the extradition of the suspect from Skull Star, but they couldn't find anyone to negotiate with, so they decided to go directly to Skull Star. For Skull Star, it would be a big problem if they were to take on more trouble and destroy the port, so they decided to drive them away before that happens.”

“With just one ship?” Nash, who had been allowed on board as an observer, looked around the bridge.

“It is enough. The Scylla is strong.”

“I see.”

“However, with an intelligence officer of the Imperial Fleet on board, we don't want to show our hand, so we have to hold back and inflict enough damage to drive them away without making them take us seriously.” Muller sighed lightly. “As always, a tricky order.”

“Good luck.”

“What would you do if this were against the Imperial Fleet?” Muller asked, without looking at Nash's face as she asked the standard question. “The autonomous star systems on the frontier and the Connection are more or less virtual enemies of the Empire, so they'll probably keep a close eye on them, but Seventh Fleet picket ships often sneak into this airspace. If we have to attack the Imperial fleet during this voyage, what will the Fleet Command intelligence officer do?”

“I'll pretend not to see.” Nash answered simply. “I hope that it never happens, but the universe is designed in such a way that things tend to go in the wrong direction. However, even if we find ourselves fighting an Imperial ship right in front of my eyes, I believe that I will gain more from achieving my original goal of gaining a channel for negotiations with the Pirate Guild.”

“What if the Chimera of Scylla were to sink an Imperial ship?”

“That won't happen.” Nash's voice carried a smile. “Imperial ships are just as strong as this one.”

“May I ask you one question?”

“You may ask not just one, but as many as you like.”

“Have you seen the Skull Star?”

Nash thought about the meaning of Muller's question before answering. “Yes, but only a part of it.”

“How do you think the Empire will treat the Skull Star?”

After taking a breath, Nash replied. “It would be unacceptable. For an Empire that seeks the rule of law and maintains order and safety, Skull Star is far too dangerous. We cannot accept the existence of a free trade port where such powerful weapons are traded without national control, where any research is allowed, and where stolen goods are freely bought and sold.”

“You're honest.” Muller looked straight ahead and did not show her expression to Nash. “Would an Empire that doesn't approve of pirate nests enter into negotiations?”

“Don't worry about that.” Nash assured her confidently. “As you know, double-talk is also one of the Empire's specialties. There are also hidden aspects within the Empire that cannot be revealed to the public, and shadows that they do not want to be exposed. Even if that were to increase a little now, it would only increase the work of the department in charge. What about you?” Nash looked carefully at Muller's back. “Can you negotiate with the Galactic Empire, which once denied your existence and wiped-out pirates from its territory?”

“If it's in our best interest, yes.” Muller, the captain's seat, raised her left hand lightly to signal the end of the conversation. “We will soon begin the battle. We can continue the rest of our discussion at leisure after we finish the task at hand.”

“Are you serious, Captain?” Coorie cried out as he was pulled along the pier. “You know it is the Love Ship, and that its master is a subordinate of the pirate Muller, and yet you’re still boarding it!”

“You said you would leave it to the captain, Coorie.” Marika pulls on Coorie's arm with her left hand, using the propeller light in her right hand for propulsion. “In that case, you'll have to follow my orders. If you really insist, I'll think about it.”

“So why would you approach a spaceship that you now know is dangerous?”

“I told you, there's no other spaceship I could ask about the Chimera of Scylla's destination.” Marika looked at the Silent Whisper parked on the pier, looking unchanged since she last saw it. The Queen of Love's pink hull was parked in the space opposite where the Silent Whisper was parked.

“Looks like it's open for business.” Gruier, who flew in using a propeller light, landed on the Silent Whisper's parking space, which was generating microgravity.

The Queen of Love, resting its wings in an octagonal parking space much larger than the space where the Silent Whisper was parked, had many colorful parasols spread around the nose of the lifting body.

“I wonder what kind of business they're doing?” Marika looked at the parking spot of the Queen of Love, which at a casual glance looked like it was holding a cocktail party at the pier.

“If the Love Ship is doing business, it's obvious what they're selling! Is the captain planning to take a minor like Gruier to a place like that?

“I see.” Marika looked around the port with a difficult look on her face. “I thought that there would be no violation of public order and morals in a public port, but this is a lawless area, a pirate island.”

“Oh, I don't mind.” Gruier waved her hand happily at the pink lifting body parked on the opposite tarmac. “The captain is a minor too, right?”

“It's a lawless area, so there's no problem.”

Marika squinted at the parking deck, decorated with brightly colored parasols and colorful cocktail lights. “It doesn't look like they're doing anything outrageous, and I'm not going there to try to get a job.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Marika turned to Coorie, who had landed earlier and was pretending to check out the area around the Silent Whisper. “I'll just ask Myra Grant of the Queen of Love if she has any idea where the Chimera of Scylla might be heading. I have no choice, since I don't know anyone else who might be connected to the Pirate Guild.”

“Nash left on his own, so why don't we just leave it at that?” Crouching at the joint of the landing gear, Coorie didn't even look up. “We'll kill another half day here and then our work will be done. Is that bad?”

“I'm the captain of the Bentenmaru, and I'm the one who got the invitation.” Marika touched the crimson invitation inside the pocket of her uniform jacket. “If possible, I'd like to officially contact the Pirate Guild.”

“Are you planning on joining the Pirate Guild!?” Her eyes wide, Coorie stood up vigorously. Her body almost floating out of the microgravity of the parking deck, but she stopped it by placing her hand on Silent Whisper's belly.

“No, I'm not going to go that far without consulting with everyone on the Bentenmaru, and I'm already overwhelmed with the work I have now, so I don't feel like expanding to the frontier, so I'd like to formally decline if possible, but in the end, I still don't know where to go until I get there.” Marika looked around the port in the skull's right eye once more. The dimly lit spaceport that spread out inside the gigantic cylinder was filled with all manner of spaceships, from legitimate to suspicious. “I suppose we could break into a pirate ship and ask them to mediate with the Pirate Guild, but don't you think it would be more reasonable to start by asking a familiar face?” Marika looked into Coorie's face. “Or are you curious about the special sale in the electronics district?”

“Oh, no, I'm curious about that, too.”

“If you really wanted to go to the electronics district, Coorie, why didn't you just leave us alone and go shopping on your own? After all, you followed us all the way out here, so doesn't that mean you're a little curious about Nash?”

“So what!”

“Well, if you really don't want to go, I won't force you.” Marika looked at Gruier. “I have no choice, so Gruier and I will go to the Queen of Love and hear what she has to say. It's okay, I'll just listen, and then I'll be back right away, so could you stay here and watch the place until then?”

Coorie looked down and let out a long, drawn-out sigh. “You're not going to ask me what happened?”

“Because I said I wouldn't say anything.”

“……” Coorie looked up slowly. “We are just childhood friends.”

Marika looked at her swirling glasses, not believing the words that had come from Coorie's mouth.

“Everyone does stupid things when they're kids, but that level of stupidity is just something I don't want to remember.”

“Hmm.” Not only Coorie, but Marika does not know much about the past of the Bentenmaru’s crew. She hasn't even asked them. “You see, my job this time was to bring Mr. Nash here, right? If possible, I'd like to take the customer home with me.” Marika looked into her face, and Coorie looked away. “I don’t want to be irresponsible by arriving at a port with a customer, and then just leaving for home when the customer left a message and took off on his own.”

Coorie turned away and refused to make eye contact. “Okay, wait for me.” With a tap on Coorie's shoulder, Marika rose from the parking deck. “I'm just going to go talk to Myra. I'll be right back.” Marika switched on the propeller light, which started to spin with a faint rhythmic sound.

“Oh, I'll join you.” Gruier jumped up to chase after her.

“Captain! Gruier!” Clicking her tongue, Coorie kicked off the parking deck and chased after Marika. Marika stopped the propeller and turned around in mid-air with a grin.

“Are you coming with me?”

“I’m an adult, so I can’t let children go to a place like that by themselves.” Coorie took out a small air gun from the waist of her work clothes, which prioritized practicality. She adjusted the spray pressure to low and fired, catching up with Marika, who was flying through the air.

“Oh, how unusual.” Myra, who was talking to a two-headed giant in a captain's uniform, immediately notices Marika and the others as they descend and raises her hand. She quickly kisses the giant's two faces as he bends over and leaves, saying goodbye. “Welcome to the Queen of Love's appreciation party. As you can see, it's a hectic day, but please take your time.” Myra's voice trailed off when she saw the faces of Marika, Gruier and Coorie. “Or are you here to discuss work?”

“I'm sorry, but that's not it.” Marika bows and starts talking. The Queen of Love’s parking deck, which is filled with garden tables and parasols, is like a bar, with stand lamps that cast a fantastical soft light, ornamental plants in pots that seem to have come from somewhere, and game machines.

Marika briefly explained her business.

“The Scylla's current location?” Myra replied, playing with her rich silver hair. “Well, I think I can find out, but if you're not in a hurry, would you be so kind as to help out?”

“Eh?” Marika looked around at Myra's face and the parking deck where a party was taking place, with couples at every table.

“As you can see, we're running an appreciation party for some reason, but our spaceship is open to both men and women, so we're short on staff. Please, I won't ask you to sit at the tables and serve the customers, just pretend to be a waitress, so could you help out?”

“Um, well, ah...”

“I don't mind.” Gruier looked at Myra's long, classic dress.

“Gruier, think about your position!”

“Of course, the secret that we're helping out on the Queen of Love here will be kept from the outside world, right?”

“I guarantee it.” Myra put the back of her hand to her mouth and lowered her voice. “There's still electromagnetic interference around here, so communications are down and the cameras do not work properly. I haven't let any photos of my children out, and I've set up various mechanisms to prevent them from being exposed.”

Myra clasped her hands together at the three of them. “Please! I feel bad asking someone who helped me once to do this again, but if you agree, I will guarantee your safety no matter what. I'll even talk to my sister if you like.” Myra looked around at the three of them. “Are you in some kind of trouble with my sister?”

“No, I don’t know yet if there is a problem.” Marika mumbled.

“It's not like we're in a hurry, but there is a time limit.” Gruier said. “We can wait another half day in standard time.”

“That's enough!” Myra exclaimed happily. “They should be done cleaning up by then. Now, we need to get your costumes fitted, so please come inside the spaceship.”

Myra winked. “If you dress up, no one will know it's you.”

“T.. Tight.” Marika, her waist cinched up in a corset for the first time in her life, appeared on the boarding deck of the Queen of Love in an evening dress that looked as if it might drag. Gruier, who had been talking to Myra earlier, turned around in a shining white evening dress.

“So slim!”

Gruier, boldly exposing her white shoulders, spun around and faced Marika with a movement that made it seem like she had been wearing the dress since birth. Marika recalled that she had the same impression of Gruier when she first boarded the Bentenmaru.

Wearing a bulky evening dress with a wide hem, Marika stepped into the side hatch of the Queen of Love's wide-open cargo hold on her high heels. The side hatch, which allows forklifts and containers to enter directly even in a gravity environment, is a ramp leading down to the parking deck, with a seamless red carpet laid out over it.

“Just walk along a straight line.” After whispering advice, Gruier looked up at Marika in her bright yellow evening dress with a smile. “It suits you.”

“Even if it's just flattery, I'm glad to hear that.” Walking down the ramp, she remembered to pinch her skirt lightly with both hands and lift it up, careful not to step on the hem. “You're the one who looks good in that kind of outfit, Gruier.”

Gruier, her platinum blonde hair pulled back and topped with a tiara, replied with a social smile. “Yes, well, it's kind of my job.”

“Wow.” Marika, who was dressed, made up, and had her hair done by the Queen of Love's exclusive makeup team, couldn't help but exclaim. “Even if you know it's a lie, that smile is enough to fool you.”

“It's also kind of my job.” After looking around, Gruier hesitantly lowered her voice. “Please be careful. This is not just an appreciation party.”

Hearing this, Marika looked around the venue, which was covered in a red carpet. The port in the background was dimly lit, and with the lights all around, it didn't look like she was on the parking deck of a spaceport, even though she knew that she was. “I'm sure you're right.”

Even if she listened carefully, she couldn't hear the sounds of a spaceport, which were common at the parking deck of the Silent Whisper. Perhaps because they were using phase-type noise cancellers in the field, apart from the classical music playing at a low volume, there was no sound of jets or machinery, nor the wind that would be caused by moving spaceships or ventilation systems.

“I just confirmed with Myra. The people here are the captains of the spaceships in port, the chairman of the Skull Star Commerce and Industry Guild, the president of the bank, the consuls and ambassadors of the frontier star districts that are stationed here, and so on.”

“Eh?”

“Don’t gawk.”

As Gruier spoke, Marika slowly looked around the party hall lined with garden tables and parasols. The companions in long, classic dresses and the boys in tailcoats were probably members of the Queen of Love’s crew. “Now that you mention it...”

The atmosphere of the guests, each dressed in formal attire, is similar to that of the clientele on a first-class luxury cruise ship catering to the upper class, while the Bentenmaru barely has guest rooms.

“So, this isn't the usual party that Myra's spaceship holds when it docks, but a special gathering?”

“Unfortunately, I don't know what kind of work the Queen of Love usually does. But if it's just doing its job as a love ship, I don't think it's going to get chased by a warship or have a bounty placed on it.”

“I see.” Marika crossed her arms with a difficult look on her face. “I thought you were just helping out, but maybe I was being hasty.”

“A murmur spread throughout the party hall. Marika noticed that the gazes of the attendees had passed her and been drawn to the open side hatch of the Queen of Love, so she looked up at the ramp she had just descended.”

“Wow.”

A silhouette with shining blonde hair tied up steps onto the ramp in a luminous blue dress. A stunning beauty with smooth movements descended the ramp with a smile on her lips.

“The top performer?”

“Oh my, Rudolph made her wear the Blue Star dress.” Before anyone knew it, Myra, in a red dress, was standing next to Marika, squinting her eyes nostalgically. “He really thinks highly of her.”

The beautiful woman in the blue evening dress, her golden blonde hair sprinkled with glitter and tied up in a flashy manner, came down the ramp slowly, as if she knew her role.

“Wow, what a beauty.”

The willow-waisted beauty, who looked like she had stepped out of a classical theater poster, looked around at Myra, Gruier, and Marika with her large, captivating deep blue eyes, then lightly picked up the hem of her dress and bowed. “Oh, hello.”

“What a face.”

Marika couldn't help but look back at the beautiful woman in the blue dress when she heard the familiar voice that came from her small, rouge-laced mouth. “Eh…”

“Me, it’s me.” Coorie said, putting on the swirling glasses she had taken out from between her wide-open bosom.

“Eh…?”

“As I thought, my eyes were not misguided.” Myra nodded in satisfaction. “I never thought I'd have such a powerful force helping me. If you ever want to rule the world, come to me anytime. I'll polish you up.”

“Thank you very much.” Coorie took off her swirling glasses and smiled seductively. “But if looks are all you see, then that’s all you’ll get.”

“What are you transforming into?” After rubbing her eyes and blinking several times, Marika peered closely at Coorie's face, holding a pair of round glasses in one hand. The image of her wearing almost no makeup every day, with her messy hair and round glasses, making her nest in the electronic battle station of the Bentenmaru, was nowhere to be seen in her bright blue evening dress.

“This doesn't count as a transformation.” Coorie holds the temples of her favorite swirly glasses up to her lips. “Appearance can be improved with determination. I'll teach the captain about it sometime.”

“...It looks like I'll need a lot of training.” Marika looked at Coorie's face, whose proportions even seemed to be different. “I'm surprised the men on the Bentenmaru would leave you alone.”

“The Bentenmaru does not have such stupid crew members.” Coorie looked around the party venue. “I'll take care of the guests.”

Coorie tucked her glasses into her chest. Her voice was the same, but even her way of speaking sounded different. “Is there anything I should ask you now?”

“Yes.” Myra looked around at the faces of Gruier, Coorie, and Marika in their evening gowns. “Can you speak any language other than standard?”

“I can’t really speak frontier languages.” Gruier shook her head. “If it's just technical terminology, I can speak at least Western Siemese and Pidgin Cornish.”

Marika shook her head vigorously as she met Myra's gaze. “Sorry, just standard language!” The archaic language she’s learning at school is not going to help her here.

“Don't worry, everyone has a translator as standard equipment anyway.” Myra put her index finger up to her mouth. “Pretend not to hear conversations in non-standard Japanese, even if you understand them. If you can't speak to someone in standard language, you don't have to reply. Our customers often have complicated circumstances.”

“It's better to think of it as a lively event.” Coorie looked around at the guests at the party venue. “It's better to pretend not to notice the identity of the customer.”

“It's up to you.” Myra smiled enigmatically. “If they had a proper reason to come, they would have let me know, but many customers don't. Anyway, I just need a pretty girl, I don't expect anything more.” Myra looked around at the three faces again. “It's up to you to decide what information you can get and what kind of acquaintances you can make.”

The guests who came to the Queen of Love's appreciation party held at the Skull's Right Eye were far more diverse than Marika had imagined, in terms of both race and occupation.

Although its existence is not officially acknowledged, it seems that Skull Star is home to consulates and ambassadors from independent star districts and alliances on the frontier. Many nations and companies have military attachés and liaison officers stationed there to gather information, and the clientele also includes executives from transportation companies and other companies in the same industry that travel to outlying star districts.

Leaving the task of entertaining the guests with light-hearted banter and casual conversation to Coorie, Marika, as instructed, continued to distribute drinks and food delivered from all corners of Skull Star to tables and groups of people.

Among the guests were a group of pirate-like figures that were easily recognizable at a glance, as well as a group of military-looking people. Perhaps it was due to Myra’s authority, who was in charge of the situation, or perhaps the skillful guidance of the women in dresses who were attending to each of them, but although they exchanged glances from time to time, they did not approach each other, and the groups kept a certain distance from each other and did not attempt to make contact.

Wearing a bright red dress, Myra whirls around among the chatting groups and customers who have slyly decided to form a couple with a girl from the bar, constantly greeting people, checking how they are, and checking up on their recent activities.

At first, Gruier acted like an apprentice and followed Myra around to various tables.

Marika had intended to focus on her waitress duties so as not to disturb the party as much as possible. However, her meager confidence and experience working part-time as a waitress at the Lamp House, a coffee shop in Shin Okuhama City, was of little use.

At the Lamp House, all she had to do was observe the customers at their tables and wait for the right timing to come. But here, customers don't order or call a waitress. Marika reads the signals of the girl sitting at the table with the customers, and raises and lowers plates and cups at Myra's instructions, but she could only do her best to move around without disturbing the venue.

“That girl is amazing.”

Marika was looking around the venue for an empty glass or decanter when someone spoke to her, and she straightened up. “Oh, hello.” Marika replied, which was not even a greeting, and went to where Myra, who had called out to her, was looking. Before she knew it, a circle had formed around Gruier.

“She's still a child, but she can entertain people with just her conversation and smiles. She's like a real princess.”

“You got it,” Marika muttered to herself.

“The other one is pretty impressive, too.” Myra's gaze darted to Coorie, who seemed to be engaged in a heated conversation surrounded by a group of people in formal military uniforms. “The white uniforms are Famir's defense fleet, the navy blue ones are Seria's Royal Guard. And the black ones are the mercenary fleet of a military company called Lakion. They each have their own positions, so they should only greet each other, but this is the first time I've seen them chatting in the same circle.”

“I’ve rarely seen Coorie’s face like that, either.” She seems to be listening to what everyone in the circle is saying and answering them one by one, changing her expression all the time. She doesn't look like the normal Coorie because she's not wearing glasses, but Marika noticed that she was watching movements behind her. “No, she's in combat mode.”

Coorie's large, glasses-free eyes caught Marika's gaze and she raised her hand, calling for her to come over. “Hey”

“I think she wants to see you.” Myra smiled as she sent Marika off. Marika had no choice but to grab the hem of her dress and jog across the party venue.

”Eh...” Marika, feeling the suddenness of the gesture, smiled politely and bowed slightly in greeting. “I’m pleased to introduce myself, Captain Kato Marika.”

The uniformed men around laughed and applauded as the captain, who was younger than Coorie, appeared.

“Captain, these guys want to hire me as an electronic warfare observer.” Coorie explained with exaggerated gestures. “Please firmly refuse.”

“Ah, Coorie is our ship's capable electronic warfare operator.” Marika looked around at the laughing soldiers, wondering how much her words would be believed. “I'm sorry, but I have no intention of letting her go.” Marika glared at Coorie, trying not to be entranced. “I’m sorry, she can't go, even if she wants to.”

“Sorry to hear that.” A tall, slender man with silvery skin and a black military uniform stepped forward. “If she ever changes her workplace, could you tell her to contact me here?” The man took out a business card with the logo of a military company from the frontier whose name Marika had heard earlier. “She said she was busy with another job and would not accept it. She said she wanted it given the captain, so please accept it if you like.”

Marika looked at Coorie's face, who nodded lightly. “I’ll accept it. I'll give it to Coorie if she asks, but I can't guarantee anything.”

“I'm tired...” Returning to the waiting room, which was equipped with large mirrors and the latest in beauty equipment, Marika sat down on a stool that was large enough for her to sit on even in her long dress, and threw her torso over the dressing table.

“That was a big haul.” Coorie entered the waiting room on board the Queen of Love and picked up one of the business cards from the pile next to Marika. “Normally we'd have to give cards to people, but if we can collect this much just by being friendly, Captain, maybe our business will do just fine.”

“I’ve realized I have no talent for customer service.” Marika raised her torso. “I used to work as a waitress at the Lamp House, so I thought I was somewhat used to it, but Coorie and Gruier are on a completely different level.”

“I'm selective about my clientele.” Coorie, who knows her specialty well, sat at the dressing table next to Marika. “The one with real talent is Gruier. She can keep up with any topic, and makes the other person talk without making it seem like she's saying anything herself. If she felt like it, I bet even a spy or a terrorist would talk about anything.”

“It's a different world around her.” Marika waved her hands. “Myra said that within a few meters of Gruier the atmosphere is completely different. A professional princess is scary.”

“I can hear you.” Gruier entered the waiting room with a smile on her face. Marika turned her chair around to face Gruier. “Good work. Aren’t you two in the wrong jobs?”

“I don’t have trouble with work.”

“Well, this is also a job.” Coorie and Gruier answered almost simultaneously.

“If you're thinking of changing jobs, please let me know.” Myra appeared in the waiting room. “You're always welcome here.”

Myra took out an ornate data card. “The trick to making business last is to remove the hidden ball while the customers still want to see more. My girls who were out have come back, so you can rest now. We've also found out where Scylla is now.”

Coorie rose quickly from the dressing table. “Where is it?”

“Oceanos 3185k.” Saying as much as she remembered, Myra handed the data card to Coorie. “It's a short jump away, but if you're planning on going, you'd better hurry.”

“Why?”

“According to the latest information, it seems that the Chimera of Scylla has entered into combat with the San Biento Autonomous Army's cruiser fleet.”

Coorie frowned. Marika looked at her watch. “Is it about time?”

Gruier nodded. “That’s right.”

“It might have already started.” Myra pointed to the data card she handed to Coorie. “The details of the situation are included in it, but it seems that it's not just a cruiser fleet, but a powerful battle fleet has also arrived.”

“Well, I'll take your word for it.” Coorie took a step and tugged at the hem of her dress, then stopped.

“Umm...”

“You don't even have time to take it off, do you?” Myra said happily. “As long as you promise to come back and return it to me, I'll let you take it.”

Coorie, in her dress, looked at Marika and Gruier. “Okay, we’ll borrow them.”

Marika stood up vigorously. “Let's go pick up our customer, Coorie.”

The Chimera of Scylla launched small-scale electronic warfare from a distance at the San Biento Autonomous Forces' cruiser fleet, bathed in the orange light of a Spectral type K star. They deployed just enough electronic jamming to make the enemy aware that they were being targeted, forcing them to prepare for battle.

After confirming that the enemy's energy signature had increased sufficiently and that their ship had been detected by a high-powered radar, the Chimera of Scylla began its attack on the cruiser fleet.

The Chimera of Scylla's triple main gun turrets were Class 120, the largest class for a battleship, with a longer range and greater destructive power than the enemy cruisers. They were also equipped with precise observation equipment to match their range. Before the enemy began their active electronic jamming, they should have been able to aim for a direct hit with long-range precision fire.

However, the Scylla turned its side towards the enemy, and fired three guns at the same time, including the triple main guns mounted at the rear, in an attempt to intimidate them from the start.

“Aren't you going to sink them?” Nash asked on the bridge of the Scylla, which had, after three warning shots, pointed its bow towards the enemy to minimize its forward projection area.

“That would be easier.” Muller replied from the captain’s seat. “Apparently the autonomous government of San Biento, which runs the military, is slowly becoming corrupt, but the military is tightly controlled. If we sink a ship of such an army, they will seriously consider pirates as enemies. That's not what we want.”

“By us,” Nash thought for a moment before continuing, “do you mean the pirate Muller? Or the Guild?”

“It's the calculations of a timid pirate who wants to live a long life on the frontier.” Muller seemed to laugh softly. “Pirates are not monolithic, and not all of them have the military strength to fight back. Rather than sinking the autonomous military's ship and incurring their hatred for all eternity, we should give them the proof that we did our job and the realization that they will suffer considerable damage if they are attack us head on, and ask them to leave. This would ultimately minimize future damage for both sides.”

“I see.” Nash looked around the bridge of the Scylla, where the anti-ship battle sequence was proceeding smoothly. “Do you always have to fight such difficult and time-consuming battles?”

“There's no such thing as an easy job.” After the battle began, Captain Muller turned to Nash in the observer seat for the first time. “Isn't it the same for you?”

“I agree.”

The cruiser fleet, which had not broken formation despite the warning shots, divided its forces into two: the fast, small assault ships led the charge at the Scylla, while the two mobile cruisers in the rear remained in formation and took a trajectory to attack the flank.

The Scylla ignored the small assault ships and targeted the mobile cruisers accelerating in formation as her main enemy. She rapidly approached them while confusing their aim with electronic attacks.

Due to the Scylla's electronic attacks, neither assault ships nor mobile cruisers can attack. Unlike missiles, whose attack power does not decrease even over long distances, the main guns of cruisers cannot penetrate the armor of a battleship unless they get very close and focus their attacks on one point.

Although it cannot penetrate armor, it can damage unarmored antennas and external weapons. Destroying antennas and sensors reduces the enemy ship's detection and targeting capabilities, and ultimately its combat power.

However, the two mobile cruisers were unable to land a single hit on the Scylla, which approached far beyond the range of their medium-caliber main guns.

Aiming for the closest approach, the Scylla fired a volley of nine main guns in three triple turrets at the two cruisers, which remained in tight formation and maneuvered to evade. A total of nine shots from two guns in the front and one in the rear accurately penetrated the beam disruption curtain released by the cruisers, burning through their surface armor.

As they distanced themselves from each other, the Scylla fired another volley from her aft turret, this time fully charged, and the beam vaporized the cruiser's delicate radar antennas just by passing close by.

The fleet of two small assault ships and two mobile cruisers joined together. Without turning, they continued to distance themselves from Scylla and moved away.

“Apparently, they've realized that they're no match for us.”

After waiting for the enemy's electronic jamming to cease, the Scylla also stopped its own. The four ships of the fleet that had escaped from the range of Scylla's main guns did not return.

“I see.” Nash was impressed. “Is this how the Pirate Muller... no, the frontier pirates fight?”

“It's a relief that they're such understanding opponents.” The Scylla's sensors picked up the jump signatures of four ships. “If you're facing an opponent who desperately rushes in, you’ll have to fight in a more detailed and troublesome way.”

“Without a lot of forces and a strategy, it seems like it would be difficult to fight you.”

“It would be difficult.” Muller replied, looking forward. “Even so, I try to avoid fighting unless it's absolutely necessary.”

“Pre-jump signature!” The operator called out with a sharp alarm. “Close range, one small ship!”

“Oh my, I thought he'd managed to escape, but he’s come back?”

“No... this signature is the Silent Whisper.”

The Scylla's sensors picked up a small spacecraft that had touched down at close range, but beyond the range of the battleship's main guns. The Silent Whisper opened a communication line without even waiting for the spatial disturbance caused by touchdown to stabilize.

“*Chimera of Scylla from Silent Whisper, excuse me for interrupting your work.*”

Seeing the beautiful woman appear on the communications monitor, Nash couldn't help but cry out. “Coorie!?”

The Silent Whisper operator appeared on the communications monitor, still in her business attire. “*I think the stowaway we've been dragging around is causing you trouble, so I've come to pick him up.*” Coorie spoke smoothly. Muller turned her eyes to Nash, who had risen from the observer's seat.

“They're here to pick you up.” Muller turned her attention back to the communications monitor. “Does that outfit mean you got involved with my sister?”

“*I've got a souvenir for you, if you want to call it that. A small fleet is gathering in the interstellar space between Oceanus 3183 and 84. You’re welcome.*” Coorie sent the Scylla a packet of information about the airspace she had scouted before jumping here. “The San Biento Autonomous Army and Arcura's Company Fleet. Do you have any idea?”

Muller looked down at the information pack she had received. The recorded assembly point matched the jump destination of the four cruisers. “Four battleships and a dozen mobile cruisers...” Muller read out the additional forces with amusement. “I wonder if you think you've gathered enough forces to take on the Skull Star.”

“*If you don't mind, I can help you.*”

“No need.” Muller answered simply. “We will deliver our guest before the battle. Prepare for landing.”

“Multiple pre-jump phenomena!” The operator raised his voice sharply. “Four of them are our opponents from earlier.”

“You didn't make it in time.” Muller seemed to chuckle bitterly. “Prepare for anti-ship combat! Fire our main guns as soon as they touch down!”

Muller turned her eyes back to the communications monitor. “Cancel the landing request. Please wait a while until I've finished my business.”

“She said to wait a while.” Marika, sitting in the cockpit with her overflowing evening dress, looked at Coorie’s profile in the operator's seat. “Do you think even the pirate Muller can take on a fleet of battleships with just one ship?”

“If you count them properly, the difference in strength would be more than ten times.” The communications monitor switched to the standby screen. Coorie, still in her dress, leaned back against the backrest of the seat, which she had lowered as far as possible to give herself some extra space. “The attacking side, relying on numbers, would have concentrated their fire on Scylla at the moment of touchdown, based on the data up to the moment, but Scylla, receiving the warning, will take the initiative. It'll be an easy win.”

“As expected.” Gruier said, leaning between the pilot's seat and the operator's seat. “Nash knew at it was Coorie at a glance.”

“He's that kind of idiot.” Coorie replied with a sullen look on her face, putting on the round glasses that she had taken out from between her breasts as if she had just remembered. “That's why I didn't want to do it.”

Aiming its main guns precisely at the touchdown point, the Chimera of Scylla began its assault. In a remarkable feat, each of the three main gun turrets was aimed at a different target, and the main guns were fired simultaneously with touchdown.

Before the spatial disturbance caused by the FTL jump had time to subside, nine Class 120 energy beams cut through space. Each turret had a different aim, and although the power of the three beams was somewhat reduced by the disturbed spatial structure, they still accurately hit the three battleships that had touched down.

Intending to take the initiative, four battleships, twelve mobile cruisers, and eighteen small assault ships were launched simultaneously by an improvised combined fleet of Arcura, a major military company on the frontier, and the San Biento Autonomous Army. Based on data from the San Biento Autonomous Army, which had previously made contact with the Chimera of Scylla, it was likely a plan to launch a surprise attack with all their forces.

Jumping involves error. Even for military fleets that have repeatedly trained and make precision jumps their daily routine, it is almost impossible to jump in formation. The touchdown point is dispersed due to error and probability, so the formation will fall apart no matter how precisely it was formed beforehand.

Having received information from the Silent Whisper, the Chimera of Scylla attacked from the point of greatest advantage in response to the simultaneous touchdown of a total of 34 ships in the fleet, first hitting the three main battleships. Next, two turrets took shorter charge times and began a wave-like attack on the cruisers and assault ships that were touching down one after the other.

The remaining turret fired a fully charged energy beam at the fourth battleship. The fleet was attacked as soon as it touched down, and before it had time to recover, the Chimera of Scylla rampaged through it. Having quickly penetrated the center of the fleet, Scylla began a mopping-up operation using its main guns, anti-aircraft guns, and even missiles, while applying fierce electronic jamming in all directions.

“Well, this is one-sided.” Coorie, in the operator's seat, calmly reported the battle situation without even trying to escape from the range of the enemy battleships. “The autonomous forces have already faced them once, so they can act without orders, but the Arcura company fleet is no good. Just because the command and communication network has been cut, they can't even launch an organized counterattack, they’re worse than useless.”

“The difference in military strength is overwhelming.” Marika looks at the devastation of the fleet being unilaterally overrun by a single battleship. “The missile spree is impressive, but do Scylla's main guns really charge that fast?”

“It’s partially because they are equipped with over-powered conversion reactors for their size, but I guess they don't fully charge them except for the single shot attacks aimed at battleships.”

The battlefield is in chaos with the electronic jamming, nuisance curtains, chaff, and decoys being used by both the improvised combined fleet and the Chimera of Scylla. Even though they were far from the main battlefield, the Silent Whisper's passive systems, which remained within range, were unable to obtain complete data. And, of course, their active systems, radar and sensors, which would loudly announce their position, were not activated.

By skillfully combining the limited observational data, Coorie was able to plot the complex and bizarre evasive trajectory of the Chimera of Scylla across the battlefield. “After the third shot, each turret seems to be firing on its own. The missiles are aimed at the approaching assault ships and cruisers, the anti-aircraft fire is chaff and nuisance curtains, they're also firing decoys, and electronic jamming is continuing on almost all frequencies. This must be tough to deal with.”

“That much?” Shocked, Marika looked again at the 3D image of the battlefield, which was changing moment by moment.

“We've been tracking the Scylla since before the battle began, so we know for sure that this response is real, but that's not the case with the other side. They might have been able to do something if they'd surrounded them from a distance and separated them into a defensive side and an attacking side, but they're doing things like putting all their forces into action at once, so if they lose control right from the start, it'll be hard to get back together since they're such a big group.”

‘Even though there are so many of them?”

‘It seems like there are a lot of ships that can't move because they're waiting for orders.” Coorie plotted several assault ships that were just taking evasive action in the battle airspace. “It is a basic rule to follow orders, but in a melee like this, neither the person giving the orders nor the person receiving them can see the overall situation. It would be even more difficult if there were more enemies, but they know there's only one ship this time, so they should be able to distinguish between friend and foe and attack indiscriminately, but the Scylla seems to be increasing its numbers by sending out decoys.”

“What should we do?” Gruier asked. Coorie held out her hand to Marika.

“Yes, captain, please answer.”

“Well, anyway, if there's confusion, the basic rule is to regroup. Try to get communication going somehow, and if communication doesn't work, blink lights, flash a beacon, or whatever to get in touch.”

“Yes, that's correct. However, right now the Scylla is focusing on attacking battleships one by one, making communication difficult. What would you do if you were the captain of the attacking ship?”

Hearing this, Marika looked at the 3D display of the battlefield situation again. “...I would run away. Even though we’re a battleship, we’re being dragged around by just one ship, and our formation and chain of command are completely destroyed, so we can't do anything unless we retreat to a place where we don't have to worry about the Scylla's interference.”

“Yes, that's correct, but what happens if you retreat from the battlefield without orders?”

“...Desertion in the face of the enemy?”

“Yes, that's correct. Of course, there are situations where we have to do that, but in a normal military, desertion in the face of the enemy is a serious crime and would get you court-martialed. Therefore, in this case, unless the command ship properly signals to retreat or retreats on its own, the other ships cannot escape. It would be great if the commander could see the situation properly and make the right decision to retreat on his own, but generally, people on big ships are not good at reading the atmosphere and are relaxed...”

“That seems to be the case for battleships, but it seems there are some cruisers who understand the situation properly.” One of the cruisers made a clear move to leave the battlefield. It pointed its engine section towards the battle area in an ostentatious manner and accelerated away.

“It's a ship of the San Biento Autonomous Army.” Coorie read the transponder that had made it through the electronic jamming. “The fact that they were quicker in their decisions than the company fleet must have been a lesson learned from their previous battle with the Scylla. Now, what about the movements of the other ships?”

Another cruiser and two more assault ships left the battlefield, accelerating at high speed without evasive maneuvers and leaving the battlefield in a straight line.

“Now, whether you want to regroup or escape, now is your chance.”

The Scylla does not pursue the ships that have left. Instead, with spectacular combat maneuvers befitting a battleship, she attacks the four battleships, still unable to coordinate their efforts.

“She’s not cutting corners.” Coorie was impressed by the Chimera of Scylla's fighting style, which did not forget to lavish missiles on the cruisers. “What's more, you've even shown them a way to escape.”

“Eh?” Marika followed the Scylla's actions but was unable to read her intentions, so she looked at Coorie's face.

“The decoy's trajectory and the main attack direction were changed to chase the San Biento ship in the direction it fled.” Coorie explained, sticking her hand directly into the 3D display. “It may look like they're driving them into a trap, but they ignore enemies that run straight away, so if you don't notice it, the damage will only get worse.”

“Furthermore, one of the battleships that was hit by Scylla's volley made a big movement. It started to retreat while continuing to fire warning shots at Scylla, whose bow was maneuvering in combat.”

“That's it.”

To cover the battleship that had begun to retreat, an assault ship tried a bold close-in attack on the Scylla. However, since it was not coordinating with the other ships, it was intercepted by a guided missile before it could even close the distance, and an explosion blocked its course.

“The assault ship's movements aren't that bad, but the bigger it gets, the less useful it becomes. It's a typical decorative fleet that's only good at bullying the weak.”

As the main battleships began to retreat, the rest of the fleet quickly followed suit. Arcura's company fleet retreated from the battlefield in their most coordinated movement since its appearance.

Until the last ship had taken flight, the Chimera of Scylla remained in combat readiness along with the several decoys it had sent out, casting a thick radar screen to detect any remaining unmanned patrol ships, and keeping its energy response high so it could instantly fire its main guns.

Still in combat readiness, the Chimera of Scylla sent instructions on the landing route for the Silent Whisper. Marika followed the instructions and took a course to approach the landing deck behind the third turret from the rear of the Chimera of Scylla.

“It's so tense, it feels like we'll be intercepted if we approach on a different trajectory than the one specified.”

“Being able to get this close to the Scylla in full combat mode will allow us to obtain a lot of valuable data.” Coorie is busy collecting data using the Silent Whisper. “Both the main guns and anti-aircraft guns are ready for battle. Is it a service, or do they trust us?”

“I think it's confidence.” Gruier muttered as the crimson pirate ship approached so close that the shape of the ship was visible even on the normal magnification external monitor. “We saw the battle just now, and we've fought them many times before.”

“They’ve been hit harder than I thought.” The Scylla, in the midst of the ship-to-ship battle, seemed to have taken no damage at all against the 30 enemy ships. However, when you get close enough to see the details, you can see scorched marks from direct hits and explosions all over the crimson hull, as well as damage to the antennas and sensors. “I guess it was impossible to come out unscathed against that many enemies.”

“It probably won't affect their fighting power.” Coorie checks the damage to Chimera of Scylla. “What's even more frightening is that they don't seem to have suffered any damage during the battle. Unlike our ship, which is short on manpower, they probably have specialists on board to handle damage control. As expected of a pirate ship on the frontier with many opportunities for actual combat.”

Following the guide beam, the Silent Whisper landed on the rear landing deck of the Chimera of Scylla, where the thick armor plates were wide open. The landing deck, which was barely wide enough for one plane, was packed with bulky attack aircraft, patrol planes equipped with radar and sensors, and high-maneuverability missiles the size of fighter jets.

“Oh my!” Coorie exclaimed, looking up at the pile of spacecraft displayed on the external monitor. “They still have this many aircraft on board, so it's no wonder they're aggressive when facing a small enemy.”

“Landing confirmed.” Marika, the pilot, announced. “External pressure 87%, no harmful substances. Yes, our customer is here.” Marika showed Coorie the image from the port side camera. Nash is standing on the landing deck with a guard. “You should go.”

Coorie, with a sullen look on her face, runs her fingers over the control panel. “It's hard to go outside dressed like this.”

“He’s Coorie’s guest, right?”

“He’s mine?!”

“Isn’t he?” Asked with a straight face, Coorie looked at Marika's face through her round glasses and then averted her eyes.

“It was the captain who said she would come and pick him up.”

“Okay, Coorie.” Marika said with a smile. “Let's go pick up our guest.”

Coorie deftly held down her long skirt with both hands and slipped out of the not-so-large inner hatch of the reconnaissance plane. “I'm here to pick up a stowaway.”

“Thank you for your hard work.” The guard with an assault rifle slung over his shoulder saluted, and Nash looked up, dazzled, at Coorie in her shiny blue dress and swirly glasses.

“I think those glasses suit you better after all.”

“You!”

“Okay, get out.” Marika gave Coorie a strong push from behind the hatch, and unable to keep her footing in the microgravity environment of the landing deck, Coorie was thrown out.

“What are you doing, Captain?”

“That's dangerous.” As Nash tried to catch the blue dress that had jumped into the air, a straight right from Coorie exploded on his head.

“Did he tell you to say that?” Landing on the deck, Coorie looked up at Nash with a murderous expression. Her skirt fluttered down and closed.

“No.” Nash answered quietly, holding his left cheek where he had been hit.

“So did he say that too?” After glaring at Nash for a while, Coorie sighed and looked away. “How many?”

“I'm the second.” Nash replied. “Even so, my actual performance isn't bad.”

Coorie turned back to the Silent Whisper, where Marika was standing on the gangway and Gruier had poked her head out of the hatch, watching the situation with wide eyes. “Captain, Gruier, I'd like to introduce you.”

Coorie, in her dress, straightened her back with difficulty and pointed her hand at the man she had just punched. “Nat Nashfall. The second clone of my childhood friend.”

“Clone?” Marika and Gruier exchanged looks.

“Military work, especially field work, is dangerous.” Nash explained in the cockpit of the Silent Whisper as they jumped to Skull Star. “Military personnel are required to keep a record of their ID, including their genetic makeup and biometric information, just in case something happens to them. You know that, right?”

“I've heard of it, but…” Marika replied from the cockpit. Nowadays, your genetic information is also stored at your regular hospital.

“Intelligence work requires talent and continuity. When the stakes are high and loss of personnel would be devastating, a backup is created. The original memories are copied and stored periodically, and the backup is activated if necessary.”

“That’s…”

“After the last backup, I was dispatched to the next mission and never returned. That makes me the second one. Some of my comrades are fifth and seventh, so even this is a pretty long life.”

“So, that's the end of this story!”

Coorie, in the operator's seat, kept her stern expression. “I told you never to appear in front of me again!”

“Yes, that promise will be kept. It was the original who said that, not me.”

“Don't use the original and the backup for your own convenience!”

Marika, in the pilot's seat, exchanged an awkward glance with Gruier, in the auxiliary seat behind the operator's seat.

“Look, Captain, it's about time to touch down.”

“Ah, yes.” At Coorie's prompting, Marika gripped the control stick again.

The Skull Star was moving just as the data from Chimera of Scylla had told them.

The request for unescorted entry was easily approved by control, who sent the data he had been entrusted with along with the numerical values ​​for the approach trajectory to the Silent Whisper.

“What were we sent?” Marika, who had been assigned the same dock as the first time in the right eye, asked as she put the Silent Whisper on the entry trajectory.

Coorie followed the procedure and opened the message. “This is a message from Myra Grant of the Queen of Love.”

“What does she want?”

Coorie summarized the message with a difficult look on his face. “It's a notice about the next Pirate Guild liaison meeting to be held on the Queen of Love...”

“You guys...” Nash looked around at the faces of the three ladies in dresses who filled the cockpit with a look of amazement. “What in the world did you do?”

Marika answered with a straight face. “We were fighting, too.” Marika turned to Nash in the auxiliary seat. “That's good. You can now contact the Pirate Guild.”

“...How many people have come this far before me?”

“You're not the first, nor will you be the last, Imperial soldier to land on Skull Star.” Coorie looked straight ahead with a sullen expression. “This is probably the first time you've come here with pirates.”

The Silent Whisper took an entry trajectory for the port in the Skull's right eye.

Afterword - The author's diary watching over the anime adaptation - (Asahi Novels version)

October 2008

"Miniskirt Space Pirates" is released. This impactful title was actually the flip side of a sense of crisis that if I wanted to sell my space opera, I couldn't afford to care about appearances. If I wanted to sell what I wanted to write, I had to get it in the hands of not only my existing customers, but also readers who had never heard the name Sasamoto.

However, as the afterword to the first volume says, I was hesitant about whether I should use the title as it is, even though it is based on such a concept. Well, I was resigned to the fact that if it failed, I could just think of another move. In this case, failure would mean that the title, content, and topic would not be of any use and it would end up being a flop, and I thought that as long as it became a topic of conversation, I would win, even if people made fun of me or laughed at me.

However, the benefits of the title appeared within a week of the release.

“We've received an offer to make it into an anime.”

My editor I told me about it while pressing me for the next manuscript, and I laughed at how quickly they responded. It seems that at least there was someone in the anime industry who thought it would sell. And the person who reached out to me was none other than Otsuki Toshimichi, a skilled producer who made a name for himself with "Evangelion" and the "Sakura Wars" movie.

This is something to look forward to.

However, the world is full of anime proposals. Only three out of 1,000 proposals become anime, and I know plenty of examples of pilot films being made but then shelved, so at this point it's still unclear what will happen.

Although the author[[5]](#footnote-5) felt that he had more to look forward to, he was afraid that optimistic thinking might lead to sadness later on, so he kept that in mind and began working hard on the manuscript for his next work.

February 2009

When I get stuck at work, I often go to a nearby family restaurant after the midday rush has died down, have a set lunch, and, with a drink from the bar as a companion, writes until my laptop battery runs out. It's nothing special, but when I’m at home, even if I’m in front of my PC, I find myself escaping to the Internet as much as I can, so I choose an environment without an Internet connection as my workplace. Even though I have set up a workroom, I wonder what I’m doing. Since Sasamoto basically works from home, I don't have a way to connect to the Internet when I’m out. I don't have an Internet contract for my mobile phone, hardly uses email, and mainly uses it as a phone – I’m member of the last century. It's more efficient to use a keyboard on a large screen for email and the Internet as well.

That day, Sasamoto[[6]](#footnote-6), who was working at the family restaurant, received a phone call from his editor.

For the second volume, which is currently being written, it would be fine to put "animation adaptation confirmed" on the cover.

Wow, things are starting to take shape. However, at this point the media has not been decided, and it is not known whether it will be a TV broadcast or a DVD release.

It was around this time that I also heard that Producer Otsuki was looking to hire Satou Tatsuo to be the director. Oh, speaking of Director Sato Tatsuo, isn't he the man who directed "Akazukin Chacha" with such lively style, and also created "Soar High! Isami" and "Gakuen Senki Muryou"? I was impressed by how easy it was to understand the scene at the beginning of the movie version of "Martian Successor Nadesico," where the electronic warfare system is set up and the invasion scene takes place. He is the best director in the current Japanese animation industry that could hope to animate "Miniskirt Space Pirates."

While hoping that it would all go well, I, as the original author said, as always, "I'll leave it up to you, so please do as you like."

I believe that it is better not to check with the original author if possible.

Of course, if the original author could write a script or make an anime, it would be a different story, but in most cases, it's up to the individual to decide, and nothing good comes from an original author who doesn't understand the situation well and goes out with inappropriate power to a workplace crowded with professionals. This became my creed after my experience at "Aerial Comics."

In the 1990s, "ARIEL" had actively expanded its media presence by dedicating an entire issue to a quarterly comic book. Of course, I only said, "Yes, yes, do it well," but when I was asked to review as the original author, I thought deeply.

I can write novels but cannot draw manga. If I, as an original author who cannot draw manga, were to check the manga, wouldn't I spoil the manga's expression? Wouldn't I dismiss hints that would come into play later by saying, "This is a bit much"? Moreover, if I, as the original author say that, there's no way he can ignore it.

As the original author, it is not productive to check the work and worry about the differences from the original. Rather than thinking about such things, it would be much more constructive to think about the next development of the story in front of you.

After thinking this far, I made a declaration. “Don't check with the original author. You can do whatever you want. I will acknowledge it. It would be easier for you to do the work without checking with the original author.”

Here too, I can enjoy the work from the same perspective as the reader. “So please make an interesting work.”

Thanks to this, when it came to the manga adaptation of "ARIEL," I came across several works that I would never have been able to read if I hadn't been involved in them.

Apparently, Tatsuo Sato had decided to direct within the same month. At the same time, the editor asked if it was okay to hand over the unfinished manuscript to the staff, since only the first book of the original work had been published and the second book was still being written. There is no right or wrong, but what the original author of the work that will be adapted for anime can do is to create an environment that is as easy as possible for the anime to be made. To that end, I must cooperate in any way I can. The problem is that I don't write with a set of events firmly decided, and I often just do things on the spot.

So when I send along the events, I make sure to add a sentence saying, "This is just the original version, so you can do whatever you like with the anime version." (Continued in the next volume)

So, "Moretsu ♡ Space Pirates", the anime adaptation of "Miniskirt Space Pirates", is scheduled to air from January 2012. Please look forward to it as well as the original work.

Yuichi Sasamoto

Pale Skull Star 8th Year Bonus: Letter from the Pirate Market

At that time, the Bentenmaru was peaceful.

Because of a request involving the Imperial Fleet, the Bentenmaru was missing a captain, communications officer, and electronic warfare officer, who are essential for a pirate ship to carry out piracy, and was undergoing light maintenance in an anchored airspace near the relay station in orbit around the third planet of the Cetus constellation system, the Sea of the Morningstar.

Continuous maintenance and resupply are essential to operate a space ship. The latest model spaceships are automated and labor-saving, but for a space pirate ship that has been in service for more than a hundred years, maintenance and replenishment are indispensable.

Despite this, the maintenance and supply of the Bentenmaru is far from satisfactory. Because it was issued a privateer license as a civilian spaceship to be used in combat, it is exempt from regular inspections by public agencies, as is the case with civilian spaceships. Taking advantage of this, poor maintenance has become the norm, with the excuse being a lack of budget and manpower.

In order to improve this situation, which is viewed as a problem by everyone involved, including the Bentenmaru's crew, crew members who have free time on the ship when it is not on missions are carrying out maintenance, repairs, and renovations in various parts of the ship.

With the captain and electronic warfare/communications positions vacant, the Bentenmaru automatically found itself in a situation where it could not do any work, and Schnitzer was appointed acting captain at this time. During the captain's absence, which was a short but certain period of downtime, Schnitzer decided to carry out as many repairs as possible on the Bentenmaru that could be done without docking, and to give the crew a rest.

Although it is always better to have more manpower, not everyone who is available can be assigned to maintenance work. Crew members who do not have any essential work to do will be allowed to apply to disembark and be transferred to the ground via the Sea of the Morningstar relay station, or to other destinations.

With the ship in inertial navigation mode and all main and auxiliary propulsion engines, as well as the artificial gravity on board the ship, are turned off. In the anchorage airspace of the relay station in orbit around the Sea of the Morningstar, the Bentenmaru will transport the crew to the relay station for leave by shuttle, while work ships and work robots rented from port operators begin light maintenance work.

Although it is called light maintenance because the ship will not be docked or placed in a closed workshop, the actual work is closer to heavy maintenance, including repairs and refurbishment. The ship's inventory of spare parts and nearby contractors' inventory that can be delivered immediately will be checked, and maintenance, refurbishment, and repair work that can be carried out will be selected, procedures will be considered and confirmed, and work that can be started will be started one after another.

The Bentenmaru's maintenance work was carried out according to a meticulously planned procedure, with large and small work boats and robot arms attached to the hull, access hatches that could be opened, and in some places the hull armor and covers removed and floating.

Schnitzer was in charge of coordinating the schedule, and all the people involved had carefully and generously planned schedules in advance, so if things went according to plan, the Bentenmaru's maintenance work would be completed easily during the holidays.

It was at this time that the Bentenmaru received a large amount of data via FTL communication from Coorie staying at the Palace Hotel on Skull Star.

“Yes, yes, I'm receiving it now!”

Maintenance work is being carried out in almost all departments on the ship. For Hyakume’s radar/sensor seat, the seat gets in the way of the maintenance replacement work and is removed along with its base, and the maintenance replacement work is being carried out.

Hyakume's dedicated seat, which had been modified and wired in various ways for ease of use, even had various things built into the armrests. The additional parts were floating nearby, still connected to the cords, and the removed main seat was pushed out to the empty captain's seat area and temporarily fixed in place.

Hyakume, who had crawled under the control panels that were left open in various places, reached out his arm and tapped on the communications panel by feel while verbally answering the ringtone. Using his grip on the panel as a handhold, he pulled his body out from under the control panel and peered at the display to check the title and sender of the data he had started receiving.

“Who is it from?” Luca asked, sitting in the navigator's seat as if it were business as usual, but she was in the middle of a major undertaking: updating the galactic star chart to the latest version, a task that could only be carried out at a time like this.

“It’s from Coorie.” Hyakume acknowledged the receipt of the data that had been sent with the highest priority. “Did she find some strange junk on her travels? Even so, it's rare to see it ranked as the highest priority.”

The message was short. Hyakume read it out loud exactly as it appeared on the screen. “This is Coorie, current location Oceanus 7187g3, Skull Star. There are many bargains to be found in the pirate market of the frontier district. I will send you catalogs, so if there is anything you want, please order it in time for departure.”

“Catalogs?” Luca floated gently up from the navigator seat onto the weightless bridge and flew over to the radar/sensor station, which had no seat.

“Like this.” Hyakume turned on one of the sub-displays that had been turned off and quickly scrolled through the titles of the data that had been sent to them. “High-power fire control system at the Aug Company, sensors for all ranges at Sensitive Fatty, star charts of the entire universe at the Astrogeographic map shop.”

“Let me see.”

Hyakume sent the requested Astrogeographic catalog to Luca's navigator seat. Luca couldn't take her eyes off the catalog titles that flashed across the display.

“A bunch of catalogues. But Coorie sent them with the highest priority, so what does that mean?”

“It’s the kind of pirate market that is shown in fairy tales.” Hyakume opened the catalog for Sensitive Fatty, which seemed to deal in sensor parts. “"Oh, wow, oh my, they even sell things like this? Um, well, this is...”

“Shouldn't we call the acting captain?” Luca returned to her seat and opened the catalogue. “According to Coorie's message, we don't have much time, do we?”

“That's true.” Hyakume pulled out the radio from his waist and switched the channel to the one for all crew members inside and outside the ship, and to the onboard speaker. “This is Hyakume on the bridge” he called out to the entire crew. “A message of the highest priority has just arrived from Coorie who is currently on a business trip with the captain to the Pirate Guild headquarters. It’s catalogues from the famous pirate market. I will upload them all to the server, so anyone who is interested can open them and take a look for themselves. We need to discuss how to respond to this with Acting Captain Schnitzer and all the bridge personnel currently on board the ship. Schnitzer, Kane, Sandaime, Misa, and Hikoza, please come to the bridge as soon as possible.”

“So, it seems that the legendary pirate market actually exists on Skull Star, where Coorie and the captain are currently visiting. Among the data sent was a catalog of electronic weapons that Coorie is in charge of, with several check marks indicating purchases.” Hyakume looked around at the familiar faces gathered on the bridge, which was weightless while undergoing maintenance.

“In other words, Coorie is going to the pirate market to buy the things she needs for the Bentenmaru, and the fact that she sent a stack of catalogs over here means that if there are any other parts we need, we should order them now.”

Sandaime, who had been flipping through a catalogue copied onto electronic paper, looked up with a groan. “In that case, how do we pay?”

“Of course, what you order as an individual is your personal property. The problem is the parts that are used by the Bentenmaru, that is, by everyone. As you probably know, we don't have any room in our annual budget. But if we can get it cheaper by shopping at the pirate market, or if we can improve performance for an amount that we can justify, rather than using the allocated budget, we can use the Bentenmaru’s annual budget.”

The Bentenmaru's annual budget and operating expenses are all publicly available to the crew. Although the income and expenditure for each job may be reported early or late, reports are submitted each time, and the crew of the Bentenmaru basically understand the ship's financial situation second only to their own financial situation.

The heads of each department on a pirate ship are required to have knowledge of not only their own field of expertise but also the market situation. Prices of propellants, shipboard air, and water, which differ depending on relay stations and supply companies used, but spare parts for the ship's large-caliber beam cannon, FTL engines, and replacement and repair parts for converter reactors are not things that can be ordered and delivered immediately at list price.

Bridge personnel on the Bentenmaru are required to know the maintenance, supply, and repair status of their department, as well as where in the galaxy spare parts are sold and for how much. However, in the case of the Benten Maru, which is aging and undergoing repeated unreasonable operations, it is not uncommon for special parts to be ordered from specialist stores but never arrive no matter how many years they wait, or special-purpose parts that cannot be found anywhere, no matter how hard one searches.

“I don't have time to look in depth, so I haven't looked, but maybe this converter reactor specialty store, Energiya, has the parts for the beta reactor you've been looking for?”

“No, well, I don't have the guts to buy the parts for the converter reactors that all of our lives depend on without seeing them, and even if I could, the super-light shells used in alpha and beta are too big to fit on a ship-based electronic reconnaissance aircraft.”

“Yes, we can leave the hassle of running around shopping to Coorie, but they can only bring back things that fit on the Silent Whisper that the captain took.” Hyakume looked around at everyone's faces again. “And one more thing, the captain is about to start packing up to go home. That means if you order, you need to hurry as much as possible, otherwise you might miss out on a bargain. And the chances of that happening increase with every second. That's all.”

Hyakume clapped his hands. “So, Luca, as the navigator, is there anything you want to grab?”

“The Star Chart of the Frontier sounds appealing.” Still seated in his navigator's seat, Luca slowly flipped through the catalogue that was displayed in 3D in front of her. “It doesn't have to be the latest version, even if it's two or three years old and second-hand data that can't be updated, it's still useful enough for flying around.”

“What do you think, Schnitzer?”

“There are some Kyber crystals[[7]](#footnote-7) on sale that could be used in our main guns.”

Schnitzer and Hikoza exchanged glances. Hikoza shook his head with a difficult look on his face. “The more you use it, the more it wears out, and the more you have to maintain or replace it, so I don't recommend buying a bunch of items right away. I wouldn't stop you from trying out some secret weapon that's like a one-off jack-in-a-box, but the best thing about shipboard armaments is that they're safe, secure, and stable to use, now and always.”

“What about Misa?”

“A recipe for a vaccine for endemic diseases in the frontier district sounds interesting.” Misa didn't look up from the electronic paper that was displaying the catalog. Most of the vaccines were either nanomachines themselves used for internal regulation or applications that were installed on standard nanomachines, there were almost no live vaccines that were cultured or synthesized like in the past.

“What about you, Hyakume?” Schnitzer looked back and forth between Hyakugan and the radar/sensor seat, which was undergoing inventory during maintenance. “Is there something you'd like to order?”

“I agree with Hikoza, who is in charge of armaments, that I don't want to mess with the radar and sensors in the main areas because they are already fully functional, but there are some optical sensors for invisible areas that I would like to try. If they are as advertised, they should be usable with our optical sensors.” Hyakume displayed an enlarged image of the image sensor's structure on the display at the radar/sensor seat and showed it to Schnitzer.

“Even if you're too scared to use them on the Bentenmaru, aren’t you eyeing a hidden weapon that you'd like to use on your own body?”

“Yes.” Schnitzer seemed to laugh. “I'm thinking of ordering that one for myself.”

Schnitzer looked around at the faces of the Bentenmaru's leaders gathered on the bridge. “I understand the situation. Everyone knows about the Bentenmaru’s financial situation. If there is anything you need to order under your authority and responsibility, please order it through Coorie. With any luck, you'll be able to make a good purchase.”

The Silent Whisper entered the port in the Skull Star’s right eye.

As before, we were assigned to the parking deck opposite the Queen of Love, and we extended our landing gear and landed at the port.

After confirming that the aircraft was secured in place, Marika stood up in the cockpit, still wearing her dress.

“Now, we have to go return the dresses to Myra.”

“Just a moment, please.” Coorie, in the operator's seat, was tapping quickly on the communications panel. “There's a lot of communications from the Bentenmaru, so I'll receive them all at once.” A FTL line that does not pass through port facilities is opened to receive all messages addressed to Coorie's personal address at once.

“If you don't mind, please check with the captain. If we're receiving the signal here, there's no need to worry about anyone eavesdropping. Nash, please leave. This is our job as crew members of the Bentenmaru.”

“Okay, okay. I'll be waiting outside.”

“I'll leave first, too.” With a slight wave of their hands, Nash and Gruier leave the Silent Whisper's cockpit.

Returning to the cockpit, Marika checked the messages addressed to her on the personal line she had set up.

Since Coorie is with her on a business trip to the frontier, regular contact with the Bentenmaru has been temporarily suspended. Marika checks the subjects and senders first to see if there are any urgent messages that need to be dealt with. “Well, if it's not urgent, it's better to deal with it after we get home.”

“Please do that. Ah, I thought this would happen.” Coorie, in the operator's seat, took out a media card from the front of her dress, inserted it into the communication device's slot, and began copying messages.

“What's wrong?”

“As you know, the electronics district is packed with all kinds of goods.” Coorie said, waiting for a copy that would not be finished instantly. “If the Electric Town is that good, I thought the other specialty shops must be pretty impressive too, so I randomly chose some trustworthy store catalogs at the Palace Hotel and sent them to the Bentenmaru. If we shop well, we can update our ship at a reasonable price.”

“...Are you sure? Doing something like that?”

“Yeah, I kind of regret it.” Coorie nonchalantly pulled out the copied media card from the communication device. “We've received a bunch of orders from our experts. When we get back to the hotel, I'll order them from the stores, and send them here to the landing deck.”

Coorie put the card media to her mouth and thought for a moment. “Captain, you don't want to join the Pirate Guild, do you?”

“Yes, that's the plan.” Marika looked back at Coorie, wondering what she was thinking now. “Why?”

“Well, I thought it would be a shame to lose all ties with this specialty store district, so Captain, could the Pirate Guild do something like a mail order membership?”

This book is a new edition of "Miniskirt Space Pirates 7: The Pale Skull Star" published by Asahi Novel in November 2011, with additional content and corrections and a new cover.



Sasamoto Yuichi

1963: Born in Tokyo.

1974: Becomes hooked on "Space Battleship Yamato" from the original broadcast.

1979: Watches "Mobile Suit Gundam" from the original broadcast.

1982: Reads "Galactic Beggars’ Army" and learns how to use airplane pilot manuals as reference books.

1984: Published "Operation Fairy"

1992: Published "Come and See the Stars Dance"

1992: Begins researching rockets from the first H-II rocket to write a space opera.

2008: "Miniskirt space pirate" battle begins!

2012: "Moretsu Space Pirates" televised.

2014: "Moretsu Space Pirates" theatrical animation was released.

2018: "Miniskirt Space Pirates" second battle begins!

Matsumoto Noriyuki

Worked for a game company for about 10 years. After that, he became a freelance illustrator, working on illustrations for light novels. Currently, his main activity is manga. His representative works include "Rin - Noriyuki Matsumoto Art Collection" (Enterbrain), "Tsubame Yodamari Shoujo Kiko" (Tokuma Shoten), and "Minami Kamakura High School Girls Bicycle Club" (Mac Garden).

A cover of a book

Description automatically generated

1. TL Note: The kanji for “island” also has a secondary meaning of territory of an organized crime gang or prostitute. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. TL Note: Literal translation of the Japanese kanji is “Rainbow Cloud Planet”. I decided to use the Japanese pronunciation as the name. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. TL note: This is in Katakana, not Kanji with Furigana like the previous instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. TL Note: An alternate, more literal, translation of that line is “I'm not going there to sell myself for a job.” Which, while technically the same, has a much different implication. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. TL Note: The author is referring to himself in the 3rd person. It’s a Japanese thing. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. TL Note: 3rd person again. I didn’t want to change it too much (delete authors name), so entire sentence is 3rd person. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. TL Note: Yes, “カイバークリスタル” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)