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There was no one in the corridors of the old art museum. The old paintings are illuminated by special lighting that makes them stand out, but causes almost no damage to the exhibits.

As usual, Gruier checked to see if there were any other visitors before her before stepping into the exhibition corridor. Paintings of a variety of materials and motifs, painted with various techniques from an ancient period known in history as the Dark Ages, before the establishment of the Galactic Empire, were lined up so densely that in some places they overlapped.

“Wow!”

The older an art museum or museum is, the more of a problem it becomes to secure exhibition space. The Royal Art Museum of the Blue Sister, on the blue planet where the Serenity Royal Palace is located, is no exception, and is struggling to display its large collection of items, and among the countless exhibition rooms, there are forgotten items that no one has ever seen.

She had intended to focus on the Dark Ages, figurative paintings, and portraits, but on both sides of the dark corridor that seemed to go on forever, countless paintings were hanging, forming the walls. Smaller paintings are displayed in the foreground, while larger ones are displayed in the background, floating in the air, and the corridor is wide enough to allow viewing from both far and near.

At her feet, there are endless floor panels made of a permanent material that resembles wood, as if it were an old structure, but neither the walls nor the ceiling can be seen because of the darkness. Only colorful paintings lined the seemingly endless corridor.

If she were to take her time looking at each one, she would never have enough time. Determined, Gruier began to walk quickly down the exhibition corridor, which seemed to have no end in sight. Her eyes wandered over the old paintings that overlapped on both sides, as she walked, more with the intention of passing through than appreciating them.

Though its name is the Classical Portrait Gallery, the paintings on display were not limited to simple portraits. There were deformed paintings of ancient gods from early civilizations when perspective had not yet been established, depictions of myths, legends, and historical scenes, reliefs that looked like they had been taken from temples, and murals that looked like they had been cut out of rock walls. Two-dimensional paintings on every imaginable material, wood, cloth, paper, metal, and all kinds of materials that were around people, continued on both sides of the seemingly endless corridors.

The curator in charge of the exhibition did not seem to be interested in strict historical or technological classification. The paintings seem to be arranged according to the level of technology in the era in which the subjects lived. The exhibition focuses on paintings from stone age civilizations, metal civilizations, pre-industrial revolution, and large-scale industrial civilizations that began using hydrocarbons, such as coal and oil, with few paintings from the time after electronic technology began to be used.

The art works stored in the Serenity Royal Museum are mainly from Serenity or planets and civilizations that it has connections to. However, the collection of the Drifting Museum on Skull Star seems to have been collected from all over the galaxy, as is typical of an old free trade port. The paintings on display are accompanied by small explanatory boards, which display the title, artist, date of creation, location, and other information in simple galactic standard language. The royal family of Serenity has been specially trained since childhood in the history and stars of the galaxy, but there are many names that Gruier has never seen before.

“I'm sure there are many planets and races that no longer exist.” Gruier muttered as she read the names of the stars and countries that caught her eye as she looked around. Most of the paintings were hundreds of years old, and some were even thousands or tens of thousands of years old.

There are large paintings, such as a family group around the dinner table, and a group of sailors and merchants standing on a pier in an old port. There are also portraits of just one person, such as a bust shot, and small paintings of just a profile.

Gruier continued to walk down the corridor, looking at each person's face as if she were meeting them in real life. Looking left and right, she never stopped walking, approaching or moving away from the paintings on display in three dimensions.

She stopped dead in her tracks, looking to the side.

Skull Star is a closed relay station, and like most other stations, it operates on a 24-hour galactic standard time system. In stations that do not create artificial days and nights, ports, public transportation, and commercial facilities continue to operate without rest 24 hours a day.

The museums and libraries that display the ancient and modern cultural artifacts that have been brought to Skull Star, also known as Pirate Island, over the years and accumulated there, are no exception.

The Drifting Art Museum, which mainly exhibits art and crafts, also never sleeps. The oldest exhibit in the museum is a primordial wall painting that is displayed on a rock, and the planet it was excavated from has been swallowed up by an aging star.

On the morning of their impending return to Sea of the Morningstar, Gruier woke up early and used the information system in her room to search for art museums in the neighborhood of the Palace Hotel, where she was staying.

The Drifting Art Museum's Classic Portrait Gallery was within walking distance of the hotel district.

Gruier used the room's information system to check the status of Marika and Coorie's rooms. They were both there. Gruier was about to contact Marika, but after checking the current time she decided not to. It was unclear whether Coorie was asleep, but Marika was definitely fast asleep.

“I would be sorry if I woke you up.”

Gruier deftly changed from the nightgown that was prepared in the room into the uniform of Hakuoh Girls' Academy and left the room. The Classic Portrait Gallery was in the same block as the Palace Hotel. Since it was a museum where you didn't have to worry about opening and closing times, she should be able to take a quick peek and be back before Marika woke up.

“Miss, are you looking for something?”

A moment before she was called out to, Gruier turned around. “"Oh.” A skinny boy wearing a loose jumper over his work clothes stood behind Gruier, who gave him a social smile. “No, I found what I was looking for.” Still smiling, she looked back at the boy's face. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Ah, no, well, that's...” As if intimidated by Gruier's smile, the boy took a step back, then spoke as if he had made up his mind. ‘Um, sorry, there is a situation, I can't tell you why, but please come with me.”

“Yes?” Gruier tilted her head and looked at the boy's face. He was slightly taller than the small Gruier, but they were about the same age. His left hand, still tucked in the pocket of his large jumper, was clutching something and pointing it at Gruier.

Deciding that a weapon or something similar was being pointed at her, Gruier looked around the exhibition corridor. As far as she could see, there were no other people in sight.

According to the warning signs and the explanation I received from Coorie, the exhibition room has a security system appropriate to the value of the items in it. Anti-personnel radar and scanners are installed all over the place, and even charging an energy weapon is considered to be malicious, and there is no guarantee of survival.

If the thing the boy was holding in his pocket was a weapon, it probably wasn't charged yet. Gruier thought about it almost instantly and said “I understand.”

“Eh?” The boy couldn't help but ask again. Gruier slowly nodded as if he understood everything.

“I'll join you.” Gruier looked around the exhibition gallery, then back at the boy. “Where should we go?”

“Gruier is missing?” Frowning, Marika asked Coorie again.

“She is not in her room. I can't reach her.” Coorie answered while munching on her usual hearty breakfast.

“Uh...” Thinking of what she could do, Marika placed her index finger on her cheek and looked up. “Didn't she have a transceiver?”

“It wasn't in the room, but I didn't call it in case the worst happened.”

The transceiver that Marika gave to Gruier was a standard military model. It had been adjusted so that it could be used by both the Odette II and the Bentenmaru, so there was no need to worry about communication being cut off unless they were extremely far away or in an environment that blocked radio waves.

“In the worst case scenario, huh?” Marika pondered. There were various modes on the transceiver. In addition to the normal standby mode, there was also a mode that would transmit the current location, but if the main switch was turned off, there would be no response unless you called out to it with a forced ring. “That means we can't get the current location of the transceiver either?”

“In that case, I wouldn't say it's missing.” Marika thought further. If she called in forced mode, the transceiver would notify her of the incoming call, but it was entirely possible that Gruier would be in a situation where she was unable to answer. “...What is that girl doing?”

“Think about it.” Coorie answered as usual and took a big gulp from her mug of fresh juice. If Coorie had the time to think, then Gruier must have judged that the situation wasn't that dire.

‘You're not worried, are you?”

“Worrying is pointless.” Coorie replied brusquely as she poked at her bowl of yogurt. “If you have something to worry about, it's much more constructive to do what you can to address it. If there's nothing you can do, then you shouldn't be thinking about unnecessary things.”

“Well, I wish I could do that.” Marika reached for the scones piled in front of her, choosing a light-colored cream from the top, as it would be the least stimulating. “No, that's not it. Coorie, you said that Gruier has gone missing, and you're not worried about it, are you?”

“I don't think the captain is worried about what's going to happen to her, either.”

“Because Gruier is much more reliable than me, has a higher adaptability, and has been through more situations.” Marika's voice trailed off. “…Why am I the captain?”

“Because of the regulations for privateer licenses. Personal ability doesn't really matter in this case.”

“Don't be so direct.”

“Anyway, a pirate ship isn’t run by the captain alone. As long as the captain sits in the captain's seat, the rest will be taken care of by us crew members.”

“I see.” Marika pondered even more, her face becoming more difficult. “Gruier has to do everything by himself, so it's much harder.”

Coorie smiled as she took her last sandwich. Marika continued without noticing.

“If she's missing and out of touch, something must be happening.” Marika looked around the nature-themed restaurant, which was filled with natural light. “Can you find her?”

“If she's at the port.” The monitoring cameras in the Skull Star's port are networked, and recordings can be accessed if the proper procedures are followed.

“You haven't found her yet?” There's no way Coorie isn't looking for her.

“The monitor system here isn't precise enough to distinguish individual characteristics. It would be easy to find Gruier if she was walking around in her usual clothes with her face exposed, but if she was slightly disguised or stuffed into a suitcase or a sack, it would be impossible to find her.” Coorie answered, stuffing a bowl of yogurt into her mouth. “Anyway, it's not like one person can check all the monitor cameras in the Skull Star's port. I've set it up so that it uses pattern recognition to check if it finds Gruier.”

Coorie stopped the spoon in her bowl. “I wonder how much I'll find. It'll probably find too much or not enough, so I'm feeling depressed about going back to my room now.”

“What?” Marika chuckled. “Even Coorie is worried.”

“Yes, but there's no point in worrying.” Coorie shoveled down her yogurt without even looking at Marika. “So, what we have to do now is decide what to do. What are you going to do, Captain?”

“What should I do? Umm...” After sorting out the current situation in her head, Marika spoke. “If Gruier has gone missing without a message, that means that at least for now we can't contact her. Even if we leave her like this, I'm sure she'll do something about it, knowing Gruier.”

“Is that so?” Coorie, still holding the spoon in her mouth, looked at Marika with a puzzled expression. “If there are people who have put her in a situation where she can't be contacted, I'm more worried about them.”

Looking at Coorie's face again, Marika thought long and hard about it and suddenly realized something. “Ah, you're right. If we don't do something about this before it becomes a big deal, it could turn into a scandal...”

“You could always just pretend you didn't notice and go home.”

“There's no way a captain could just abandon her crew and go home! You mean you could just leave Gruier here, Coorie?”

The reply was delayed by a breath. “That’s not possible.”

“Anyway, let's go look for Gruier.” Marika reached for the fresh juice.

“Then we'll analyze the situation to see if there's anything we can do here. I'm sorry for the unimaginative approach, but is that okay?”

“Roger that.” Coorie stopped a passing service robot, and uses the touch panel of the robot to quickly enter her order.

“Room service? Are you ordering that much?”

“It might be a long wait. If you don't have something in your stomach, your brain won't work well.”

“Ah, I see.” Marika recalled how Coorie usually works on the bridge of Bentenmaru. “If I ask the front desk, maybe they'll tell me what time she left?” After voicing her idea, she noticed Coorie's gaze as she looked at her with one hand on the touch panel.

“That’s a good idea.”

“What?”

“I completely forgot. This is the Palace Hotel.” Coorie began to shovel yogurt from her bowl with great vigor. “Let's ask at the front desk. They should be able to confirm the key's departure time and current location.”

The room keys at the Palace Hotel in Skull Star use old-fashioned card keys. There are systems that do not require keys, such as biometric authentication, but these require registration of personal information and are often unpopular with some customers.

The concierge at the front desk remembered seeing Gruier leave the lobby. The Palace Hotel's room keys were equipped with a system of electronic authentication, and their current location could be confirmed anywhere there was a signal.

Gruier had left the hotel more than an hour before Marika woke up. They were able to track her as far as entering the Classic Portrait Gallery, one of the branches of the Drifting Art Museum, which is located on the same block. The Drifting Art Museum is protected by a strict security system, so the weak radio waves from the room key are blocked and cannot be detected.

Several tens of minutes pass before the room key's reaction is detected again. The room key leaves the Classic Portrait Gallery, then moves towards the skull's jaw, going out of detection range.

“...Can't you follow her?”

“It's impossible.” Coorie replied as she reconstructed the tracking data that the concierge had copied for her into the room's information system. “Below the skull's mouth is an industrial area. There are closed docks, factories, plants, parts stores, and maybe a collection point.” Coorie overlaid the room key's tracking data onto the three-dimensional structure of the Skull Star.

“It's not as solid as the two eye ports, but the ports around the mouth are larger in size. There are docks that can accommodate large ships and disassemble and repair them, or build new ones, and there are also research facilities and museums. There are also suspicious electromagnetic waves and radiation flying around, and of course there are many special materials and alloys that block them. There are also fewer monitor cameras than in the port area. If she goes in there, we won't be able to track her with the weak radio waves from the room key.” Coorie zoomed in and scrolled the three-dimensional structure of the jaw. “I think a transceiver call would go through.”

“What is she doing in a place like that?” Coorie stopped what he was doing and looked at Marika's face. Looking through her round glasses, Marika realized what Coorie wanted to say. “No, she was taken away?**”**

“I would conclude so, given the situation.” Coorie began searching the data for more detailed data on the three-dimensional structure. “As you know, Gruier likes museums, so I think she found one nearby, went there by herself, and was taken away somewhere.”

“Museums aren't the only things Gruier likes, though.” Marika sighed as she looked at the three-dimensional structure of the industrial district in the lower jaw of the Skull Star. “She's not the type to be taken away so easily, so where did she go?”

“Where are we?

“Deep in Pirate Island’s downtown.”

The driverless public buses became more and more outdated with each transfer. Getting off the last bus, which smelled of a burning motor, Gruier looked around curiously. The arterial corridors were large, as expected of a huge station built to a uniform standard, but the beams supporting the structure were thick and the lighting panels had deteriorated and were missing in places.

“The lower jaw harbor is newer than this one, but the upper jaw is the oldest port facing outward.”

Although there are exceptions, old stations and megacities tend to expand outward, with newer sections on the outside and older sections left inward and reused or even completely remodeled.

Industrial and residential areas can be expanded with additional blocks on the outside without much problem as long as transportation and wiring are well connected, but the port area cannot function unless it is on the outermost side adjacent to space. Most spaceports are built with block structures, so when they are expanded, the whole area is moved outwards and a pier is added to the increased usable area.

Skull Star was not originally built in the shape of a skull. The prototype mobile fortress was built in a spherical shape, following the principle of maximizing internal volume while minimizing surface area. Equipped with powerful fortress cannons even by the standards of the time, the gigantic mobile fortress ended up being expanded as a commercial port without ever experiencing full-scale combat, and at some point it was brought to Oceanus and became a free trade port.

The upper jaw industrial area is the oldest structure of Skull Star's port district currently visible on the surface. Huge enclosed docks, seemingly brought from somewhere, and industrial blocks somehow brought from other space cities, are connected without much preparation or consideration, reinforced with structural materials, and on the outside there are temporary areas, and in the worst cases, standardized containers fixed in place as storage facilities. It is the area that has developed most chaotically, with contractors gathering there who undertake everything from spaceship construction and repair to questionable modifications that cannot be done in decent places, and an increasing number of factories and facilities conducting research and development and machining to match actual products.

Before the new open spaceport was built in the area where the skull's eyes would be, Skull Star had a deformed, octopus-like style. As the haphazardly developed upper jaw moved its trade port functions to the ports in the eyes, the cheeks and head were expanded, and Skull Star took on the shape of a skull without a lower jaw.

The current Skull Star has had a large expansion in the lower jaw. The upper industrial area has become extremely disorganized and reckless expansion has made orderly development almost impossible. However, the demand for more factory lots in the port area has not decreased, so the large lower jaw area was reluctantly built by adding to the structure of the old area.

Reflecting on the disarray of the upper jaw expansion, the lower jaw was built with future development in mind. Its volume is larger than the upper jaw's industrial zone, which was built with a rough, makeshift structure, and its energy and lifeline supply system was also planned in a sensible manner. The lower jaw quickly became the core of the industrial zone, while the upper jaw was left with its old sections and facilities undeveloped.

As it is part of the Skull Star, which changes location irregularly, the structural strength of the section is more than sufficient. However, as a space station, the environment is terrible, and even the minimum necessary maintenance is not carried out in some places, and there are apparently closed areas and ghost sections.

Ruminating on the preliminary information she had gleaned from the hotel's information system, Gruier asked further. “Do you live here?”

“Further out.” The boy answered Gruier's question in a blunt manner. “It's okay, the pipes and wiring are still working, and even if there is a small leak, we can quickly refill it.”

From the main shaft, where large trailers and old buses pass by, they enter a backstreet shopping district where a variety of stores are piled on top of each other. The sunlamps hanging from the low ceiling have turned reddish brown with age, and the alley, where daily necessities stores, grocery stores, and restaurants stand out, is not as lively as the Electric Town. The clothes and equipment of the people passing by are also not as varied as in the Electric Town.

The area resembled the interior of a station on an old colony planet, and Gruier concluded that it was an area populated mostly by local residents.

The boy, who had been walking ahead of Gruier so as not to let her get away, suddenly crouched down, grabbed Gruier's hand, and ran into the antique shop next door.

A cartoon of a child pointing at something

Description automatically generated

“What's wrong?”

“Shhh! Follow me.”

“Hey, isn't that Richard?”

As I rushed into the overstocked store, where kitchen utensils and military equipment were lined up alongside antiques and used clothing, a voice called out from the back of the dimly lit store.

“Did you do something bad again?”

“I haven't done anything yet!” The boy called Richard answered, baring his teeth. “There were some welfare officers there, let us through, old man Shaho!”

“Oh, together with a pretty girl again.”

The old man, covered in mechanical equipment and nicknamed grandpa Shaho, rose to his feet from the counter at the back of the store, accompanied by the faint sound of a motor. Richard, who seemed to know the layout of the poorly lit store, skillfully ran through the miscellaneous inventory, and slipped past the owner as he got to his feet.

“Over here!”

As she was being pulled, Gruier looked up at the store owner's face. Equipped with a classical sensor eye, the old man's arm moved with unusual agility and presented a small card in front of Gruier. Taking the card with her free hand, Gruier followed Richard into the closet behind the counter where the used clothing was stored. Relying only on his hand, he made his way through the jungle of used clothing, which smelled of burnt fabric, mold, and detergent fragrance, through a door that looked like a wall, and into a narrow corridor where miscellaneous goods were piled up like a warehouse.

“This way.” Richard walked quickly through the dark corridor, dotted with emergency inspection lights, as if he knew exactly where everything was. After passing through several intersections and climbing up and down ladders and stairs, the view suddenly opened up.

“Huh?”

A little further on, Richard, who had let go of her hand, was waiting for her. Gruier looked around.

It appears to be a huge warehouse or factory. In a space that could easily accommodate a large transport ship, there are huge machine tools, containers, the remains of trucks, exposed small engines, small power reactors still connected, energy packs, and a pile of scrap parts of all sizes all piled up haphazardly.

Gruier looked around at the piles of junk, illuminated under lights that had worn to the color of a sunset thanks to age, then turned her eyes back to Richard. “Who was that person from earlier?”

“Old man Shaho?” Richard began to walk across the floor, which was strewn with parts and debris of all sizes. The floor was textured to prevent slipping, and the material varied in different places. “He's been running an antiques shop in Scrap Iron Alley for a long time. He says he doesn't even remember how long he's been there.”

Recalling the sensor-eyed face of the shop owner, who seems to be highly mechanized, Gruier looked at the card in her left hand. The name of the shop, Antique & Junk/Shuffle, as well as its address and contact information, were printed on it.

“What about the other person, or rather, the two of them?” As she walked, careful not to step on any sharp edges, Gruier placed the card in her skirt pocket. Richard turned around in surprise.

“How did you know?”

“Two people in black suits with not-so-good looks ran into Shaho's shop later.”

Sighing, Richard jumped up onto the arm of the gantry crane that was strung diagonally across the space-standard container like a bridge. “Let's go up from here. You'll get your shoes dirty walking like that.”

Gruier took the offered hand. “Thank you, Richard.”

Lifting Gruier onto the catwalk attached to the top of the arm, Richard peered at her face. “Right, old man Shaho called me by my name.”

Richard let go of her hand. Gruier bowed slightly. “I’m Gruier.” When Gruier looked up again, Richard looked her over from head to toe, then he sighed again and jumped off the catwalk.

“Sorry, I brought you all the way here, but I think this is enough.” Richard held out his hand to Gruier, who was on the catwalk. Gruier looked down at Richard with a puzzled look.

“Isn't there some reason you brought me here?”

“I didn't bring you here.” Richard looked away awkwardly. “I tried to kidnap you. I'm sorry.”

“Why?

He looked up at Gruier, who asked honestly. YYou were in a place like that, in a museum, and you were dressed nicely, so I thought I could make some money by getting a ransom. But that's fine, I'll stop now. I'll take you back to where you came from.”

“I willingly let myself be kidnapped.” Standing on the catwalk, Gruier clasped her hands behind her back with amusement. “Is it over now, after coming all this way?”

“Y-you let yourself be kidnapped?”

Gruier nodded. “You had a very worried look on your face, so I thought there must be some unavoidable circumstances. If you don't mind, could you tell me your story?”

“Why?” Richard cried out in astonishment. “You came along even though you knew you were being kidnapped? And why did you look so happy!?”

“Oh, did I look like I was having fun?” Gruier laughed. “Yes, I had the opportunity to visit places I probably would never have been to on my own. I like going to unfamiliar cities.”

“But you knew you were being kidnapped?”

“I thought you would be troubled if your payoff, whom you had taken the trouble to kidnap, escaped.”

“That would be a problem...” Unable to look directly at his payoff's smiling face, who even spoke politely to her kidnapper, Richard averted his eyes from Gruier.

“Is your goal really money?” Gruier was staring straight at Richard, who answered bluntly, still looking the other way.

“Yes.”

“But there's more to it than that, right?”

Richard glanced up at Gruier. The junkyard, with its dreary sunset-like lighting, seems to be shining only around her. “What makes you think that?”

“Money is only one way to solve a problem. It is often just a way to postpone the solution, and can even make the problem worse. You seemed to be thinking about a lot of things while walking with me. Um, is it okay to say that you have a troubled expression in this situation?”

“People often tell me I have a difficult look on my face.” Shaking his head with a frown, Richard climbed up onto the gantry arm catwalk again. He slipped past Gruier, who was standing on an inspection catwalk with only a thin handrail on one side, and started walking ahead. “Just like my sister said, kidnapping is not worth it because it's just too much work.”

“A truly bad person would never do something that is obviously bad at a glance.” Holding on to the handrail to avoid falling off the inspection catwalk on the gantry arm, Gruier follows Richard, who is ahead of her. “Truly evil people do evil deeds without anyone knowing or noticing.”

“My sister said the same thing.” The tip of the gantry crane hung over a space-standard container. The top of the standard container, completely blackened by radiation and high heat, had far fewer obstacles than the floor. “That's why, when dealing with bad guys, intelligence is the most important thing. You can't win unless you're more cunning than the bad guys.”

“You have a good sister.” Gruier touched the transceiver she had brought under her uniform jacket. She called out to Richard, who was walking on top of the container. “Excuse me, but can I contact my friends?”

Richard, who had climbed onto the next container, turned around in shock. With a smile on her face, Gruier showed Richard the transceiver she had taken out. Seeing the transceiver, which was not switched on and had nothing on the display, Richard turned his eyes back to Gruier. “You had that and didn't sneakily contact them?!”

“Because I was kidnapped and taken away.”

“I told you, I'm done kidnapping.” Richard looked around the junkyard, where machine parts and scrap of all sizes were piled up. “Fine, but they'll probably ask where they can contact you?”

“It's not the kind of transceiver that's that easy to locate.” Gruier turned on the transceiver's main switch.

The transceiver, which had been left on the sideboard, suddenly started chirping. Marika, who had been peering at the information system display from beside Coorie, reflexively turned towards the bed.

“She’s calling!?”

“Please answer it.”

Because it was a military transceiver with a secret line, it could only be called from a host that knew its unique number. The only person who knew Marika's transceiver number at this station, other than Gruier, was surely Nash. Marika grabbed the transceiver without needing to be told by Coorie.

The display showed a call from Gruier. Marika answered the radio, impatiently trying to unlock the phone.

“*This is Gruier, can you hear me?*”

“This is Marika!” Hearing Gruier's usual voice, Marika responded forcefully. “Current location: Palace Hotel. Gruier, where are you and what are you doing?!”

“*Um, my current location is...*” Gruier read out the address of the Antiques & Junk/Shuffle store she had taken from her skirt pocket. “*It's in the upper left, 34th Ward, Scrap Iron Alley, near 3568-2243-9751, I think.*”

“Do you know it?” Marika repeated the address she had heard to Coorie, who was still at the information system, making sure not to make any mistakes.

“The last three are coordinates. It's around here.”

Returning from the bed with the transceiver in hand, Marika peered at the 3D map displayed on the information system. At the front of the skull, a pair of ports lined up, then a rather irregular upper jaw curved around and down, and nearby, on the edge of a complex block structure that seemed to have been haphazardly added on, was a flashing red dot. “Can't we use the transceiver's current location display?” Marika looked at the display of her transceiver to find the other person's current location. The coordinate data remained blank, indicating that the other person's current location was not included in the communication data.

“If the transceiver had a structural map of the area or a landmark registered, it might be able to display some information, but it's a completely unknown place. I'm glad there's an antenna network that unconditionally transmits communications waves, without regards to their contents.”

Inside the station, surrounded by metal walls and covered with energy conductors and fibers, the low output of a portable transceiver often does not work even at close range.. On Skull Star, conductive materials are intentionally used in some of the main structures to improve the passage of radio waves so that communication can be made even in blocks far below the surface.

“As expected of a trading port.” Marika muttered. In commercial ports, it's not uncommon for communication issues to cause serious losses.

“The fact that it’s possible to talk means that someone somewhere is listening in on every communication they can get their hands on.” Coorie said bluntly. Marika smirked and tried to imagine the result.

“An informant would have no shortage of work.”

“*Ah, the address I just gave you is the last coordinate I was able to confirm, and I'm now moving to a block outside of that.*”

“Is the air okay?” Marika asked worriedly. “Looking at the map, you're about to leave the environmentally safe area.”

“*I'm fine, I'm not short of breath or smelling anything strange at the moment, and gravity is normal.*” Gruier answered, looking around. I will be back in time for departure, so if you don't mind, could you just take my luggage with you? “*I will be back in time for departure, so if you don't mind, could you just take my luggage with you?*”

“Luggage?” Marika and Coorie exchanged glances.

“*Yes, I've packed everything so we can leave at any time.*”

“Gruier?” Marika called out in as calm a voice as possible. “Where are you and what are you doing?”

There was a breath's pause before the answer came. “*I was kidnapped.*”

“What!?”

The voice coming from the speaker cracked. Trying to hold back her laughter, Gruier continued her explanation. “*There's no need to worry. I've already spoken to the kidnapper.*”

"Kidnapper?" Richard said, pointing at his nose.

“It seems that you have some circumstances, so if there is anything I can do, I will help you and then head home.”

“What are you saying, you'll help me? You've been kidnapped!”

“I'm not a hostage anymore.” With the transceiver still in one hand, Gruier smiled at Richard. “I'm a friend.”

Pointing at his own face, Richard blinked. “Oh, come on!”

Marika's laughter was heard over the transceiver first. “*Okay, I'll take your luggage to the port. Please let me know if you're going to be late or if you need help, okay?*”

“I understand. I'll count on you. Can I end the call with that?”

“*If you waste the bandwidth, you might get into trouble, so it's better to turn off your transceiver outside the bay area. I'm always available here, so if you think you’re in danger, call for help right away.*”

“I understand. I will try to keep to the regular contact schedule from now on.”

Looking at the display, Gruier turned off the transceiver. Richard looked with wide eyes at the girl who had made contact with the small but complex military transceiver as she put it back inside her jacket.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” Gruier nodded to Richard. “Let's go.”

After passing over the roofs of two containers that were packed tightly together, Richard came to containers stacked even higher. Entering through a small inspection hatch beneath the large double-door cargo doors that opened up like towering wings, he found himself lost in a maze.

The back road from Scrap Iron Alley led into the residential area, albeit in a twisty way. From inside the container, the route Richard chose took them through several airtight doors, past forgotten tubes, access hatches, and the remains of a patch of high-speed railway track.

“Are you okay?”

As soon as he opened the airtight hatch at the end of the narrow passageway, a gust of wind blew into the open space from behind. The wind stopped immediately, so the air on this side didn't continue to flow to the other side forever. The difference in air pressure wasn't that great, but Gruier looked worried as she peered into the dark passageway, where only a few inspection lights were on here and there.

“It's okay, this area is still inside, so even if it's not quite airtight, the air won't escape forever.”

Richard stepped out through an old-fashioned airtight door with a large round handle, the likes of which she had only seen on the Odette II, and waited for Gruier to come in. She glanced at the hardened, cracked gasket as she stepped into a tunnel that looked like it hadn't been used for any real purpose in at least half a century.

The tunnel, which is almost circular in cross section, appears to have been an ancient railway. The guide rails integrated into the walls are still there, but there are a series of holes where superconducting magnets for linear motors were embedded.

“Gravity is weird in some places, so be careful.” As Richard, who was ahead of her, spoke, Gruier almost fell over, but was caught.

“Thank you.”

“Be careful. Around here, there are a mixture of gravity and zero gravity zones, and the direction of gravity changes.”

In a space city that was built according to a well-thought-out development plan, the direction of the artificial gravity would be aligned from the perspective of efficient energy use. In stations and bases that have been expanded in a chaotic way, the direction and strength can be adjusted and controlled as much as desired, and artificial gravity is often set to suit each area and block.

Careful adjustments are required at the boundaries between blocks with different operating directions, or at the boundaries with zero-gravity sections. However, in stations that have been added in a disorderly manner without considering the direction of gravity in adjacent sections, the artificial gravity becomes amplified or attenuated in complex patterns at the boundaries.

“We're pretty far out, aren't we?” Gruier asked Richard, who was about to open a downward-facing inspection hatch.

“It's just outside the harbor.” Richard slid easily into an inspection shaft with a built-in ladder. “There's a zero gravity area up ahead, are you okay?”

Richard, who usually works around here, has no obvious physical abnormalities, so even if there was radiation or harmful substances, it probably wasn't something to worry about.

“Are we going through the zero-gravity area?” Gruier asked, concerned.

“It's okay, only a small part is gravity-free.”

“No.” Gruier smiled and looked at Richard. “I was wondering if you could live in such an unkempt place, especially outside the station.”

“The only thing free here is energy.” Richard gave a clumsy wink. “Unless you make a terrible mistake, you won't have any problems.”

“Is that so?”

The living conditions in a space city become harsher the further out you go. The further inside you go, separated by numerous partitions from the high vacuum of outer space and protected from radiation, the safer it becomes. The outermost edge, separated only by a single airtight wall, is allocated to facilities such as ports that are conveniently located facing directly into outer space, and there are almost no residential areas there.

With each narrow turn, the gravity weakens until, once they've passed through the final airtight hatch, the passage beyond is completely weightless, though filled with breathable air.

“I knew it.” Richard, who was flying ahead of Gruier, turned around and laughed at her graceful movements as she flew through weightless space. “If you can fly so easily, I was right to give up on the kidnapping after all.”

“Why?” Gruier gently touched the wall and changed direction.

“You have a pretty face and you were looking at paintings at the museum, so I thought you were a rich girl who was only familiar with planets and ground travel, I didn't expect you to be so used to floating.”

“I've practiced.” Gruier answered calmly.

“This way. Follow me.” Richard slid into an even narrower shaft, weaving deftly through the narrow space filled with thick conductive tubes and all sorts of cables and fibers that were barely secured in place.

Moving through a narrow passageway where you have to turn your body vertically is easier than in a vast, weightless space, since you can just use a hand or foot and to maneuver. However, Richard, flying through a narrow passageway with only dim emergency lights on here and there, barely touched anything and moved with minimal effort. He didn't make contact with even half of the things Gruier touched and kicked here and there.

“Here we are.” After turning at five intersections with inspection shafts of various sizes, Richard stopped and quietly put his fingers up to his mouth. He opened a dingy access panel hidden by a bundle of cables and touched the tattered display of the authentication system. He touched several points on the touch display, some of which were blank, in order, and it began to flash dimly.

Richard put his mouth close to the authentication system. “It's Richard. Open up.”

“How many pirate ships are in the skull's right eye?”

“Nine and a half.”

“Welcome back.”

With the suspicious password, the wall on the other side of the conductor pipe sank in. A bright light leaked out from the inspection shaft.

To help, Richard pushed the sunken wall further in. From behind the cracked, aged and deteriorated airtight seal a girl smaller than Gruier appeared.

“Oh? A visitor?” Her large, mobile black eyes locked on Gruier and then turned suspiciously towards Richard.

“Nice to meet you.” Gruier bowed from behind Richard. “My name is Gruier.”

“Where is she from?”

“She’s an outsider, Gappi.”

The girl stood in front of Richard, holding the slightly ajar airtight door open. “Richard, you can't be serious.”

“Yeah, that's what I was planning to do at first, but I gave up halfway through.” Richard waved his hands hastily. “She’s nicely dressed. I thought I could do it because she was spacing out at the museum, but I was totally wrong.”

The eyes that had glared at Richard looked back at Gruier.

“Don’t worry.” Gruier almost laughed. “I came here of my own free will. I'll go home when I've finished what I have to do.”

The eyes that had been staring at Gruier for a while retreated into their depths. After the sound of machinery releasing several locks on the inside of the airtight hatch that had been slightly open, it opened wide. “You'll pick up anything and everything.”

“I didn't pick her up!” Richard pointed Gruier behind the wide open door. “Welcome to the Great Cosmic Witch. This is our ship.”

The Great Cosmic Witch is a small, old-fashioned passenger and cargo ship that seems to have been forgotten while moored to a makeshift harbor block. The enclosed pier and the small passenger and cargo ship that was moored there were used as a temporary bunkhouse and tool storage area as floating docks and factory blocks were added around it, stacked on top of each other, and it seems that it fell into disuse as more blocks were added around it.

‘Is it tilted somehow?” Gruier asked from the boarding bridge connecting the inspection shaft's airtight hatch to the Great Cosmic Witch.

“Gravity hasn't been working well lately.” Richard explained as we walked sideways across the boarding bridge which, although neatly tidy and cleaned, seemed as if the passage itself was warped due to the low gravity acting at an angle. “The artificial gravity of the Great Cosmic Witch is not working properly, so it's like this due to the influence of gravity from the other blocks. It's okay, gravity is turned off inside the ship.”

“Zero gravity?” Gruier frowned. As the girl called Gappi, who was ahead of them, opened the last door of the boarding bridge, a bunch of high-pitched cheers came out.

“Welcome back, big bro!” A mass of children came flying from the other side of the airtight hatch, passing by Gappi who quickly dodged, and leapt at Richard.

“Did you find the parts?” “Are you safe?” “Did you get hurt?”

“I'm fine.” Richard caught the three children one after another.

“Who’s that girl over there?” “Who’s that?”

“She’s a visitor. Now, have you been good while your brother was out?”

“I was!” “You can ask Gappi-neechan.”

“Okay, I'll play with you later, so go ahead for now.” Gently tossing the three children through the door, Richard pointed to the back. “It's a mess, but come on in.”

“He’s never cleaned up a mess.”

Hearing Gappi's voice behind her, Gruier passed through a door that seemed to be a hatch on the outer shell of the spaceship.

The former airlock was even less tidy than the entrance. Gruier entered the inner door, wondering how much the inner airtight door, which had almost no gasket left, would be able to function in an emergency.

The gazes of several children inside were focused on Gruier. After smiling and bowing, Gruier looked around the space that seemed to have once been used as a cargo bay on an old passenger and cargo ship.

The ship's hold, which is about the same width and depth, serves as the living room. The tables, chairs, shelves, and lights appear to be fixed at their tops and bottoms, indicating that gravity was at work, but food packages and what appear to be toys are floating and being drawn into the numerous ducts near the ceiling.

“Do you all live here?” Gruier asked quietly, a social smile still on her face. Richard simply nodded.

“Yes. There's air and light, and it's warm. Here, we won't be chased by human traffickers or welfare officers.”

“But gravity...” Gruier looked around the hold, which was lit by lights of various standards and intensities. After seeing her talking to Richard in a friendly manner, the children returned to their own activities, such as reading, puzzles, and games. They all seemed to be accustomed to the weightless environment. However, life that originated under gravity could not grow healthily without gravity. “How long has there been no gravity?”

“It's been six months since it started acting up.” Richard answered in a hushed voice, knowing that it was bad for their health. “Even so, I managed to get normal gravity by changing the position of the gravity coils and adjusting the output, but three days ago the system finally started spewing smoke, and since then the control panel has stopped responding no matter how many times I turn it on.”

“Three days, huh...?” Gruier looked around at the children's faces again.

“It would be better if they were in the city where gravity was working properly when they were awake, but if we don't stay with the children who don't know how to escape, they won't be able to escape if the welfare officers find them.”

“What kind of people are the welfare officers?” Gruier asked, remembering the two men who they ran away from as soon as they saw their shadow in Iron Scrap Alley.

After a moment's thought, Richard replied. “They're the city's cleaners. Their job is to clean up trash and other troublesome things, and they think of us as trash.”

“I see.” Gruier nodded, at least understanding how Richard felt about the welfare officers. “You tried to kidnap me to restore gravity.”

After looking away, Richard said apologetically. “Yes. According to Gappi, the gravity coils and the control circuit are broken, and they need to be replaced. You can find plenty of usable gravity coils in junkyards and back alleys, but the control parts are useless. Gappi has been repairing them and making them usable up until now, but she's been pushing them too hard, so she said he needs to get a set of usable parts from somewhere, even second-hand ones.”

“Artificial gravity control circuits?” Artificial gravity, along with inertial control, is a technology older than FTL speed. Artificial gravity and inertial control use almost the same principles and technology, so modern spacecraft usually have both. Artificial gravity is used to keep the environment inside the ship the same as on the ground to maintain the health of the crew and passengers, while inertial control is used for more efficient operation.

“I've been looking for it for a long time, but one per spaceship is enough, so there aren't that many. You can't find parts for artificial gravity control unless you look for spaceships that have been discarded or dismantled, and the Great Cosmic Witch is old, so I haven't found any parts with similar specifications yet. I could get all the parts I need by buying parts in town, but they're not cheap.”

“It's difficult, isn't it?” Gruier, who had never thought about how the artificial gravity of a spacecraft was generated, remembered the principles she had been taught. Since the artificial gravity and inertial control mechanism are old technologies, they are stable and there is almost no risk of them breaking down. However, if they do break down, major repairs will be required, equivalent to replacing the entire system.

“If, hypothetically, there was a new control circuit, would that bring gravity back?” Gruier asked. Richard nodded.

“Perfect. With the right control circuit, we can use artificial gravity again.”

“For how long?”

At the repeated questions, Richard looked at Gruier's face. “Um...”

Richard looked back with a troubled look on his face. Gappi, holding an old-fashioned datapad in one hand, answered as she passed by. “Probably half a year.” Gappi floated off to the living room.

“The gravity coils have long since reached the end of their lifespan, and replacing only the control circuit doesn't fix the deterioration of the coils over time. It would be a different story if we could replace them with a set of gravity coils that are uniform and aligned, but if we're using gravity coils with different manufacturers and specifications, just because the sizes match, then that's what's going to go wrong next.”

“But...” Richard shrugged as if that was the end of the explanation. Gruier looked around the hold that was being used as the living room. There were only children there, the oldest of whom was around Richard’s age.

“What kind of people are here?” Gruier asked, beginning to understand the situation.

“They got lost, got separated from their parents, abandoned, ran away, there are all kinds of reasons.” Richard shrugged again. “Gappi says she was left behind by her warship. They were in a losing battle and probably wouldn't make it back, so she was left behind in the last port.”

“Oh!”

“Miri and Keck were the only survivors of a spaceship that was sending out a distress signal near the port. Seito says he stowed away, and Notch’s spaceship was scrapped when it finally made it here.”

“How did you get here, Richard?”

“Me?” Richard pointed at his nose with a puzzled look on his face. “I escaped.”

“What?”

“I fled the refugee ship I was on because it looked like it was going to turn into a slave ship. It was a fast spaceship, but you need to be careful when the food is different for the crew and passengers.”

“A slave ship?” Gruier repeated darkly. “Are there spaceships that handle such things even here?”

“This is Pirate Island.” Richard looked at Gruier’s face again. “Even though the Pirate Guild has banned the slave trade, the underground from all over the galaxy gather here. There is no permanent slave market, but if you do it secretly on a ship that is in port, it is hard to get caught, and there are people who have no way out other than to board a slave ship.”

After thinking for a moment, Gruier quickly understood. “You are from an uncivilized planet that does not yet have the means to cross the stars, right?”

“Not only that. There are plenty of places you would want to escape from, such as pioneer planets or prison planets, no matter what the reason.” Richard flew gently into the hold. “If this were a normal station, they would be strict about managing people, but this place is a bit looser, so as long as you don't cause any trouble, you can get by.” Richard looked proudly around the hold, where some children were busy fiddling with datapads in the weightless environment, while others were busy dismantling machines. “There's plenty of work to do in the city and at the port, so if you're careful and do it well, it's not that hard.”

“Are there any adults here?” As if to confirm, Gruier looked around the hold.

“No.” Richard laughed. “Because, everyone would board a spaceship if they had the chance. This port isn't a bad place, but it's not a place to live forever.” Kicking the floor of the hold, Richard flew to the open door at the back. “No one will stay here forever. Once they learn new skills and become able to work, they will all leave. That's why this is a shelter.”

There is no age limit for spaceship crew members. If the spaceship is carrying an entire family, any child can take on a role as long as they can do the job.

“In the Skull Star’s ports, no one cares about the identity of the crew. As long as you can do the job, you'll have no problem finding a ship to board. Well, they won't let you board a spaceship unless you can at least use a computer or do some odd jobs, and that doesn't mean they'll just let you board any spaceship.”

In the passageway leading to the hold, junk parts, boxes of food, data boxes, and old containers were piled up. They were secured with belts and ropes to prevent them from drifting away in the weightless state, but the tattered books and boxes stuffed in between looked like they would collapse if gravity returned.

“I need a spaceship that can get me safely to my next destination, and if possible, one that I can feel safe on board. However, when it comes to the Skull Star’s ports, there are surprisingly few spaceships that fit the criteria for feeling safe.”

“I think so, too.” Gruier recalled the other spaceships she had seen in the skull's right eye, then tried to think about how the craft she was riding in was perceived by those around her. A lone electronic reconnaissance craft could not, no matter how you looked at it, be considered a proper spaceship.

“There are enough jobs in the city and the port to make a living, but everyone leaves. This is not a place to stay forever.”

After making his way through a corridor that would have been difficult to walk through if artificial gravity had been in effect, due to the amount of luggage packed into it, Richard reached an airtight door at the end of the corridor. He unlocked it by pressing the number pad next to the door.

The door opened automatically, though it seemed a bit stuck, as if the power source was barely working. Richard entered the room, where only a few dim lights were on, and turned on the lights with the wall switch.

The bridge of the antiquated spacecraft was illuminated by lights that seemed to be out more often than they were on. A few displays were lit, but the majority of the instrument panels and displays were out.

“Hold on a second.”

Richard disappeared between the instrument panels. Looking around the bridge, where most of the panels were dead, Gruier realized that the bridge was not in charge of the ship's functions. If energy was supplied from outside, there was no need to operate the main engine, and if the artificial gravity was controlled by each deck, there was no need to control it from the bridge.

Gruier flew into the bridge, which was the only place that was not used as a luggage storage area like the others. Several of the bridge's instrument panels had gaping holes, and many of the displays, switches, and levers were missing.

The access panels were left open, and makeshift covers were simply strapped on, making it unclear whether anyone intended to repair them or whether they had simply taken them for parts.

Richard was under a floor panel between two consoles in a corner of the bridge. The area underneath, lit by a number of old, faded lights, was a hotbed of modular electronic components. There were many empty mounting slots here too, likely because many of the components had been carried away.

“Ah, it's so tightly screwed on, I can't remove it with my bare hands. Sorry, get me that hydro spanner...[[1]](#footnote-1)”

Heard a voice from underneath the floor, Gruier looked around. There was a box that looked like a tool case on the floor. Opening the lid, it seemed to have been designed for use in zero gravity, and all the tools were fastened in place, although many were missing.

“Sorry, you don't know which one it is, give me the whole toolbox.”

“Is size 12 okay?”

As Richard emerged from under the floor, flashlight in hand, Gruier presented him with a worn-out size 12 hydro spanner, the type commonly used in ship wiring. Richard's eyes widened as he glanced back and forth between the spanner and Gruier's face. “You know?”

“It's just a guess.” Gruier replied, remembering her training voyage aboard the Odette II. “Are you repairing the electronics?”

Richard opened his eyes wide again. “Do you know what I’m doing?”

“Are you trying to fix the control system?” Gruier said, drawing on all her limited knowledge. “I think that's probably electronics, computers, or communication equipment. But even if you repair the communication system on this ship, it doesn't seem like there's much use for it, and you don't have plans to leave port, so I don't think there's any need to repair the navigation equipment.”

“We were using the monitor system for surveillance.” Hydro spanner in hand, Richard went back under the floor. “The main computer uses too much electricity, and we don't need that much processing power unless the ship is moving. If it's just the monitor system to check the status of the ship's interior and malfunctions, we can manage with just the subsystems, and we'll be fine with just the machines we have now.”

“Surveillance, you say?”

“It's not easy to get in, but the Great Cosmic Witch is inside the Skull Star. For security reasons, there are surveillance systems in the surrounding corridors, ventilation shafts, and other places you can get through.” Richard explained as he continued working under the floor. “The old port block where the Great Cosmic Witch is located is now an uncontrolled area, so there's no one there, but the station's monitoring system is still active. I don't know who's watching or where they are. So, when we pass through, we have to send out a signal that there's nothing abnormal, and although we're using a route that adults normally wouldn't take, we still want to have a minimum level of security.”

“What are you doing!?” Along with the voice, Gappi came in through the open bridge door. Seeing Gruier floating above the console, she flew straight over to the electronic navigation and communication system section.

“It's for repairs.” Richard half emerged from under the bridge floor, holding the spanner in his right hand and a removed circuit board in his left. “The image on the monitor camera has been black for a while now, and Gappi, you said it might be a problem with the image processing system. I picked up a chip that looked usable, so I thought I'd try replacing it.”

Gappi glanced at Gruier, then cast a suspicious look at Richard, then reached out and picked up the board that Richard had removed. “Let me see.” Checking the modules fitted into the board, Gappi reaches out to Richard, who is still lying half-lying under the floor. Richard takes out a small, dirty protective paper package from the pocket of his jacket, which was rolled up and tucked into the foot of the console. “Is it okay? Are there any traps or tracers?”

Anti-theft tags can also be placed in the memory area of ​​electronic components.

“If it's just radio waves or radiation, it's fine because we passed it through the port checker. The package is completely dirty, but the seal is still intact, so I think the contents are brand new.”

“You're trying to use it without even checking that it works.” Gappi let the board that Richard had removed float nearby, then tore open the protective paper wrapping she had taken from Richard's hand, revealing a brand new crystal cube.

Gappi tapped the scratched datapad to bring it back to life, then took a sensor out of her pocket and connected it. She carefully touched the small rod he pulled out to the connection on the crystal cube.

The check program ran automatically, displaying the part number and specifications on the datapad's display.

“What do you think? It's new, right?”

“If the display is misleading there's nothing I can do, but it seems to be usable for now.” Gappi brought the crystal cube, which she had separated from the sensor rod, in front of her and illuminated it on all four sides with the hand light she had snatched from Richard's left hand. There were no visible scratches or cloudiness.

Gappi brought the floating circuit board to her side and replaced one of the crystal cubes with the new one Richard had brought. The old cube that had been removed was completely blackened and sooty. “Okay, try putting it back.”

Richard took the circuit board and the light and went back under the floor with the hydro spanner in hand. Gappi began to skillfully put away the sensor connected to the data pad. Gruier picked up the sooty cube that had been left floating. “What should we do with this?”

“It’s trash.” Gappi answered without even looking at Gruier. “The crystal is so cloudy that even if I take it to a dealer it wouldn't be worth anything.”

“It’s hooked up.” Richard came out from under the floor. “I think it's okay.”

“Let's flip the switch.” With the datapad still in one hand, Gappi took her place at the console where the chair had been removed. “Have you put everything back where it should be?”

Richard looked at the open floor access panel. “I've put it back. I'll put the floor back when it's fixed properly.”

“Okay, I’m switching it on.” Gappi expertly flipped the mechanical switches on the old-fashioned controls one by one. Some of the displays on the electronics section control panel lit up and showed the startup screen.

After running a simple self-diagnostic program, the screen displayed the normal settings, while several displays flashed red and gave off warning messages.

“Huh, what?” Richard frantically looked around the dimly lit bridge. “Did I put in the wrong part?”

“The parts are correct. The repair was successful.” To prevent herself from floating up from the force of operating the panel, Gappi hooked one of her feet onto the lug used to secure the seat. “Our monitoring system just came back up, and all the accumulated warnings came up at once. Maybe it's a rat or something.”

Gappi calmly operated the panel and brought up the list of warnings on the display. He left checking the older warnings for later and rearranged them in order of newness.

Gappi frowned as she looked at the list that appeared on the old-fashioned flat-screen display. “Two of the sensors are dead.”

“Again?” Richard floated above Gappi and peered into the display. “They’re a simple all-in-one sensor with no moving parts. It would be one thing if the vibration or infrared were malfunctioning, but these two shouldn't be.”

“Where are they?”

“The farthest part of the shortcut behind us, and the side road on the port side, which is also far away.” Gappi turned on the sub-display. The high-precision display lit up after a long delay, and a simplified structural diagram of the Great Cosmic Witch was projected in 3D. Gappi slid her fingers across the control panel with practiced hands to reduce the 3D display centered on the Great Cosmic Witch. The 3D structure of the station, centered on the abandoned port block, was overlaid with complex lines. After a few more operations, Gappi displayed only the passageway, ventilation opening, and inspection hole centered on the port block on the sub-display. “The sensor information is no longer coming from here and here.” Pointing at the display, Gappi indicated two spots: a corner passage and an access shaft. “I don't know if the sensor is dead or the cable is broken.”

“Wired? Or wireless?” Richard asked. The security sensors placed around the Great Cosmic Witch are a mix of wired and wireless. Many recent parts are wireless to reduce the hassle of wiring.

“Both are wired.” Gappi selected only the information from the two sensors from the operational log and displayed it. Both of them were sending out data normally yesterday, but today there was no information, as if they had suddenly lost connection. “If they were broken, they would have sent impossible data before that, or it would have said something like this area is dangerous, but there's no such signal.”

“You have spares, right?” Richard turned over at the console. “Let's try replacing they. If it's just a bad connection, it might be fixed just by touching it, but if that doesn't fix it, the cable might be broken somewhere.”

“Wait a moment.” Gappi called up the operation status of the sensors on each route. It was a security system built by an amateur, with sensors placed at minimum locations such as intersections and corners to collect data. “The security of the port side street is connected wirelessly all the way here. The data there is...” Gappi called up the operation records of the sensors installed on the port side passage. There were four sensors in total, two of which were basic sensors that could detect vibrations and temperature changes, and the only high-precision sensor that could pick up images and changes in atmospheric composition was the one at the entrance to the port block, closest to the Great Cosmic Witch. “...No abnormalities.”

Putting yesterday's and today's data side by side, Gappi frowned even more. “Maybe I'm overthinking it.”

“Today's data is pretty quiet.”

Gruier honestly voiced the discomfort she felt. “In yesterday's data, there were still some vibrations and temperature changes, but today's data has remained the same?”

Gappi suddenly looked at the display's operation record again and began pounding on the control panel with great force. “They might have gotten in! Richard, get the kids ready to escape!”

“Huh, why?”

“Wired data can't be tampered with unless there's a direct connection, but data from a wireless sensor can be easily falsified. If this location has been discovered and it's been set up over time, someone will come!”

“S… Someone…?”

“Someone who knows we are here and thinks it's profitable to go to all this trouble to catch us! Do you think a welfare officer would come out to a place like this outside of the controlled area? They're selling children!” Gappi, who had been typing at an alarmingly fast tempo, tapped on the control panel. “No good, the communicator here can't tell if the data transmission has been hijacked or if it's just broken.”

Gappi jumped up from the console and arrived at the booth where the seat remained. “Richard, hurry up! I hope I'm mistaken, but if not we'll all be caught!”

“I understand!” Richard dashed off the bridge. Gappi flipped switches one by one in what appeared to be a radio operator's booth, but half of the control panel remained unlit.

“Ah, no! It's useless when it matters the most!” She repeatedly tried to turn the control panel back on. There was no response. Gappi rose from the seat and reached for the fastener that held the panel in place. Gruier pulled the transceiver from inside her jacket.

“You need a communication system?” She turned on the main switch and checked the display. The channel she had previously sent to Marika was still there, but Gruier erased it and showed the transceiver to Gappi. “Would this be helpful?”

“Eh?” Gappi, who was removing the panel, looked back and forth several times between the small but sturdy military transceiver and Gruier who was holding it. “It's not just a handheld device, isn't it the same series used by the Imperial Fleet?”

“Is that so?” Gruier looked at the transceiver in her hand. She only knew the basics of how to use it. “I borrowed it so I don't know much about it.”

“Let me see.” Gappi put the panel back, did a somersault, and received the transceiver from Gruier. Supporting it with her left hand, she ran her right hand over the touch panel. Calling up the common standard for data communication that had been set up, Gappi looked back at Gruier. “You don't look like a soldier, but who are you, using something like this?”

“An outsider…” After thinking for a moment, Gruier rephrased. “I'm from an old family that makes a living from trouble within the territory of the Galactic Empire.” She nodded as if that was the end of the explanation. After a moment, Gappi smiled at Gruier for the first time.

“Maybe you're working for your gang leader, although you don't look like it. I understand there's a reason, I'll borrow it.” With the transceiver in hand, Gappi looked around at the control panels around the radio operator's seat.

“What are you looking for?”

“Antenna wire.” Gappi pushed the communications booth seat back and slipped into the space at her feet. “This transceiver is much faster than the ancient communication system on the Great Cosmic Witch, but the antenna will be more sensitive if it's directly connected to the outside.”

Gruier peered over at Gappi as she began working in the small space.

“Ah, I wish there was more room, but does the antenna cable only extend this far?” Gappi pulled out a fiber cable from under the communication system and compared the connector she had removed from the board with the transceiver's external antenna connection jack. There's no way the standards would match. “Uh...” Lying on the floor of the bridge, Gappi looked around the open communication system. “…Is this okay?”

She picked one of the many cables that were directly attached to the board and connected to other blocks, and ripped it off with all her might. The insulation on both ends, completely worn down with age, came off easily just by pinching it with her fingertips. Gappi plugged the conductor cable into the connector on the external antenna and the transceiver jack.

“Are you sure that’s what you want to do?”

“It's not like we’re using any special signals. As long as the antenna is connected, it will transmit the necessary signals. It's better than nothing, um...” Gappi returned to her seat in the communications booth, still backed up, and looked closely at the transceiver's touch panel. “In this case, it might be quicker to look for suspicious communications in the vicinity”

Gappi ran her finger over the touch panel. She limited the scan to only short-range data and voice communications. A list of nearby communication frequencies appeared on the display. “We don't need radio wave sources moving at high speeds, just nearby sources are enough, because here there's a lot of radio waves coming in from outside.”

In no time at all, she set up the filters and selected only the necessary signals. Gruier watched Gappi's profile as she expertly performed operations she had never thought of on the transceiver. “You seem to have your own circumstances as well.”

“There's not a single child here who doesn't have a problem.” Gappi answered without looking up. “No normal kid would be thrown out onto pirate island. This is a port where only people with problems or ships with problems come.” Stopping her fingers, Gappi clicked her tongue.

“We're surrounded...” Gappi combined the four or so channels of voice communication she was receiving and output them to the speaker. Several overlapping, leisurely conversations came from the sturdy speaker. “How foolish of you to not even use code conversion when you’re trying to launch a surprise attack on the spaceship right in front of you.”

“Are they planning to attack from the port side?”

Gappi glanced at Gruier. “Can you hear them?”

“With this many people, I can manage.” Gruier responded while listening to the four channels of conversation coming from the transceiver. “There are about ten people in all, right?”

“Probably.” Gappi removed the antenna wire that had been temporarily connected and rose from the seat. “There's no need to join in. If you can escape, escape on your own.”

“I'm sorry.” Gruier clasped her hands together in amusement. “I'm not very good at using my body to escape or fight.”

Gappi laughed as she reviewed Gruier from her toes to her face. “I thought so. Can you call for help?” Gappi gestured to the transceiver in her hand. Gruier shook her head.

“It won't be helpful in this situation.”

“As for weapons...” Gappi looked at Gruier's entire body once more, then turned around and began to move. “...You don't have one.”

“That’s right.” Gruier chased after Gappi. “I think it's dangerous to carry around something you can't use properly. Do you have one?”

“There are a lot here.” Gappi exited the bridge and slid smoothly through the passageway. “I agree that it is dangerous to use unfamiliar weapons. If you are unarmed, you don't have to worry about being shot, but if you have a weapon, people will usually shoot at you even if you are a child.”

“Do our opponents have weapons?”

“Probably.” Gappi, leading Gruier, pushed stacked container boxes in the passageway and turned into the passageway leading to the hold. “If I were a human trafficker hunting children, I'd give everyone a gun. A low-power beam gun or a tranquilizer gun would be enough to silence a child.”

“I see... that's true.” Gruier thought for a moment and continued. “The easiest thing to do would be to just barge in and silence everyone, not kill them.”

“I know that. I wondered where you were from, but you're actually quite talented.”

“Thank you.”

There was a bit of a commotion in the hold. Gappi, who had thought that the commotion she had heard from the other end of the passage was people preparing to escape, called out as soon as she entered the hold. “I told you to prepare to run away, didn't you little brats listen?”

In the hold that was being used as the living room, there were firearms of all sizes floating, it seemed as if they had been brought there from somewhere. There were beam guns and rifles of all sizes and specifications, as well as what appeared to be grenade launchers and hand missiles.

“I told them to run away, but the kids…” Richard, who had quickly fitted a large energy pack into the assault rifle he had secured, turned to Gappi. “We have to protect our spaceship.”

“You think we'll win!? Besides that, you're going to bring something like this out and destroy the spaceship!? You might be forgiven for stealing energy or taking the air for free, but you can imagine what would happen if you were to fight inside the station!”

“Oh!” Gruier looked around at the unexpectedly abundant firearms floating in the hold. There were clearly more than the number of children. “So many of them!”

“Weapons are worth next to nothing in this port!” Gappi spat out. “Weapons that aren't guaranteed to work are sold by weight at junk shops. Guns are cheaper than food. We can't win against them, and we're not in a position to fight in the first place, so drop your weapons and prepare to run away!”

“No!” “We’ll fight!” “Let's all protect the Great Cosmic Witch!” Three boys shouted as they attached themselves to a large-caliber beam bazooka that could be used against armored targets.

“If we run away from here, we'll have nowhere to go back to.” “I'd be in trouble if I had nowhere to go back to.” Two girls who were looking for a beam gun that their small hands could hold looked up at Gappi.

“Life is more important than a home, and freedom comes second!” Gappi yelled at the children in a surprising voice. “You went through all the effort of escaping, and now you want to get caught again?”

“We won't get caught!” “We'll fight!” “We'll drive them away!” The three boys huddled together holding the beam bazooka spoke in unison.

“It's useless! We're dealing with bad adults who've been doing this kind of work since before you were even born, so fighting is out of the question! We don't even know if we can escape, so if we stay here, we're falling into their hands!”

“We'll drive them away!” “We'll protect our home!”

As Gappi took another deep breath, about to yell at the small children who had quickly become a chorus, Gruier quietly placed her hand on her shoulder. “May I?”

“Huh?”

Without waiting for Gappi's reply, Gruier proceeded into the hold. “"Listen. The people outside are not targeting the Great Cosmic Witch, but each and every one of you.” Even though she wasn't shouting, Gruier's voice carried to every corner of the hold. “The people outside are human traffickers. They're meticulous human traffickers, starting with the disabling the surveillance system around here. And their target is not this spaceship, but you.”

Gruier looked around the hold with a gentle smile on her face. “The people outside want to catch you and sell you off. So if you want to win, don't fight. Your victory is to avoid being caught by them. Are you still going to fight against the adults here?”

Gruier slowly turned her gaze to Gappi and Richard. “The enemy has been preparing for days. They are not going to slack off just because they are dealing with children. And they expect you to stay and fight. They don't want you all to escape, they want to capture you even if it takes time.”

Gruier looked around at the children in the hold once more. The three children had backed away from the bazooka and were all looking at Gruier. Gruier smiled. “It will be easier to win if you run away with Richard and Gappi.”

“Now, prepare to run away!” Gappi clapped her hands. “No volunteers who want to stay and sacrifice themselves! No, we're only going to run away now, and we'll come back to the Great Cosmic Witch later, so there's no need to pack. We'll use the shortcut below, and we'll leave the bums behind, so start moving!”

Gappi started moving first. The children who had gathered in the hold followed her in a frenzy.

“Thank goodness.”

After giving instructions to the children at the front of the group on the escape route, Gappi returned immediately. “I always have a hard time persuading those disobedient kids.”

“Will we make it in time?”

Gappi looked at the display on the transceiver she was holding. “It might be getting dangerous soon.”

“Where's the escape route?”

“Down below.” Gappi pointed in the direction that would have been the floor if artificial gravity had been in effect. “Richard, take the kids quickly! No firearms, big or small, allowed!”

“What are you going to do, Gappi?” Richard asked, touching his rifle reluctantly.

“Lock the doors!” With a brief reply, Gappi turned towards the airlock that served as the entrance.

“There are three entrances to the Great Cosmic Witch, including this one, and only the left and right airlocks are connected to the port block. The only boarding bridges that are usually used for entry and exit are the left and right boarding bridges, so they're probably trying to push in through there.”

“Shouldn't we close the other side, too?” Gappi called out to Gruier, who returned to the hold after checking. “Do you know how to close it?”

“Just closing it is easy.” Gruier turned to Gappi in mid-air and waved. She had experience aboard old-fashioned spaceships, such as the Bentenmaru and the Odette II.

The starboard airlock, which wasn't used as an entrance, was overflowing with stacked containers and boxes in a weightless state, making the gap even smaller. Gruier used her slender figure to slip through the luggage and somehow made it to the airlock opening and closing panel. She put a mechanical lock on the outer door, which was closed, and cut off the power.

Gappi returned after closing the inner door and turning the large handle to secure it. “I'm used to it.”

“You've turned off the main switch, but can it be opened from the outside?” Civilian spacecraft usually have hatches that can be opened from the outside in case of an emergency.

“Don't worry, I've disabled the mechanism to open it from the outside since I started living here. Follow me.” Making sure the inner door was locked, Gappi leapt to the floor of the hold and entered the narrow passageway through the lower door. “The only emergency exit that can be opened from the outside is the one below.”

The Great Cosmic Witch had landing gear with wheels so that it could travel in the atmosphere as well as land on the surface of planets that are not fully developed. The port block is basically operated in a weightless state, so the landing gear remains stored inside the hull, and many of them cannot be deployed depending on the position of the gantry arm that secures the hull.

The nose gear door, located in the center of the front of the lower hull, does not touch either the arm or the floor of the port block. Richard, who had descended to the landing gear storage compartment from the boarding and alighting door used when landing on the ground, opened the hatch, which was only large enough for one person to enter and exit.

Four rows of huge tires, completely worn, cracked, and hardened, occupied the landing gear storage compartment. Some of the inspection lights were flickering, illuminating the interior of the storage compartment, which was full of dirty white painted mechanical structures.

“Hold on, I'll open it now.”

Richard, who was in the corner of the joint of the outer sliding storage door, whose internal structure was only partially covered, unlocked the small hatch for human use that was closed. Perhaps the gasket had stuck due to aging or the mechanical parts were not working properly, but the hatch, which should have opened automatically, did not budge. He had no choice but to put both hands on the step on the wall and use the strength of his feet to push the hatch down.

“Hmmm!”

There was a whoosh, the sound of gasketing peeling away, and the passenger hatch rose outward.

“Shh!” At the unexpectedly loud sound, Gappi descended into the nose gear compartment with an index finger across her mouth so that no one would say anything. “I think it's okay because we're outside, but please be quiet. It's nice and quiet around here because there are no energy plants nearby, but it can be a problem at times like this.”

As if listening, an impact sound came from somewhere. Then, two or three times, a sound like something hard being slammed with force was heard somewhere inside the quiet ship.

“They're here.”

A child by the boarding gate looked up anxiously at the inside of the ship.

“It's okay.” Gappi got down next to Richard and looked around at the children gathered in the storage compartment. “The front door is locked, so they're just trying to force it open. We'll run away before they get in.”

Gappi pulled out a small, short telescope-like device from somewhere, a night vision scope detached from the head sensor of her work space suit. “Do you all remember the layout of the port where the Great Cosmic Witch is?”

More than half of the children nodded or raised their hands, but the rest looked at each other worriedly.

“It's pitch black outside. If you don't remember the layout of the port, grab someone who does and don't let go of them. And no lights allowed!”

A cry of protest went up.

“Quiet!” Gappi put her index finger over her mouth again to quiet the children. “If you turn on your lights in the dark, you'll stand out! Well, they're probably equipped with a lot of stuff too, so it might only be a temporary solution, but no lights until we say it's okay! Anyway, the inspection lights will be on when we enter the passage.”

Just when they thought they had stopped hearing the sounds of people hitting the spaceship from outside, they heard a destructive sound like metal pieces being crunched. The children started to get excited.

“Oh, I'll have to fix the door later.” Gappi said nonchalantly and then waved at Richard. “Open it, go ahead. I'll be the last one out. I'll turn off the lights.” Going to the corner of the space where the giant landing tires were stored, Gappi flipped a mechanical switch. All the lights in the storage area went out, and after a moment of darkness, a few small inspection lights came on.

Richard turned upside down, putting his foot on the step, and slowly opened the hatch, the mechanical parts of which had also become quite stiff.

The port block was shrouded in darkness. There were still some inspection lights on the walls and gantry arms, but the block, which was taken deep into the port area while still housing an ancient cargo-passenger ship, was almost completely dark. If it wasn’t for an emergency like this, no one would come out to the port block outside the ship, and there was no need to keep unnecessary places brightly lit.

Richard poked his head out and looked around at the bottom of the Great Cosmic Witch and the gantry arms supporting it. The floor of the harbor block was filled with junk parts, structural materials from other spaceships, and discarded containers.

“Want to use it?” From inside the ship, Gappi handed him the night vision scope. Richard looked around again through the narrow field of view of the night vision scope. Nothing suspicious was visible.

“It's okay.” Richard handed the small night vision scope back to Gappi and slid out of the ship. “They don’t seem to be holding down the outside. Come on, little ones, come out, quietly.”

The children, who had adapted to weightlessness, one by one left the bottom of the ship through the boarding hatch at their necks and legs. The harsh sound of metal being crunched that had echoed in the storage compartment suddenly disappeared.

“It's been opened.” Gappi muttered as she helped the children out of the ship like an assembly line.

“Don't worry, it should take just as long to break through the inside. Come on, please.”

After helping the last child, Gappi held out her hand to Gruier. “You probably don't know the structure of the outside. I think everyone else is gone by now, so follow me.”

“Yes.” Gruier left the ship through the hatch as instructed. She entered a space that was almost completely dark, with only scattered lights here and there. The air felt colder than inside the ship, and Gruier shivered. The children who had left earlier seemed to have already moved on, and were nowhere to be seen.

“This way.” Gappi slid out of the hatch, kicked an old cargo container that was lying on the floor, which flew to the side. She took out the transceiver and tossed it to Gruier. “I'll give it back to you. I probably won't need to use it anymore.”

“...Is that so?” Taking the floating transceiver, Gruier looked at the display. There was a lot more voice and data communication going on than before. Gruier realized, now that they were outside the ship, that the built-in antenna was sufficient for communication, and then she realized the true nature of the cold air she had felt. “It's a trap!”

“Eh?”

Gruier turned around to see Gappi flying ahead, and turned up the volume on the transceiver. “Until now, I could only hear four groups, but since we came outside, the number has increased. There are people on this side too!”

“*All right, all the kids are out.*” Gappi managed to discern the words from the overlapping voice communications. “*Turn on the lights.*”

The dock block had been shrouded in darkness, but suddenly all the lights came on. A violent light shone on the dark bottom of the ship, where only the emergency lights for inspection were on.

“*Okay, that's enough, kids.*” A distorted voice, amplified through poor quality speakers, echoed around the dock block. “*Don't resist, we won't do you any harm. We're going to give you a warm place to sleep and a home with hot food, and if you come out obediently, we'll give you a reward.*”

“Don't listen to him!” Gappi spoke in the pause in the earsplittingly loud calls. Gruier was thinking about what the most efficient way to capture the children would be if she were the attacker. Even with her eyes closed, she could feel the light coming through her eyelids.

“Sorry, can I borrow your transceiver again?” The transceiver was taken from Gruier's hand, whose eyes were still closed. Gruier opened her eyes slightly and saw Gappi, with her back to the light, looking at the transceiver display in the shadow she had made herself.

“If you're going to run, run towards the light.” Gruier approached Gappi and whispered.

“Why?”

“If it were me, I would cast a net in the direction of escape.”

“That's right.” Gappi looked around at the children, who were frozen in the powerful light. “Let's escape in different directions, even through gaps. Don't clump together, run towards the light.”

“Oh, I can make use that.” Richard, who had somehow come next to Gappi, scanned the wall. Gappi and Gruier followed his gaze. Between the containers and the frame of a truck, there was an emergency button on the wall of the port block.

“Emergency fire extinguishing system? Does it work?”

“Probably. That type is mechanical, so if the wire is still working…”

“But how?”

“By staying still.” Richard turned his back to the light and raised his hands. “Got it!” He shouted loudly. “I hope you really have hot meals!”

“*Wow, you're so obedient. I'll give you three servings as a special favor.*”

“Five servings!” Richard moved slowly while continuing the conversation. “What should I do?”

“*Hey, don't move carelessly.*” A voice over the loudspeaker spoke to Richard, who had risen from the floor of the dock, not knowing where he was being watched from. “*But, if you're floating, there's nothing you can do. Just head slowly towards the wall. My teammates are aiming at you, so there's no point in trying to run away. let's save each other a lot of trouble.*”

“I got it.” Richard spun around, kicked the bottom of the Great Cosmic Witch's hull, and flew sideways.

“*Hey, where are you going?*” The man's reaction was delayed, probably because Richard was speaking normally. Richard disappeared between the container and the frame of what was once a truck. “*Ah, damn it!*”

There was a ‘bang’ sound as something was hit. Richard smashed the protective cover apart and pressed the emergency extinguisher button.

The emergency fire-fighting system, which was in place to deal with an unexpected fire within the port block, uses chemicals in the event that there are living organisms in the pressurized environment that are unable to escape. The emergency button triggered the system, which was designed without electrical systems in order to ensure reliable operation.

“Huh?” Despite the button being pushed, there was no response.

“*What have you done? Come out where I can see you!*”

Richard looked around the panel where the emergency button was located to make sure he hadn't missed any other steps. He pressed the red button again with his palm and it seemed to push back slightly with a faint sound.

The pressure-activated detonator worked as if it had remembered its role for the first time in over 100 years since its manufacture. The capsule that was destroyed by the button being pressed in caused a chemical reaction, igniting the detonation cord embedded in the wall. The detonation cord, which is safer and faster than a fuse, instantly branches out and kicks the emergency fire extinguishers embedded in various parts of the port block, spraying the extinguishing agent at high pressure.

With an almost explosive sound, the pure white extinguishing agent was forcefully sprayed over the entire port block.

Not all of the emergency fire extinguishing systems installed in the port block were activated, but the light from the unnecessarily powerful lights that had been brought in to illuminate the hull of the Great Cosmic Witch were obscured by the enveloping white created by the spurting fire extinguishing agent.

“Now!” With a low yell from Gappi, the children scattered all at once.

“*Fire!*” At the same time as the speaker's voice, targeting lasers ran across the pure white port blocks, and the sounds of multiple firings overlapped. The electromagnetically accelerated solid anesthetic bullets missed their targets and made a metallic noise as they hit the bottom of the Great Cosmic Witch or an empty container.

“You, come here!” In the dense foam of the fire extinguishing agent, so thick that she couldn't even see her own hands, Gruier was suddenly pulled by the hand, being pulled at high speed through the weightless port blocks. To avoid hitting or being caught on anything, Gruier made herself as small as possible and let herself be pulled along.

Finally, after a big turn, Gruier was pulled into a narrow passageway.

“Are you okay?” Gappi asked, wiping the extinguisher foam from her forehead.

“Yes.” Gruier also tried touching the extinguishing agent on her face. The smooth extinguishing agent flaked off as she touched it.

“Thank goodness it was a fire extinguishing agent that doesn't harm precision machinery or the human body. It was an old item, so I couldn't complain no matter what happened.” After wiping her face, Gappi shook off the fire extinguisher from her hands and began to move towards the back of the dimly lit corridor, lit only by small lights here and there. “If you hesitate, you'll get caught. Follow me.”

Gruier looked at the entrance to the passageway, which was filled with white fire extinguishing agent. A loud voice roared from the speaker, and the sound of not only electromagnetic rifles but also energy beams being fired could be heard. Seeing that no one else had entered the passageway, Gruier followed Gappi. “What about the other children?”

“I told them to split up and run away.” Gappi moved smoothly through the passageway, with its exposed structural materials. “Nobody knows all the escape routes. Everyone knows their own way out.”

As she walked down the passage, Gruier brought the transceiver in front of her. She was still receiving multiple frequencies, and the stream of conversations was conveying that the traffickers had entered the port block, which was filled with fire extinguishing agent. “There are many paths, aren't there?”

“It's an unmanaged block that hasn't been abandoned, and it's inside a pressurized area, so as long as the gaps are connected, there are plenty of paths. This one was a passage, so it's better, but there are also paths that go through the gaps in the port block.”

After passing through several intersections that were difficult to squeeze through, gravity returned. Gruier climbed the steps built into the shaft and emerged into an old container.

Beyond the half-open door, a warehouse-like space lit by dark red lights spread out. Gappi, who had exited the container first, turned to face Gruier. “Do you know your way home?”

Following Gappi out of the container, Gruier looked around the junk-filled block that had apparently once been a factory. There was no one else in sight. “Is that the wisdom tooth downtown over there?” Gruier pointed in the direction, and Gappi nodded.

“You seem to be okay. Well, you're going to have to go home by yourself from here. I have to go and pick up the other kids.”

“Shall I lend it to you?” Gappi was about to return to the container through the half-open door when she looked at the transceiver that was handed to her and Gruier's face.

“Eh, but...”

“I can go home without this.” Gruier nodded to Gappi. “You need this more than I do now.”

“Well, I could use it for any number of things.” Gappi studied Gruier's expression but didn’t touch it. “But I might not be able to return it.”

“I have spares. When you no longer need it, please come and return it.”

“…That could be a problem.” After stammering, Gappi took the transceiver from Gruier’s hand. “In other words, I have to live long enough to return this sometime in the future.”

“Take care.” Smiling, Gruier bowed to Gappi. “Please give my best regards to Richard.”

“I'll let him know. I hope you’ll be safe, too.”

Suddenly realizing something, Gruier turned around.

“Hey, good job!” A man in black combat clothing and a sturdy helmet with information display goggles was standing on top of the crane on the other side, his assault-style beam rifle already pointed at the two of them. “You're the fifth to come out. I'll let you choose. Either listen to what I say or become the target of the beam right now. Choose whichever you prefer.” The man, who seemed to be accustomed to this kind of work, had his expression obscured by the angular information display goggles that covered most of his face.

“The mode is ‘paralyze’ but this is a military rifle that is meant to be used on adults. It might be too much for you girls, but if you want to try it on your own body, that's fine.”

Gappi glared at the man in black standing on top of the crane, took several deep breaths, and then spoke. “What happened to the previous three!?”

“They were bad kids who didn't listen and ran away.” The man replied, still pointing the gun at Gappi. “They're sleeping over there.” The man pointed his chin in the direction of downtown.

“You shot children!?” Gappi let out a shriek.

“That's right. Don't worry, they’re not dead. But the longer you make us wait, the longer it will take to treat them. What do you want to do? If you do as we say, we'll let you treat the sleeping children.”

“How did you know we were coming through here?”

“Ah, well, I told them.” A small figure appeared, trampling small parts everywhere.

“Old man Shaho!” Gappi shouted.

“Don't take it personally, I tried to stop them, but they kept telling me that they would destroy the store if I didn't tell them.”

“Why?”

“Well, I thought she could make it in time.” Old man Shaho pointed to the container Gappi and Gruier had come out of.

A blue shadow was standing there. A shadow with a thick, large gun barrel, longer than their height and held like a walking stick, appeared on top of a container where nothing had been there a moment ago.

“Bastards!”

Without warning, the man switched his rifle from paralysis mode to urban combat and fired at the blue shadow bathed in the dark red light. His aim was true, and the energy beam, strong enough to penetrate light armor, was absorbed into the blue shadow. Hair that looked strangely black and purple flew up.

“That won't work.” A low voice was heard. The blue shadow nonchalantly readied the huge guided barrel beam weapon they were holding. “Don't you realize that?”

While taking several more beams, the shadow calmly fired the beam weapon at the top of the crane. The energy beam, spreading from the muzzle, enveloped the man in the black combat suit and blew him away.

“Aaah…”

The blue shadow floated down from the container, holding a beam cannon that looked twice her height.

A black and white image of a person holding an object

Description automatically generated

“I said it would be nice to have something flashy, but was this all you had, grandpa Shaho?”

“It's a vehicle-mounted class 12 beam cannon, with the power reduced to the bare minimum and the focusing coil removed. It looks flashy, but the convergence is so low that it can blow away an opponent, but it can't penetrate the outer walls around here. What's more, with that energy pack, you can fire it as many times as you want.” Old man Shaho pointed to the mechanism at the base of the long guided barrel, which was roughly the size of a human's arms. It had an obligatory pistol grip, but it wasn't meant to be a handheld weapon. “If you plan to hand him over to the guild and become a bounty hunter, you probably don't need a weapon powerful enough to shatter targets, right? The Gaines family spends a lot of money on their equipment, so their firearms and combat gear will be worthless if they get destroyed.”

“Big sis!” Gappi cried out happily and hugged the blue shadow. “Big sis, human traffickers, child hunters, the Great Cosmic Witch.” The rest could not be heard.

“There, there. You did a great job.” A woman with strangely colored hair carrying a giant beam cannon at her side looked up at Gruier. “You're a newbie, aren't you?”

“There’s a small connection.” Lightly pulling her right leg back, Gruier nodded. “I’m Gruier.”

“Noel.” The tall, slender young woman patted Gappi on the head. “Okay, then, big sister has to get rid of the bad guys and go rescue the other kids. Go ahead and treat the three kids the guy caught earlier.”

“Got it.” Gappi sniffled and left Noel.

“I think it's going to get a little noisy.” Noel raised one hand as if to say greet Gruier. “If you have somewhere to go, this is farewell. Maybe we’ll meet again somewhere.”

“Big sis!” Gappi caught Noel's black cloak as she was about to leave. After a quick glance at Gruier, she handed her the transceiver she was holding. “You can listen to their conversations and check their data usage. Do you want to use it?”

“Where did you get that from?” Holding her huge beam cannon at her side, Noel received the military transceiver in her left hand and operated the display with just her thumb.

“Ah, um...”

“I lent it to her.” Gruier stepped forward. Reflecting Gruier in her purplish blue eyes, the same color as her hair, Noel smiled.

“That would be great. I'll borrow it.” Holding the beam cannon, which was longer than she was tall, Noel disappeared into the container.

“Who is she?”

“Big sis Noel.” Gappi answered between sobs as she rubbed her face, which had become a mess thanks to her tear ducts having burst open. “Not many people who leave the Great Cosmic Witch come back, but big sis Noel comes back every now and then.”

“Her job is to capture and deliver people with bounties placed on them by the pirate guild and star systems.” Old man Shaho hobbled along, looking down at the crane where the black combat suit had been blown away. “A bounty hunter. The purple-blue haired witch is quite famous in this area, but I don't think many people have heard of her in the Empire.”

“I apologize for my ignorance.” After thinking for a moment, Gruier continued. “Are you a bounty hunter by profession?”

“Yes. The Pirate Guild handles wanted arrests and bounty payments throughout the frontier, so it gives me an excuse to come back to the port for the handover. If the Gaines family had run their business steadily and not bothered the Purple Witch, they could have lasted a little longer.” Old man Shaho walked towards the crane where the black combat suit had fallen. “Human trafficking is illegal in the Pirate Guild. If they'd done it secretly that would have been one thing, but if they did this to Noel, they wouldn't get away with it. I'll take his equipment before I hand him over.”

Old man Shaho pointed towards downtown. “The three who were caught earlier are locked in the D4 container. I brought a first aid kit, so please treat them.”

“Oh, thanks, grandpa Shaho.”

“No need to thank me.” Stepping through the junk scattered at the base of the crane, grandpa Shaho waved his hands behind him. “If Noel had come back a little later, I would never have met you guys again.”

There was a sound like an explosion somewhere in the distance, and a gust of dust and dust blew out from the half-open container.

“It's started.” Old man Shaho turned around and shrugged his shoulders reluctantly. “The Gaines family were loyal, paying customers until today.”

“Whoaaaaa!” With a strange shout, Richard jumped out of the container, holding one child in each arm.

“Welcome.” Gappi, whose usual calm expression had returned, called out to Richard, who had lowered the two children to the ground, panting.

“Ah, Gappi, are you safe? And Gruier too?”

Gruier laughed at the additional comment. “So Noel is the older sister you were talking about.”

“That's right.” Richard replied, looking a little embarrassed. “I shouldn't have thought about kidnapping you when she was coming home. I would have been blown away.”

“I'm glad you didn't get blown away.” Gruier took out her favorite pocket watch from her uniform pocket and checked the current time. The Silent Whisper's scheduled departure time was approaching. “How long does it take to reach the right eye port from here?”

“If you're in a hurry, you can get there quickly by using the outside bus. There's still some time until the pirate island’s next jump, so it's quicker to go to the port and take the outside bus than to go through the middle.”

“The three who came here first were ambushed and shot.” Gappi summed up the current situation briefly. “I need to treat them, but it's okay if I do it alone. Please take her home.”

“Thank you.” Gruier turned to Gappi. “Regarding the artificial gravity on the Great Cosmic Witch, does the control system have to be from a spaceship?”

“What do you mean?” Gappi asked back. Gruier continued.

“It seems like there are a lot of unmanaged blocks around here, but if they were once part of the station, wouldn't each block have its own artificial gravity system?”

"Ah," Gappi said, her mouth wide open.

“The scale is different for a station and for a spaceship like the Great Cosmic Witch, but the control system is the same. The gravity system in the unmanaged area is probably integrated with the block, but it's not that difficult to peel off the floorboards and pull out the coils and control system. Of course the control system won't fit the Great Cosmic Witch, but it won't require the same fine adjustments as when flying, so it should be fine...”

After muttering rapidly to herself, Gappi suddenly broke into a smile. “Thanks, that should do it!”

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” It was fifteen minutes before the scheduled departure time when Gruier returned to the parking deck of the Silent Whisper. Gruier flew through the harbor, not from the pier, and landed on the parking deck.

“You're late!” Marika, who had been doing preflight checks around the Silent Whisper with its side hatch open, called out to Gruier, who had finally returned. “I was just discussing with Coorie about whether we should call an extension, you know?”

“I'm sorry for worrying you.” Gruier bowed to Marika.

“Where have you been?”

“The Drifting Museum. Old museums often have portraits that resemble your mother or grandmother.”

Marika looked at Gruiers's face again and smiled. “Did you find them?”

“Yes.” Gruier smiled back and looked around the parking deck. “Are we leaving soon?”

“Not yet.”

Coorie emerged from the port hatch. “Our client from the intelligence department just contacted me. He said he'd finished his final errand in the right eye port and was on his way here.”

“The luggage has been delivered.” Marika pointed to the interior of the Silent Whisper, where the side hatch was open. “What in the world were you doing going all the way to the lower jaw port?”

“My friend was showing me around downtown.” Gruier answered with a mischievous smile, and Marika patted her on the back.

“Sounds like you had fun.”

‘Yes. But there is one thing I need to tell you.”

Marika frowned at Gruier's serious expression. “What's that?”

“I left the transceiver I borrowed. Would it be okay if I bought an equivalent item to return it?”

“What?” Marika laughed with a carefree look on her face. “I'm glad you were able to return safely over just one transceiver. It's okay, it's just equipment, and there should still be a few left.”

With the sound of a quiet jet, an airbike flying in the weightless harbor of the right eye suddenly approached the parking deck of the Silent Whisper. Before the airbike, operated by a female rider, could fully decelerate, Nash jumped out of the back seat where they were riding together. He landed with a fair amount of momentum, smoothly losing momentum, and waved to the airbike as it made a sharp turn. In response, the airbike shook its body lightly and accelerated rapidly as it left the sky above the Silent Whisper.

“You're slow!”

Nash turned to Marika and Gruier, but before he could open his mouth, Coorie appeared again from the side hatch. “What were you doing?!”

“A military company battleship was docked in the next eye, and I wanted to check the pirate guild's communication network.” Nash saluted Coorie, Marika and Gruier. “This completes my entire mission. It was a lot of work.”

“Get on board quickly!” Coorie snorted and retreated into the ship. “The scheduled departure time hasn't been changed. If we don't leave the parking deck on time, they'll automatically charge us an overage fee.”

“Did we forget anything?”

As Marika asked, Gruier looked up at the port in the skull's right eye, where numerous ferry boats and barges were flying around. “Yeah, probably.”

“Well, let's go.”

“Sorry, but can we change our destination a bit?” Nash said after waiting for Marika to take the captain's seat and Coorie to take the operator's seat. “When we get back to Imperial territory, can you stop by the fleet base at Seruna?”

Coorie, while proceeding with the launch sequence, said “it will be an additional charge.”

“It's a necessary expense. I'll pay it.”

“Also, no trouble. I don't have time to deal with their questioning a bunch of privateer licensed pirates returning from Skull Star.”

“I know.” Fastening his safety belt in the auxiliary seat in the cockpit, Nash raised both hands. “If we go near the fleet base, we'll be picked up by any passing cruisers. I have to get this report to my superiors, so I'll be careful about that.”

“I wonder how much we can trust you.” Coorie in the operator's seat stopped operating the controls. “Preparation for takeoff complete.”

“Launch permission confirmed.” Looking at the display, Marika in the captain's seat confirmed the takeoff permission that had automatically been sent from port control.

“Silent Whisper, taking off.” The restraints on the parking deck were released, and the Silent Whisper floated up from the parking deck in the right eye port.

A black rectangular object with white text

Description automatically generated

“SOS – a distress signal?” Marika returned to the bridge of the Bentenmaru, putting on her captain's uniform.

“Another one.” Hyakume, in the radar/sensor seat, answered. “First it was a FTL signal, now I’m receiving it as a normal signal. Hugh & Dolittle's high-speed passenger ship, the Shenandoah, is on our radar.”

Having left Hakuoh Girls' Academy early after only having morning classes, the Bentenmaru was on its way back to the Sea of the Morningstar relay station after its usual business activity of pirating the luxury cruise ship Princess Apricot. After finishing her pirate business in her usual flashy captain's uniform, Marika retired to the captain's room, leaving the return to Sea of the Morningstar to the crew. Marika had been a perfect attendance star in middle school, but since entering high school and becoming the captain of the pirate ship Bentenmaru, she has been absent more often due to work. The only way to make up for the missing attendance hours is to write reports, but lately those have been piling up.

Marika, who was struggling with a substantial physics exercise in the captain's cabin, was called to the bridge where a distress signal had been received.

In space, it is an unwritten rule that when a distress signal is received, the nearest spacecraft will come to the rescue. And when the distress signal from the Shenandoah was received, which was sent simultaneously via normal communication and FTL communication, the Bentenmaru was the closest ship.

The Bentenmaru, which was headed to the relay station, quickly turned around and headed to the Shenandoah's rescue. Marika returned to the bridge. “So, do you have the details of the situation?”

“We haven't been able to get through to the Shenandoah yet.” Hyakume passed the current data that could be confirmed to the captain's seat. The current status of the Shenandoah was displayed on the screen.

“...Nothing abnormal?”

“It may be because we're still far away, but their attitude, speed, and orbit are all normal, and there are no abnormalities in the transponder. From what I can see, it doesn't look like a situation that requires them to send out an SOS and ask for rescue.”

Marika tilted her head. “Then why are they sending out another distress signal?”

“I'm trying to call them to ask about it, but I can't get through at all.” Coorie, in the electronic warfare seat to the left of the captain's seat said, sending a standard message. “There are signs of reception, so I don't think there's anything wrong with their communication system, but there's no response. There is an automatic response to confirm reception, but they're not replying.”

“Hmm.” Marika checked the specifications of the Shenandoah in the data that Hyakume had passed around. It was not a luxury liner for the wealthy, like the ones the Bentenmaru usually pirates for business purposes, but a high-speed passenger ship that traveled the shortest route. It was much larger than the Bentenmaru. “I'd appreciate if it didn't turn into a nasty situation.” Marika looked up. “What about the star system military?”

“Three escort ships are on their way. But we'll be able to make contact with the Shenandoah quicker.”

Rescue operations are the military's most important mission.

“The military wants us to contact the Shenandoah first and assess the situation.”

“We said yes, of course.”

“Yes. We'll be used as a scout, but if it's really a serious situation, the Bentenmaru alone won't be able to do anything.”

The Bentenmaru approaches the Shenandoah at a considerable speed. As the distance decreases, the information obtained by the Bentenmaru's radar and sensors increases dramatically, but there is still no response. And as far as the Bentenmaru could see, the Shenandoah was sailing normally.

“How should we prepare?” Misa appeared on the bridge in a white lab coat. “Do you think they'll need a doctor?”

‘The situation is still unclear.” Hyakume answered while gathering information. “When hit by such powerful radar, unless the crew is really stupid, they'll have some kind of reaction, but there's been no response at all.”

“That's strange.” Coorie continued to call out not only on the emergency frequency but also through all the other means of communication. “Even though we’re so close and calling out to them, there’s no response. I wonder if all the operating staff had collapsed?”

“Eh?” Marika checked the Shenandoah's specifications on the display. As it's a high-speed passenger ship that prioritizes cost, there aren't many crew members, but there should still be several dozen crew members on board. Including the cabin attendants, cooks, and mechanics who look after the passengers, the crew numbered over a hundred, and there were currently over a thousand passengers on board. “You mean there's no one on board the spaceship?”

“That's not true.” Hyakume switched sensors. “The environment inside the Shenandoah is normal, and we're getting vital signs that correspond to the number of people on board and the livestock it's carrying. It's not like some drifting ship or an ancient ghost ship where the entire crew is missing but the ship is fine.”

“That's weird.” Marika tilted her head further, trying to think of a situation that would fit the situation before her. “The distress signal is still going out, right?”

“It hasn't stopped.” Coorie replied. “I'm sending both regular and FTL messages, but there's no reply.”

“Uh...” Marika tried to think of a way to contact the spaceship while it was moving. “...I wonder if we can get through to the public phone on the Shenandoah?”

“What?” Hyakume turned around with a strange look on his face.

“So, even if you can't get through to a person on the bridge, a cruise ship of that size should have public phones and internet lines. Could you try and see if the public phone works?”

“I'm doing it now.” Coorie finds the Shenandoah's unique public phone numbers in its database and begins calling random numbers. Since they are already in the inner planetary system of the Taurus star system, the FTL communication network is active.

“It’s busy.” After answering briefly, Coorie immediately tried the next number. “And this one, and another one.” After trying three different lines in a row, Coorie, in the electronic warfare seat, looked over her shoulder at Marika in the captain's seat. “Shall I continue?”

“That's enough. No response, all the phones are busy, so doesn't that mean that all communications lines of the Shenandoah have been taken over?”

“I see.” Hyakume switched between several sensors. “Even if it's a civilian ship, it's no mean feat to take over all the communication lines of a spaceship of that size, from short-range to long-range, from information lines to FTL lines. If someone was intentionally trying to kill communications, I don't think they would miss a distress signal, even though it's a separate system.”

“In other words, the Shenandoah is sailing normally, but for some reason is unable to communicate, which is why it is sending out the SOS?” Kane, in the helmsman’s seat, said as they approached the Shenandoah.

“Is it possible for all of the communication systems to become unusable, even though they are sending out SOS at both normal and FTL speeds?”

“It is highly unlikely.” Schnitzer answered from the combat commander's seat. “But anything can happen in space.”

“Um, so if someone somewhere tried to do something like this, is it possible?”

“It's not easy, but it’s possible.” “It's not impossible.”

Schnitzer and Coorie answered almost simultaneously. Marika tried asking the question from a different angle. “If this is what someone, somewhere did, why would they do it?”

“If you send an SOS in space, nearby spaceships will rush to your aid.” Schnitzer spoke of the obvious response. “If there is no need to send an SOS from the spaceship, it would be possible to explain that there are no abnormalities in the communication even if the distress signal cannot be stopped. However, this is not possible if the means of communication are blocked.”

“If that happens, communication will be impossible, and other spaceships will naturally gather around.” Marika tilted her head further. “…for what?”

There was a short silence on the bridge. Kane spoke up. “If they were in a remote area with no shipping route, it would be different, but if they are doing something like that in a star system, especially in the inner planetary system, the military will definitely show up. If someone is doing something bad, I can't think of any reason to go out of their way to summon the military.”

Kane began the Bentenmaru's deceleration sequence. To prioritize time, he turned the ship 180 degrees and began using the main propulsion system for reverse thrust in the direction of travel. The Shenandoah was maintaining an interplanetary speed toward the Sea of the Morningstar relay station, so it would take some effort to match their relative speeds.

“Does the Shenandoah have radar or something?” Marika asked to confirm. They also had to consider the possibility that another spaceship was disguising itself as the Shenandoah.

“Only low-power civilian radar.” Hyakume replied. “It's also in normal navigation mode, and hasn't changed since we started observing. The pattern matches the Electro Galactica-made Mighty Watcher that's on the Shenandoah, as listed in the catalog. There's nothing strange about its appearance or navigation pattern. That makes it even more strange that it's only sending out an SOS.”

“The Shenandoah has windows, right?” Marika called up the exterior data of the Shenandoah on the display in the captain's seat. For safety reasons, it's not uncommon to see spaceships that don't have windows that allow you to look directly outside, even if they're not warships.

The Shenandoah, which had been in service for nearly ten years and was still relatively new as a passenger spacecraft, had a bridge with a viewing window at the front of its cigar-shaped hull.

“I think it's best not to make any contact until we can confirm what's going on with the Shenandoah.”

“But it’s the duty of any spaceship that receives a distress signal to rush to the scene and help immediately.” Kane immediately responded to Marika.

“We need to understand the current situation in order to rescue them, right?” Marika answered smoothly. “Can you get a picture of the bridge of the Shenandoah using a telephoto lens?”

“It's still a bit far away, the angle is bad.”

The Bentenmaru is on a trajectory that will bring it close to the Shenandoah from the side. The Bentenmaru, which is now slowing down after their emergency acceleration, is still much faster than the Shenandoah, which is at interplanetary speed.

“Here’s what it currently looks like.” Hyakume projected an image of the Shenandoah captured with an optical telephoto lens onto the bridge’s main screen. The spindle-shaped hull of a civilian high-speed passenger liner, free of optical camouflage or electronic jamming, was projected from almost the side. The white hull had a large engine compartment typical of a high-speed ship, and the clean, streamlined lines even revealed the star mark that adorned the wings of the Hugh & Dolittle Interstellar Transport Passenger Division.

“They know we're here, right?”

“If they were doing normal flight operations, they would have noticed by now and called us.” Hyakume said. “After all, we're moving much faster than them, and on a perfect collision trajectory. What's more, we're hitting them with our radars so loudly, there's no way they didn't see us.”

“But there's no response?” Marika looked at Coorie, who answered with her back to the captain's seat.

“No response. The SOS transmission is still going strong.”

“Do you think they'll notice a light signal?”

There are many means of communication a spaceship. Light signals, which communicate by flashing light rather than radio waves, are an old means of communication that have been used since before wireless communication was put to practical use and before space travel began. The control and reading of light signals is all done manually rather than electronically, so they are less susceptible to interference.

“It might be worth a try.”

“I’ll do it.” Hyakume rearranged some of the controls around him. “If the Shenandoah responds by blinking somewhere, we'll notice it sooner if we're watching.”

The retractable searchlights on the left and right sides of the Bentenmaru's bow were raised by the controls that were routed to the radar/sensor seat. The lights, which are only used when entering a station, were turned on at full brightness.

“Also, if the Shenandoah's communication system has been hijacked, is there any way we can help them?”

“That's our job.” Coorie began to work busily with her hands. “I've been checking the communications around the Shenandoah for a while now, and at least from the outside, it doesn't look like we're under electronic attack from anywhere. So if this is a deliberate attack by someone, it's probably from inside, and if that's the case...”

“Let's try to forcefully intervene in the Shenandoah's normal communications.” Schnitzer started to move. “It's the kind of action that would be classified as an electronic attack, and if they're sending out a distress signal, it's an emergency.”

“We should report this to the military.” Marika looked around the bridge. “That's probably the captain's job.”

Marika began to operate the communications panel in the captain's seat. She checked the Bentenmaru's most recent communications records to find the ID code of the star system military escort ship that was heading to rescue the Shenandoah, and called it.

Although it took some time to explain the unusual situation in which no other abnormalities were found on the spaceship sending out the SOS and yet no communication was being established, the star system military accepted the Bentenmaru's plan to forcibly intervene in the Shenandoah's communication system as part of the rescue operation.

While Captain Marika briefed the star system military, Schnitzer began forcibly intercepting the Shenandoah's communications links.

Spaceships are equipped with several communication systems. In an emergency, some of these systems can be activated by external forcible intervention even if they are switched off.

Schnitzer targeted several communication systems from the publicly available catalog data of the Shenandoah and began forcible intervention. Communication systems that were operating normally would reply with a confirmation of receipt. From that point on, even when he tried to force the communication systems to receive under our control using standard commands and calling out to them, there was no response. The bridge communication system should have been showing messages on the display and playing our voice over the speaker, but there was still no response.

“How's it going? Have you been able to contact the Shenandoah?”

“No.” Schnitzer shook his head while calling with the various communication systems they were equipped with. “There was no response, or rather, no reaction. It felt as though my calls and attempts were received somewhere and then discarded into the void.”

“That's strange.” Marika looked at the optical image of the approaching Shenandoah. The Shenandoah was in flight with its navigation lights on as required by law, and there was nothing strange about the lights on the port side observation dome and the cabin windows. “Try to get as close up a view as you can of the observation dome.”

“Okay.” Following Marika's instructions, Hyakume zoomed in on the observation dome on the side of the Shenandoah, which he had captured with his optical telephoto lens. Even though they were in the inner planetary system, their home planet, Tau, was still far away, and the observation dome only had a weak anti-glare polarizing shield, so the interior could be seen.

In the observation dome, which serves as the ship's public space, many people could be seen standing and walking around. The stores in the back also appeared to be open for business as usual.

“I thought it might turn out that all the passengers were asleep because of an infectious disease or chemical weapon, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.” Kane said, as he kept the Bentenmaru stationary while they acquired optical images.

“Turn towards the bow.” The Bentenmaru started circling the ship.

“As requested. No response from the Shenandoah to the light signals?”

“No.” Hyakume answered. “I thought they might manually flash one of their navigation lights or some other message, but there's been no sign of that so far. I wonder what's going on.”

“We’ve got a response.” Schnitzer locked the comm channel. “Bentenmaru to Shenandoah, this is the Bentenmaru. We have received Shenandoah's distress signal and are currently on our way.”

“*Shenandoah to Bentenmaru, this is the Shenandoah, thanks for the rescue.*”

After verifying that the data sent along with the voice was legitimate, Schnitzer responded. “Response confirmed. Communications are good. Please report your situation.”

“*Armed assailants are on board.*” The Shenandoah's radio operator reported in a calm voice. “*There is currently no impact on navigation, but the security personnel aboard the Shenandoah are no match for them. Please send in the marines.*”

“This is Bentenmaru, I understand the situation. Please send me more detailed information.”

While replying, Schnitzer quickly compiled a list of forces currently available to be dispatched from the Bentenmaru and sent it to the captain. Marika confirmed that this was a refined version of the pirate boarding team that had been dispatched earlier, but for actual combat, and announced to all crew members that they were on standby. “This is the bridge, Captain Marika. We've been able to contact the Shenandoah. It seems that an armed assailant is causing trouble on board the ship, so please prepare the forces listed by Schnitzer to board the Shenandoah.”

“Is this why communications were down from Bentenmaru to the Shenandoah?”

Schnitzer instantly read the preliminary report that had been sent from the Shenandoah at the same time as the voice communication via the direct data line and asked for confirmation. “Your report says that the armed assailants had taken control of and disabled some of the Shenandoah's electronic systems, including its communications lines.”

“*That's right. It took until now to restore the communication lines.*” The Shenandoah's radio operator replied. “*We've opened the docking mechanism on the port side. The Shenandoah is not currently in a position to perform detailed maneuvers, so we'll leave the docking to you. Please have you forces board the ship as soon as possible and apprehend the armed criminals.*”

“Understood. Please keep me posted on the situation.”

“Considering the armed criminals causing trouble, they're flying slowly.” Hyakume observes the finer details of the Shenandoah optically, which becomes even more detailed as they approach.

“The radio operator of the Shenandoah requested our forces to be deployed without confirming that we are a pirate ship.” Schnitzer simply stated the facts.

“The name of the Bentenmaru and the fact that we are a pirate ship is in our communication data, right?” Marika checked the data sent along with the voice communication from the Shenandoah. It seemed that the gunmen had somehow disabled the Shenandoah's communication system, then attacked the safe room used for transporting valuables, engaged in a battle with the security forces aboard, inflicting heavy damage, and then moved around the ship. “Hugh & Dolittle Interstellar Transport is the family business of Jenny, the former head of the yacht club, so surely they know the Bentenmaru’s name?”

“Docking system access has arrived from the Shenandoah.” Schnitzer reported. “We can dock at any time with control from our side.”

“Do we have any data on the armed criminals?”

“All we have is a rough summary of the security forces' reports.” Schnitzer reported, who read it instantly via the direct connection. “Three to five men, armed with the maximum firepower available for personal use, unknown identity, fleeing the ship after stealing precious metals and valuable cargo from the vault.”

“If they're carrying things they don't want to be caught with, they should at least check passengers' luggage more thoroughly.” Marika watched the video of the Shenandoah in flight captured by Hyakume. It looked like it was cruising normally. There was no sense of tension from the image that something abnormal was happening inside. “Should we leave it to the military?”

“It will be a while until the military arrives.” Schnitzer said. “I have forwarded the report I received to the military, so they will be able to organize their forces and prepare to board.”

“If we were to put our forces aboard the Shenandoah, I would of course ask Schnitzer to take command of it, but what are the expected developments in that case?”

“We will cooperate with the Shenandoah's security department to neutralize the armed criminals.” The obvious answer came back. “This report does not allow for any tactical decision beyond our policy. The other side is probably confused, but there is too little information on the gunmen.”

Marika confirmed the planned time of contact and trajectory of the Bentenmaru and the Shenandoah. “Let's check the bridge at the bow first before docking.” Marika decided to do this minimum detour. “There's only one line currently connected to the Shenandoah. I don't think it's too much to check the bridge situation before docking.”

“Roger.” Kane replied, choosing a trajectory that would allow them to circle around in front of the Shenandoah and then rendezvous, rather than the shortest possible contact trajectory. “We'll check the bridge of the Shenandoah before docking.”

The Bentenmaru began rapid deceleration, changing its closest point of approach from the side of the Shenandoah to being in front of it.

“Signal confirmed!”

“Eh?” Marika responded to Hyakugan's sharp report in a goofy voice.

“A signal is being sent from the bridge window, probably using a flashlight. It’s human-powered Morse code.”

“Morse code?!” It took Marika a while to recall from the depths of her memory the principles of ancient communication that she had only learned in classroom lessons in the yacht club. “You mean that primitive human-powered digital communication that sends signals by varying the intervals between flashes?”

“That’s Morse code.” Hyakume zoomed in on the flashing light in the window of the Shenandoah's bow bridge. “At this distance, they should be able to tell the shape of our ship. Taking into account the direction of the light, this blinking is clearly being sent towards the Bentenmaru.”

The Shenandoah has a bridge with windows that allow for visual navigation.

“Can you decipher it?”

“This ship is currently out of communication.” Schnitzer instantly deciphered the repeating flashing pattern on the display screen. “That’s what it keeps repeating.”

“Out of communication... then what about that previous communication?” Marika looked at the communications panel. The communications line with the Shenandoah was still up and running.

“Do you want me to check it out?

“Wait.” After instructing Schnitzer, Marika immediately gave her next instructions. “Um, can you respond to Morse code?”

“Well, the searchlight is still on, so we can use that to reply.” Hyakume replied. “No, if we use our searchlight, the response will be visible not only to the bridge but also to other places. Can we send Morse code using light, erm, using a light signal, from the bridge so that it can only be seen by the place we are sending it?”

“We can precisely aim the beam cannon and use it in pulse mode.” Schnitzer replied. “There's no need to use the main guns. At this distance, we can accurately aim it at just one of the windows on the bridge.”

“They just need to be able to see the light over there, so don't accidentally shoot through them.” Marika laughed. “I'll leave it to you. Um, can you confirm receipt and explain the situation?”

“That's easy.” Schnitzer activates a small Class 12 beam cannon mounted on the bow of the Bentenmaru, changes the mode to visible light optical communication instead of firing, and aims it at the bridge of the Shenandoah. “Kane, please keep the ship still for a while.”

“Okay, got it.”

Kane halted the Bentenmaru's progress, reducing its relative speed to the Shenandoah to zero. Schnitzer connected the nerve cords on his fingertips directly to the bow beam cannon and began optical communication.

The ship is currently unable to communicate, and a repeating light was sent to the target to confirm receipt. Before the short message was repeated twice, the blinking pattern on the bridge side changed.

“Connected.” Schnitzer reported as he received the light signal from the Shenandoah. It seems that the Shenandoah also has equipment that can transmit light signals at high speed, or a specialist who can transmit and receive them. Schnitzer switched to automatic decoding of the light signal, which appears to be a continuous light to the naked eye, using his sensor eye. “Light Morse code, moving to high speed. The Shenandoah is currently cut off from all communication. The bridge is also blocked, so no access is possible.”

“What is it?” Marika did her best to reply in a voice that contained her surprise. “It's almost like it's been taken over, isn't it?”

“The cause is unknown, and no communication between the bridge and the ship, so the situation inside the ship is unknown on the bridge.”

The advantage of light signals is that you can continue to send your own signal even while the other party is transmitting. In response to the Bentenmaru's question, the light signals from the Shenandoah's bridge conveyed information at a speed not much different from voice communication.

“Check how much the bridge knows about the controls inside the ship.” Marika added after thinking for a moment. “Does the bridge know that docking access has been granted?”

“The Shenandoah's navigation systems are under bridge control, and there are no issues with navigation. The docking systems are under bridge control, and they don't recall granting any access.”

“Ask the Shenandoah and see if we have the docking control. Also, ask about the gunman.”

“We have docking control access.” Schnitzer, who had checked via a different channel, answered in rapid succession. “The bridge of the Shenandoah has confirmed that they have not released docking system control. They had received word that an armed man was acting violently on board the ship, but the bridge does not know what has happened since the loss of contact.”

“The situation is clearly contradictory.” Coorie, in the electronic warfare seat, muttered. “For a spaceship of that class, it would be possible to release access to the control system from the sub-bridge, but it must be intentional that the main bridge is not aware of it.”

“Was the SOS sent from the bridge? Or from somewhere else?”

“"It doesn't seem to be coming from the bridge. There's no way to stop it from the bridge, and it's true that all communication, including the network, has been cut off, so they're currently focusing all their efforts on restoring communication.”

“So what about that communication that just came back? Oh, it didn't come from the bridge?”

“At least for now, the bridge is not aware of any other communications besides this light signal. Even if another department has succeeded in restoring communication, the bridge is not aware of it.”

“Wait a minute, let me get this straight. So the Shenandoah is currently out of communication, and it's sending out a distress signal on its own, and someone is acting up inside, is that right?”

“That's it.” Schnitzer answered while continuing the optical communication with the Shenandoah. “I am currently checking the details of the previous communication with the bridge. The bridge is not aware of the previous request.”

“Please check again to see if we need to send our forces on board.” Marika instructed, frantically thinking of what to do based on the information she had and the current situation. “Also, ask if there's anything else we can do.”

“We've received a request to board our forces.” Schnitzer reported. “We are requested to work with the security department to secure the armed criminals.”

“But they probably haven't been able to communicate with the security department.” Marika muttered. “I wonder if we'll be able to contact them properly after we dock.”

“We’re being lured in.” Luca's words, muttered in the navigator's seat, sounded strangely loud.

“We'd better be careful. If what you said is true, then the Bentenmaru is being lured in by whoever sent out the SOS.” After thinking again about the meaning of Luca's words once more, Marika spoke. “What do you mean?”

“Up to this point, the Bentenmaru has been moving according to the intentions of the one that sent out the SOS, whose intentions are different from those of the Shenandoah.” Luca holds her hands over the crystal ball-shaped rear display.

“Did they go out of their way to target the Bentenmaru?”

“I don't know.” Luka answered Marika's question with a cliché.

“Even if we were lured in or it is a trap, we have no choice but to go and help if reinforcements are requested. Kane, dock with the Shenandoah. Schnitzer, please take command of the boarding forces. Coorie, be careful to lock the doors of the Bentenmaru so that no one can tamper with it from the outside.”

“Docking, Roger!” “Taking command of our forces.” “Yes, yes, the doors will be properly locked.”

“I've taken over communication with the Shenandoah.” Hyakume said to Schnitzer, who stood up, sliding the combat commander's seat back. “However, once the ship is docked, the bridge will no longer be visible from here.”

Schnitzer exited the bridge with movements that did not match his huge size. Marika asked.

“Is voice communication with the Shenandoah still connected?”

“...No response.” Hyakume answered after playing with the communication system. “The channel is fixed and connected, but there's no one on the other side.”

“Do you know which part of the Shenandoah the communication channel is connected to?”

“...The main bridge.” Hyakume replied mockingly. “If they had at least made it the sub-bridge, it would have been believable that the regular crew had succeeded in restoring communication with the outside world, but this is definitely a fake.”

“So the request to send our forces was fake at first, but is it true that armed criminals are rampaging? With the SOS being sent out, I'm not really sure what's going on.” Marika, in the captain's seat, crossed her arms and leaned deeply into the backrest.

“That’s easy.”

“Eh?” Marika looked back at Coorie, who was checking the Bentenmaru's defenses in the electronic warfare seat.

“Just think of it as two groups of perpetrators: one who took down the entire communication system of the Shenandoah and sent out an SOS, and one who is an armed criminal. The armed criminal might not actually exist, though.”

“Hmm.”

“Let's get going now.” Kane aligned the Bentenmaru with the Shenandoah. Marika looked around at the displays and monitors around the captain's seat.

“No change in the situation on the Shenandoah?”

“No change.” Hyakume replied. “Their navigation is normal, and we can't see what's going on inside. Incidentally, even if we look through the windows of the Shenandoah, we can't see any commotion inside.”

“Ready to dock.” Kane announced. “We can dock anytime.”

Marika checked the situation of their forces waiting on the starboard boarding bridge. The Bentenmaru’s forces under Schnitzer's command were equipped for close combat and ready to board. Schnitzer contacted her directly.

“*Schnitzer to the bridge, troops can board the Shenandoah at any time.*”

Marika nodded. ‘Keep an eye on the situation on the Shenandoah and on our surroundings. Let's go, the Bentenmaru will forcibly dock with the Shenandoah and send in the forces as reinforcements.”

“Hold on tight.” Although they weren't going to perform any violent maneuvers that the inertial control system couldn't absorb, Kane called out to the others to encourage them, and brought the Bentenmaru to the center of the Shenandoah's port side in one go. Taking advantage of the fact that they had access to the docking system, they opened the docking gate on the center deck of the Shenandoah's port side and approached at such a speed that they almost collided.

Kane stopped the Bentenmaru perfectly in front of the Shenandoah, leaving a gap that was just enough for the boarding bridge, which was forcefully extended from the Bentenmaru and touched the docking gate on the Shenandoah's side, where the standard docking mechanism secured it in place.

“Be careful.” Marika muttered. “If they could hijack the Shenandoah's communications system, they will definitely try something as soon as they connected to us by wire.”

“There's no sign of that happening right now, though.” Coorie said as she checked the connection to the Shenandoah. “Just the usual confirmation protocols and environmental data over there. Yes, docking confirmed, pressure inside the boarding bridge normal, connected to the Shenandoah. I'll open the hatch on the Shenandoah's side.”

The doors to the Shenandoah, which was docked via a boarding bridge, were opened, first on the outside, then on the inside, by an operator from the bridge. Marika stared intently at the image on the monitor camera.

A figure was standing at the docking gate, where passengers were not supposed to be able to enter while the ship was underway, holding a large firearm in its arms.

“Hmmm?” Marika looked at the image on the monitor again. A figure with long, flowing, strange-colored hair was standing with its back to the boarding bridge leading from the Bentenmaru.

“*Noel Blue, bounty hunter!*” The figure shouted with her back to the Bentenmaru’s forces, led by Schnitzer. “*There's a bounty on the loose aboard the Shenandoah right now, and I'm here to catch him.*”

“*I’m Schnitzer, commander of the Bentenmaru’s forces.*” Schnitzer introduced himself, pointing a small assault rifle at Noel's back. The troops waiting at the door pointed their firearms, short-barreled machine guns and dual pistols, at various points around the deserted docking gate.

Suddenly, an alarm sounded inside the docking gate and red emergency lights began flashing.

“All emergency escape capsules on the Shenandoah have been activated.” Before I could ask what had happened, Coorie read out the information sent over the wired line from the Shenandoah.

“001 to 079 in the front, 121 to 184 in the center, and 253 to 290 in the rear have begun their ejection countdown.”

All passenger spacecraft are required to carry emergency escape capsules that can accommodate more passengers than they can hold, and the escape capsule launch ports all around the Shenandoah began to open simultaneously.

“Nearly half of the emergency escape capsules have begun their ejection countdown.” Schnitzer relayed the information from Coorie. “Do you have time to explain the situation? Does the Shenandoah's security department approve of your actions?”

“I’ve given my ID to both the operator and the spacecraft.” Noel spoke to the troops behind her, keeping her large beam rifle, which was equipped with a radar sight, missile launcher, and other extras, at full alert. “I'm prepared to give you my ID after the battle.”

Bounty hunters, who specialize in tracking, capturing, and arresting criminal and civil offenders who have bounties placed on them, are not that uncommon. However, there are very few hunters who are officially licensed to carry high-powered firearms.

“Be careful, the ejection of the escape capsule is a distraction for that guy. If he sneaks in, he'll be able to mess around with the inside of the spaceship as he pleases.”

“Ah, right.” Schnitzer turned to Coorie, who was monitoring the conversation.

“Yeah, yeah, it's pretty much going as expected.” Coorie, in the electronic warfare seat, began scanning the barriers around the entire Bentenmaru to see if there were any signs of a reaction or if a reaction had been erased.

“So, who is this bounty?”

The only bounties who can be tracked down by licensed bounty hunters using force are those that have been publicly disclosed. The bounty hunter in the monitor camera seemed to glance back. “Jackie Fahrenheit.”

“Wha-aat?!” Marika instinctively rose from the captain's seat and yelled out. Coorie reported in a calm voice.

“Escape capsules are being launched.”

The escape capsules were launched all at once from the launch ports that had already been opened to the outside. The capsules, which had minimal life support systems, automatically distanced themselves after being launched to avoid being caught up in the destruction of the main ship.

The spindle-shaped hull of the Shenandoah appeared to fire a volley of missiles or fireworks in all directions. The escape capsules, which would normally be launched in the direction deemed safest, all took a trajectory away from the Shenandoah and exploded.

Not all of the escape capsules aboard the Shenandoah were launched. Only half of the total number of capsules were released, but over 100 of them turned the radar of the combat-ready Bentenmaru white for a moment before rapidly departing.

“What's the response from the escape capsules!?” Marika asked reflexively. The escape capsules transmit their trajectory, flight direction, affiliation, number of passengers, and their health status as they fly, making it easier for them to be rescued.

“All unmanned.” Coorie swiftly swiped her fingers across the control panel, moving on to the next action without stopping. “Of course, I can't verify which data is fake and which is real.”

“Is our spaceship okay!?” Marika sat back in the captain's seat and looked around at the displays. “At the moment of the launch, didn't our radar almost overflow for a moment because there were so many reactions? Did they do something unnecessary at that time?”

“It's just that the display couldn't keep up.” Hyakume said as he played back the radar recording. “It's okay. We can keep track of that many. There's no problem.”

“Schnitzer!” Marika called out to the combat commander on the boarding bridge. “Can you confirm with the bounty hunter if the Jackie they're fighting is the same Jackie?”

“*Later.*” Schnitzer replied. “*If this is the work of the armed assailants who took down the Shenandoah's communication system, it's not over yet.*”

‘What!?”

“Trying to escape at the same time the escape capsule is launched is a common scenario.” Coorie's fingers kept moving as she rearranged the control panels one after the other. “Besides, a criminal with such an elaborate plan to hijack the communication system would not escape in an escape capsule, a vehicle in which he can hardly move by himself.”

Escape capsules are used to escape when the mother ship is in a critical situation. Their main function is to escape from the ship and maintain life until rescue, and they are equipped with the functions to enter the atmosphere once, land, and splash down, but they have almost no capability to navigate on their own.

“I see.”

Half of the escape capsules on the Shenandoah were launched at once, so it may seem like a large number, but they are easily tracked as they scatter with active transponders. With the star system military's escort fleet currently on the way, it's safe to assume that most of them will be recovered soon.

“So the culprit is still aboard the Shenandoah?”

“The Shenandoah’s bridge has restored communications.” Hyakume said. “There's voice and data transmissions from the main bridge to the Bentenmaru, thanking us for the rescue and the troops for coming aboard.”

“It's not over yet, just send a receipt.” Marika thought for a moment and continued. “Schnitzer? If it's Jackie, I think we should take all possible measures. I think it would be better for all forces to board the Shenandoah, and then for the Bentenmaru to undock and keep watch in the surrounding airspace. If we stay docked, we can't move, and there will be many blind spots for our radar and sensors.”

“*Understood. The troops will board the Shenandoah and continue to work to contain and access the situation. The Bentenmaru will undock and patrol the surrounding airspace.*”

“*Go ahead. If the rescue ship leaves, there'll be no reason to stay at the docking gate.*”

After waiting for the bounty hunter's reply, Schnitzer entered the docking gate, and after confirming that all of the forces were aboard the Shenandoah, he closed the outer hatch and detached the boarding bridge.

The Bentenmaru separated from the Shenandoah while storing the boarding bridge inside the ship, which was in the way of combat maneuvers. It took up an electronic warfare posture while keeping its distance from the passenger spacecraft, whose escape capsule ports were all still open.

Schnitzer's forces boarded the Shenandoah and contacted the main bridge and security department from the docking gate. They informed them that they would continue to provide security on board, and that they would work in tandem with the security department.

The Bentenmaru was preparing for an attack from the Shenandoah with electronic warfare that was far too thorough for a civilian ship, while at the same time protecting itself, when it received a brief progress report from the security department.

Immediately after the Shenandoah touched down after its final FTL jump into the star system, an anomaly occurred in the communications system, and at almost the same time, Noel Blue, who was aboard as a bounty hunter, requested the security department's cooperation in identifying and arresting her target.

The only information available on what happened aboard the Shenandoah after that is based on the chronological reports of the guards, but it seems that Noel cornered the culprit several times during his pursuit, but was unable to capture him. While the culprit was escaping aboard the ship, the Shenandoah's communication system became inoperable, and an SOS was sent out without any command from the main bridge.

“So the radio operator who first contacted us was actually the criminal on the run.” Coorie said in her usual tone. “In voice communication, you can change the voice as much as you want.”

“I wasn't fooled by that conman.” Marika, in the captain's seat, glared at the latest situation being displayed in an organized manner on the display. “Well, that's why they called for help without even checking if we had troops here.”

“They would have been able to do whatever they wanted to a civilian ship that was not designed for electronic warfare.” Coorie began to rescan the Bentenmaru itself. “It’s not over yet, so don't let your guard down.”

“I know, did you find anything?”

“Nothing yet.” Coorie shook her head. “I've re-measured the weight of the Bentenmaru just to be sure, but so far it's only decreased by the weight of the forces aboard the Shenandoah, and there's been no unnatural weight gain.”

“So, is the culprit still on board the Shenandoah?” Marika looked at the display showing the Shenandoah flying nearby. Coorie answered.

“Probably... with a spaceship that big, we might not be able to find them again unless we isolate the whole thing somewhere.”

“The star system military has arrived.” Hyakume announced. Three escort ships were approaching the Shenandoah and the Bentenmaru.

Although an SOS was sent, the situation was not such that the ship was unable to continue. The Shenandoah wants to continue its flight to its next port of call, the Sea of the Morningstar Relay Station, as scheduled. In addition to the explanation of the situation sent by the security department to the Bentenmaru, a report from the main bridge had been submitted.

The Bentenmaru’s forces, which had boarded the Shenandoah earlier, cooperated with the security department's request to search for the missing criminal. However, they were unsuccessful, and Schnitzer's troops, who had boarded the ship prepared for hand-to-hand combat, ended their mission without firing a single shot.

After the escape capsules were launched, the main bridge regained full control of the Shenandoah, including the communications system. A subsequent investigation revealed no perpetrators, and the Bentenmaru forces returned to their mother ship following the arrival of the star system military.

The Shenandoah, along with three star system naval escort ships, heads for the Sea of the Morningstar relay station. In order to accommodate their troops, the Bentenmaru again prepared to dock with the Shenandoah.

“If the criminal is still on the Shenandoah, this is his last chance to board us.”

The first docking was quick, like that of a pirate operation, but the second docking was done in good time, following the proper procedure. This time, Coorie left the docking control to the Shenandoah and checked the situation of the approaching Bentenmaru, muttering to herself. “I wonder if it's okay.”

“This time, it's not just our spaceship, but three escort ships are on guard as well.” The three escort ships of the star system military are already escorting the Shenandoah. Hyakume had asked the star system military to pay special attention to the Shenandoah and the Bentenmaru before and after docking. “If it's at least as big as a space suit, there should be a reaction somewhere. As long as Schnitzer and the others don't bring back any strange luggage, there's nothing to worry about.”

“Well, Schnitzer will be fine.” Marika nodded.

“*Schnitzer to Bentenmaru.*”

The boarding bridge hadn't been connected yet, but Schnitzer, who had already returned to the docking gate with the forces who had boarded, contacted the bridge directly. Marika answered the radio.

“She wants to ride with us? On the Bentenmaru?”

“*Yes. Miss Noel Blue, a bounty hunter aboard the Shenandoah, is asking to travel to the Sea of the Morningstar abord the Bentenmaru.*”

“But the Shenandoah is going to the Sea of the Morningstar's relay station, right?” Marika asked Schnitzer over the communication screen. “Won't she get there if she just stays on board?”

“*Apparently, the destination of the criminal she’s pursuing, Jackie Fahrenheit, is the Sea of the Morningstar.*”

“What the..?!” Marika couldn't help but raise her voice in response to Schnitzer's response.

“*She says she wants to get to the Sea of the Morningstar as quickly as possible, so she can get one step ahead of the criminal.*”

Marika's eyebrows furrowed. “...What is Schnitzer's decision?”

“*I am willing to allow her to board the Bentenmaru in exchange for the information Noel Blue has about Jackie.*” Schnitzer answered smoothly. “*Anyway, the Bentenmaru has to deliver Captain Marika to to the Sea of the Morningstar. It won't be too much trouble.*”

“Is that your decision as our combat commander, who worked with the bounty hunter on the Shenandoah, even if only for a short time?”

“*That's right.*”

“Hmm.” Marika searched through the large amount of data circulating on the captain's desk and found the information about Noel Blue, and displayed it. It already contained her Galactic Empire-certified bounty hunter license, a photo of her, notes, and a brief resume.

She has a wide range of activities, not only in the Empire but also in the frontier regions. “I think it would be fine if we could get information on that conman just by giving her a ride to the Sea of the Morningstar.” Marika looked around the bridge. “Moreover, if Jackie is coming to the Sea of the Morningstar, I want to know as much as I can.”

After making sure that no opposing opinions or suggestions were raised, Marika said to Schnitzer. “Schnitzer? Well, along those lines, you could try negotiating with the bounty hunter and saying we'll bring her to the Sea of the Morningstar if she gives you information about Jackie. I don't want to get in the way of your work, and I don't want to have anything to do with Jackie anymore, so I'd like some information.”

“*Roger that.*”

“But that guy has a bounty on his head even from the Galactic Empire.” Leaving the rest of the negotiations to Schnitzer, Marika leaned back on the backrest of the captain's seat. “What are you doing out there?”

“The Galactic Empire's Seventh Fleet has a bounty on Jackie Fahrenheit.”

“Eh?” Marika sat up when Coorie told her.

“Last time, I checked to see if he would get caught because of a criminal record.” Coorie said while operating the electronic warfare panel. “The Seventh Fleet is responsible for the frontier areas outside of the Empire's territory, so that's probably where Jackie must have done something to earn the bounty, but no matter where you catch him, as long as you hand him over, the bounty will be paid.”

“*Noel is not trying to hand Jackie over to the Galactic Empire.*” Schnitzer announced, as if he had been listening to the conversation. “*The delivery destination is apparently the Pirate Guild.*”

“I'm Kato Marika, Captain of the Bentenmaru.” Marika, who had gotten down from the captain's seat, gave a formal salute to the purple-blue haired bounty hunter who appeared on the bridge. “Welcome aboard the Bentenmaru.”

“Noel Blue, bounty hunter.” Noel raised her empty right hand as proof that she was unarmed, and held up her ID card in her left hand. A 3D image automatically unfolded.

“Yes, confirmed.” Hyakume called out after authenticating the 3D image that unfolded. ‘It's impressive that you have an Imperial license and are active in both the frontier and the Empire.”

“Criminals who cause trouble in the Empire that result in a bounty often flee to the frontier.” Noel put her ID back inside her travel clothes. “Besides, the frontier star districts pay better than the Empire. You are a licensed pirate operating within the Empire's territory.” Noel looked around the aged bridge of the Bentenmaru once again. “I never thought I'd be able to board a pirate ship authorized by the Galactic Empire.”

“Privateer licenses are issued by the government of the Tau star system, not the Galactic Empire.” Marika casually corrected her and continued. “This ship is currently flying to the third planet in the Tau star system, the Sea of the Morningstar. Once we enter into orbit around the Sea of the Morningstar, we will send a shuttle to Shin-Okuhama Airport. Noel will be taken to Shin-Okuhama Airport by shuttle. Is that okay?”

“Good enough.” Noel nodded. “I can get to the Sea of the Morningstar. half a day sooner than if I were on the Shenandoah. Thank you for letting me join you.”

“So, Noel, the person you're chasing is Jackie Fahrenheit?” Marika signaled to Coorie in the electronic warfare seat, who projected a 3D image of Jackie, wearing a colorful patchwork suit and a bowler hat, in the center of the bridge.

Marika carefully observed Noel's expression. “Is this the person?”

After looking at the 3D image, which was several times larger than life, Noel turned her eyes back to Marika. “This is him. Jackie Fahrenheit, Jackie Celsius, and many other pseudonyms. I've never seen this photo before.”

“This is the Bentenmaru’s data.” There is surprisingly little image data of Jackie himself. The Bentenmaru’s data is from when he previously admitted complete surrender. “A few things happened before.” Marika glanced at Schnitzer, who had returned to his battle commander's seat and begun writing up the deployment report. “As you may have heard from Schnitzer, we are not interested in the bounty on Jackie. But, after what happened before, we'd rather not have anything to do with him anymore if we can help it. Can you tell us what he is up to aboard the Shenandoah, why he is coming to the Sea of the Morningstar, and where he plans to go from there?”

Noel shook her head expressionlessly. “Sorry, but I don't trust anyone who says they're not interested in criminals or bounties because of my job, but providing information about Jackie is one of the conditions for me to ride this ship to the Sea of the Morningstar. I'll provide any information I know. First of all, I still don't know where his destination is. I don't know if the Sea of the Morningstar is a stopover or a destination.”

“How far did Jackie plan to go on the Shenandoah when he bought his ticket?” The Shenandoah is cruising the Orion Arm, including the Tau system.

“I don't know. He boarded the Shenandoah without buying a ticket.”

“A stowaway?” As I asked, I checked the passenger list of the Shenandoah. The Shenandoah is currently flying to the Sea of the Morningstar with the system's military escort, and the passenger list is being rechecked on board.

“I haven't checked what method they used. Passenger ferries don't have very strict security, so there are plenty of ways to sneak in.”

“So how did you know Jackie was on board the Shenandoah, and how did you recognize him?” As a first step in providing information, Noel would answer questions asked, but would probably not explain things that were not asked. Understanding that much, Marika pointed to the observer seats at the rear of the bridge. “Would you like to sit down? I think we have a lot to talk about.”

“Shall I bring some tea?”

Marika nodded at Misa's question. “Please. Enough for everyone, and something to snack on.” Marika turned back to Noel. “Do you have any preferences? Or is it your rule not to touch anything that's served to you on other spaceships?”

“You're not in the intelligence department, so there's no personal data that would be of any trouble if it were recorded.” Noel replied. If you touch the drink that's served to you, your fingerprints and DNA data from your saliva can be collected later. “The data on Jackie's movements was provided by a sponsor.”

Noel took the observer's seat, which had been rearranged around a table with one side turned into a display, and began to speak. “Jackie has bounties on his head on a number of planets, both within the Empire and on the frontier, but the highest bounty is by the Pirate Guild.”

‘Yeah, I thought so.” Marika, sitting down opposite Noel, nodded with a gloomy look on her face.

“I'm sure you know the details of how Jackie incurred the wrath of the Pirate Guild and recently had a record-breaking bounty placed on his head, so I won't go into that here. As is the case with these types of requests, it's not uncommon for the person placing the bounty, not just the guild, to disclose any information they come across. Of course, not all of the information is accurate, and not everyone has access to it, but a tip from one of these sources revealed that Jackie was boarding a spaceship bound for the Cetus constellation from the Arnold Junction.”

“By passenger ferry?” Marika tilted her head. “Jackie had his own spaceship, right?”

“The Lunar Lion's whereabouts have been unknown for some time now.” Noel said. “It's not a big spaceship, but it's pretty conspicuous. Unless it's disguised, it's not something you could travel around in.” Noel paused for a moment. “I suspect that's what happened.”

“At this time of year, there are probably many spaceships heading from Arnold Junction to the Cetus constellation, including passenger ferries and cargo-passenger ships, so why did he choose the Shenandoah?”

“The Shenandoah was the earliest departing spaceship for the Tau system.”

With a bad feeling, Marika continued asking questions. “Why did you decide that Jackie would come to the Tau system instead of the Cetus constellation?”

“Of course, it's far from complete, but it's the result of analyzing Jackie's steps and his work. He seems to have been researching the independence wars of the Stellar Alliance and their colonies that were annexed by the Galactic Empire more than 100 years ago. He even searches for and buys parts of old spaceships that participated in the independence wars from junk shops.”

“Ah.” Marika sighed as she remembered the antimatter part that Jackie had brought, which had been manufactured at the same time as the White Swan's monomolecular ram, and the old, original ram that had been sent afterwards.

“I don't know what he learned during the investigation, but based on the information I had, I determined that Jackie would probably disembark at the Sea of the Morningstar.”

“What are you planning to do, you nuisance?” Marika muttered.

“He seems to have been researching the history and ruins of the colonies from the time of the Orion Arm Unification War. He's probably hanging around there.”

It took Marika a while to realize that the historical event known at the Sea of the Morningstar as the War of Independence was known from the outside as the Orion Arm Unification War. “Does our planet have a history?” Marika thought to herself that she should have paid more attention to her history classes, and tried to remember the origins of the Sea of the Morningstar.

The Sea of the Morningstar is a colony planet. The planet, which is mostly ocean, has no native civilization and was developed before the technology for FTL travel existed.

Discovered before the technology for interstellar travel even existed, the Sea of the Morningstar was expected to be a planet where life could exist even before it was named. It was 300 years ago that the first unmanned probe reached the interstellar star system, and 250 years ago that the first group of immigrants settled there as pioneers.

It was 140 years ago that the war of independence between the Stellar Alliance and the Federation of Colonial Stars began, and 120 years ago that the war ended with annexation to the Galactic Empire. Even counting from the day the first group of immigrants landed, it has a history of 250 years, making it still relatively new compared to many developed planets.

In the Milky Way galaxy, there are many civilizations with a long history, dating back tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of years, since they first ventured into space. While technological civilizations have continued throughout history, even though the intelligence that carried them has evolved into a biologically distinct species.

“Last time, didn't Jackie come to the Sea of the Morningstar looking for parts of the Stellar Slayer that was nearly used during the War of Independence?”

Misa, who had been listening in silence up until then, came to the rescue. “Come to think of it, that's right.”

“Technological advances are not uniform across the galaxy. The most rapid advances are made on the front lines of war, whether it be the War of Independence 120 years ago or the unification wars the Empire is currently fighting on the frontier.” Noel looked around the bridge of the Bentenmaru. “Unless he is driven by historical interest, his actions must have a practical purpose.”

“I think so.” Marika nodded. It seemed hard to believe that Jackie was driven solely by academic interest. “But are there any ruins from the War of Independence on our planet that could be turned into money?” Marika tilted her head. The War of Independence ended before the flames of war reached either the Alliance or Colonial planets, so the old townscapes from the pioneering days remain intact on both the Sea of the Morningstar and the other colonies. Compared to the Alliance and other older civilizations, the Sea Star has a short history, so they are even more enthusiastic about recording and preserving their history.

“If it's something that anyone can see could be profitable, there's no way it would have been left alone for 100 years.” Noel said. “Have you ever heard of legends about hidden treasures or secret weapons from war?”

Marika tilted her head a little more. Marika was born and raised in Sea of the Morningstar's Shin-Okuhama City, the oldest and largest city on Sea of the Morningstar, and the old townscape from when it was first developed remains intact. Hakuoh Girls' Academy also has a history just as old as Shin-Okuhama City, and there are plenty of legends and mysterious rumors. “Our planet doesn't have a complicated or mysterious history, so I can't think of any stories that would interest Jackie.”

“There's no history that isn't complicated and mysterious.” Noel smiled, and Marika realized it was the bounty hunter's first smile.

“Any more questions?” Noel looked around at the faces of the Bentenmaru's crew on the bridge. “To be honest, I've only recently started following Jackie Fahrenheit. If you've had any contact with him, I'd love to hear from you. What kind of man is he?”

”He's always smiling and is a sloppy, careless liar.” Marika spat out. “However, when it comes to electronics, he's a wizard. Jackie has outwitted us many times up until now. I'm sure that no matter how much you investigate later, there will be no trace of how he hijacked the Shenandoah's communication system.”

“I see, it's similar to the impression I have.” Noel nodded. “In order to corner Jackie, it was more effective to take into account his flashy, attention-seeking personality and what he would do to achieve his goals, rather than tracking what he was doing. He has a clear pattern of behavior, and he chooses the shortest, most efficient means to achieve his goals in the shortest time possible, so in that respect he's easy to deal with.”

“I can't believe you would describe Jackie as easy to deal with.” Marika looked at Noel's face again. “But why is Jackie coming to the Sea of the Morningstar?”

“I don't know.” Noel shook her head. “If I knew, I could just go to Sea of the Morningstar and wait. Right now, I don't know if what he's after is on Sea of the Morningstar or somewhere else.”

“I hope it's somewhere else.” Muttering, Marika looked up at Noel. “If you don't mind, could you give me your contact information?” Marika said with a smile. “As I've said many times before, I want to avoid having anything to do with Jackie as much as possible. If we find him, we'll let you know right away, so please give us your emergency contact information.”

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Description automatically generated

A black and white image of two people

Description automatically generated

A group of girls with long hair

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A group of people in a room

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A poster of a cartoon

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1. TL Note: Yes, another Star Wars reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)