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Illustration Noriyuki Matsumoto

Design by Shindosha

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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 seemed 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 efficiently 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 after 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 herself, 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. “You 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 tranquilizer 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 have 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 Tau 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 star, 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 Hyakume'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 of the Morningstar 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

“What are you trying to find out now?” Lynn Lambretta asked, walking ahead of me and holding a set of old keys that had been passed down from generation to generation of yacht club captains. “Occasionally, curious local historians or students who chose the wrong topic for their independent research wander in, but I think Marika is the first club member this year to enter our archives.”

“Well, there's something going on.” Marika was unsure of how much of the situation she should explain to Lynn, the president of the yacht club. She would not tell outsiders about her pirate business unless it was necessary. However, Jackie Fahrenheit had a history of infiltrating the Hakuoh Girls Academy, and Lynn had fought him both on the ground and in space.

After thinking for a moment, Marika looked up. “Well, if I explain the situation, it may cause trouble for the club president. Also, there may be confidentiality obligations regarding the explanation.”

“What?” Lynn exclaimed happily. “Are you saying that trouble from space is going to come down here again?”

“Yeah, well, something like that.” Marika looked around the long corridor. There were no students to be seen in the old research building. “Do you remember Jackie Fahrenheit?”

Lynn, who was walking ahead of me while rattling her keys, turned around. “Is that the colorful patchwork guy?”

Marika nodded. “I haven't been able to confirm it, but it seems that they are coming to Sea of the Morningstar.”

“For what purpose?”

“I don't know yet.” Marika shook her head. “However, it seems that before coming to Sea of the Morningstar, he had been researching various things about the War of Independence. Last time, he tried to find and take away a final weapon, a supernova bomb, so I thought I'd check our records.”

“I see, if it wasn't for that reason, you wouldn't have been interested in searching the Yacht Club's archives.” Throwing up the bundle of keys again, Lynn started walking. “It's going to be tough, there are documents from the War of Independence that haven't been scanned or organized, and there are even paper logbooks left behind.”

“I guess.”

“Here it is.” Lynn looked up at the old door, made of a large single piece of blackwood. The old crest of the Hakuoh Girls' Academy was carved in relief.

Lynn inserted the large key into the old cylinder lock and pushed down the lever doorknob. The door slid open without a creak, as was typical of a well-maintained academy.

There were no lights that turned on automatically. Relying on the light from the corridor, Lynn searched the wall and flicked an old toggle switch to turn the light on.

“Wow.” To protect the old papers, the archives had no windows. Marika looked around at the endless rows of huge bookshelves that reached the ceiling, feeling not only the perfect air conditioning but also the faint smell of disinfectant for sterilization and insect control.

“Not only are there documents related to the Odette II, but there are also old spaceship logs and maintenance records from the time of the colonization to the War of Independence.”

“Did all ancient spaceships fly with so many paper books loaded on them!?” The spine of a large file, which is roughly the size of a person's arm, is labeled with the ship's name, voyage records, and dates.

“Not all of them.” As if she knew the layout of the shelves, Lynn led the way and went to the back of the library. “However, electronic records cannot be read if the machine breaks down. Manuals for departments that are important to life, such as navigation, mechanical, life environment, and communications, were kept on board in paper files for a long time so that they could be read under any circumstances.”

“But they're heavy.”

“If it is printed or written down on paper, you can read what happened even if the spacecraft is lost or sunk and later discovered. If it were electronic, it seems that even if they salvage the sunken ship, the magnetic and electronic alignments may be completely lost, making it impossible to know what happened. That's why they started printing out the latest logbook.” Lynn stopped in front of a tall bookshelf lined with large, leather-bound books. “The documents related to the Odette II are on these shelves.”

“Gah.” Marika looked in horror at the large books lined up tightly on a bookshelf that even seemed to have a ladder built in.

“As you probably know, the era names were based on the lunar calendar before the War of Independence, and the new calendar after the War of Independence.”

“Eeek.” Marika looked up at the heavy-looking bookshelves that were packed all the way to the ceiling.

“And, on this side are documents that have are not online.” Lynn pointed to shelves filled with drawers next to her. “Memory cards, old optical discs, and microfilm.”

“What is microfilm?” Marika looked up at the wall of drawers that stretched to the ceiling with a frightened look on her face.

“The original plates of old photographs. Photographs and documents are scanned in analog and reduced in size. It's more space-efficient than just putting them in a bookshelf as files, so they were often used before the Revolutionary War.” Lynn opened a nearby drawer and took out a thin cylindrical case. She opened it, pulled out the film wound on a metal reel, and held it up to Marika.

“What is that?” Documents and landscape photos were lined up in a row on a thin plastic tape.

“So, this is microfilm. Electronic records can disappear or become damaged and become unreadable, but if you keep them in an analog state like this, they will last forever. Apparently they were all digitized several decades ago, but I think the format changed and they're no longer readable.”

“…I'm supposed to read this?” Marika peered inside the drawer that Lynn had opened. It was filled with similar cases lined up inside.

“There is a dedicated reader over there. If you put the reel into the reader, it will enlarge it so that you can read it on the display. Many of the originals remain only on microfilm, so please handle them with care.”

“Haa…” Marika sighed and looked around the archives. “Why are such ancient documents still in an all-girls school like ours?”

“Apparently they took over all the documents from before she became the Odette II.” Lynn put the microfilm case back in the drawer. “You see, it's not just our planet, but the Federation of Colonial Stars is diligently keeping records because no matter what they do, they can't compete with the Stellar Alliance when it comes to history.”

“Even so...”

“After the first training voyage, I researched the electronic weapons system of the Odette II. There's no need to come to a place like this for a normal training voyage, but there were even battle records from the War of Independence, so I found a lot of useful information.”

“Isn't that kind of stuff usually found in military libraries?”

“After 100 years, military aircraft will become history. In fact, it seems that many documents were brought in from the military.” Lynn slid open the built-in ladder on the bookshelf and climbed up, then pulled out an appropriate leather-bound file from about the third rung up. “Look, this has a military stamp on it.”

She opened the cover and showed it to Marika. It was a rebound file containing the battle records of the White Swan, when it had been issued a privateer's license and participated in the War of Independence as a pirate ship, and on the cover was a stamp with a military seal and the date it was decommissioned, as well as a signature that appeared to be from someone in charge.

“Um, well, that’s nice.”

“This is the yacht club's archives, so it only has spaceships, but the library's reference room is a big mess. It's not just spaceships, it's got a whole bunch of documents from the War of Independence.”

The Hakuoh Girls' Academy has a huge library. The walls of the huge cylindrical hall called the Round Room are lined with bookshelves about three stories high, and reading tables that spread out radially, which are enough for most of the needs of the middle and high school students.

In addition to the Round Room, the library also has a branch library with a large collection of specialized books. The library is as old as Sea of the Morningstar's oldest library, the Shin-Okuhama Municipal Library, or the archives of the executive branch, and has more books in its collection because it has more space and budget than those libraries.

“Oh, there's that too.” Remembering other things she should investigate, Marika shook her head gloomily. She often goes to the library's round room, but there are many branch offices and special reference rooms throughout the school, many of which she had never set foot in since visiting them on an orienteering tour.

“Well, please take your time.” Lynn handed Marika a heavy set of keys. “I'll be in the club room for a while, but if it gets late, please come and see me.”

“Got it.”

“I'll tell you something good.” Lynn pointed in the direction of the entrance. “The search shelf has an index of which materials are located in which areas. You can also see which materials have been digitized and can be read on the network or not. If the materials are digitized, you can read them on the display, so you don't have to pull them out of the bookshelf and put them back in their original place.”

“Yeah, I know.” Marika looked around the bookshelves with a gloomy look on her face. “When I decided to come here, I did as much research as I could. I had already looked through all the digitized records on the network, so I thought I would probably have to look at the records that were not digitized.” Marika looked up at the massive bookshelves, filled to the ceiling with tightly packed files. “I feel like I'm going to fail even before I start.”

“Then let me tell you one more tip.” Lynn put her hands on Marika's shoulders with a serious look on her face. “The most important thing to find the documents you need is to keep looking until you find them. If you have the determination and the documents you want to look at definitely exist, it only makes a difference whether you find them quickly or slowly. So, to find them quickly, you just need to look at a lot of them. The more you look at, the higher your chances of reaching your goal.”

“Ehh…”

“Finding documents is largely down to luck. Don't worry, I'm sure Marika will be able to easily find the documents she needs.”

“I hope so.”

The captain's and first officer's logbooks were printouts, but there were some difficult to read notes here and there. It was written in an archaic language from over 100 years ago, so even though the characters used are the same as today, the spelling and use of words have changed. Classical literature is a compulsory subject for both middle and high school students, but it's not Marika's forte.

Even with Marika's cursory reading, she could understand that the voyage of the White Swan, which had participated in the War of Independence as a pirate ship with a privateer's license, was extremely burdensome to the crew. As a Category II solar sailing ship that cannot travel at FTL speeds, its main combat airspace is limited to the inner and outer planetary systems of the Tau system. However, it intercepts a large number of communications every day and frequently communicates with its home planet, Sea of the Morningstar, and continues to engage in trade battles aimed at the supply routes of the forces dispatched from the Stellar Alliance.

A communication route with the Sea of the Morningstar was secured, and there were ample supplies, crew changes, and overhauls while in flight. It seems that technological innovation was remarkable during the war, and when it occasionally returned to the station, not only was the hull repaired, but the electronic armament and the now-defunct ship-mounted weapons were also upgraded.

After standing on the ladder and skimming through the large leather-bound files that filled the bookshelf, which contained several months' worth of voyage records, Marika remembered her original purpose. What she needed to look into now was not the battle records of the White Swan, but the results of the war.

Marika picked up the file containing the battle records instead of the logbook.

“Wow.” The events leading up to the start of the war are illustrated in chronological order, with both enemies and allies. The responses of each department and the changes in the battle situation are shown in parallel, but the pace is much slower than in modern times. “So that's how old battle records were written.”

Marika flipped through the battle records that went on for many pages. Since she had been in many battles aboard the Bentenmaru and had been forced to write battle records, she could just about read it, but the words were in archaic language and it was hard to understand.

"Well, the battle records may be useful, but what about the results?"

She narrowed her focus to the results of the battle in front of her and followed them. The White Swan, which had predicted the movements of the enemy supply ship and placed a number of missiles in advance, had succeeded in capturing it after clever electronic warfare and threatening communications. The supply ship's cargo was supplies for the expeditionary forces from the Stellar Alliance, and the White Swan had only seized electronic parts and weapons and ammunition, leaving the food and crew untouched and freed them.

The military supplies transferred to the White Swan were then transferred again when it came into contact with a civilian spaceship from the Federation of Colonial Stars and sent to the Sea of the Morningstar.

"I can't investigate all of the results of the White Swan's battles like this."

"I'm coming in." The closed door to the archives opened. Looking toward the entrance from the back, Marika saw Misa, who looked like a school nurse wearing a white coat, raise her hand. "How is your research progressing?"

"Not at all." Marika, who had been sitting on the ladder with the pages spread out on her lap, put the file back on the bookshelf and jumped off. "I mean, it's educational, but I feel like I'm basically looking in the wrong direction."

"I'm sure if you spend time on it, you'll get the hang of it." Misa looked around the archives, which was packed with documents. "Ririka gave me permission to contact the boss."

"The boss?" Marika tilted her head. "Who is that? Is he a high-ranking official in the star system’s military or someone?"

Misa shook her head with amusement. "He's a much higher-ranking official. Get ready, I'm going to meet him."

"I don't mind going to meet him." Marika fastened her seat belt with an apologetic look on her face and looked at Lynn, who was already fully prepared in the seat next to her. "But, why is the president here with us?"

"You're dealing with the patchwork conman, right?" Lynn answered with a look of surprise on her face. "Depending on the circumstances, the Odette II and the yacht club could get involved. In fact, he came into our school without any hesitation last time. I want you to tell me everything you can."

"Is that okay?" Marika asked Misa, who was in a white coat and holding the wheel in the front seat.

"It's a matter of risk management." Misa answered, putting both hands on the wheel. "As Lynn said, there is a high possibility that Jackie will appear at this school again. When that happens, would it be better to have the relevant parties deal with it with reliable information, or would it be better not to?"

"Just because the club president has the information, doesn't it mean we don't have to consider the possibility that it might show up elsewhere?"

"I know that." Misa smiled, looking straight ahead. "That's why I said it's a matter of risk management. After considering the pros and cons of both informing and not informing, if the captain thinks it's safer not to inform, then of course we'll all follow that."

Marika looked at Lynn's face. "Would you please listen to me when I tell you not to come now?"

"Oh, of course I'd listen." Lynn grinned. "As long as you explain the reason and I'm satisfied with it."

"I see." Marika looked down and thought deeply.

"I think it would be easier if the president knew about the situation, but I was wondering how much we could do if something bad were to happen."

"What are my underclassmen worried about?" Lynn patted Marika on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I've got a criminal record. Or is the president so unreliable that her underclassmen have to worry about her?"

"As a club member, I'm not worried." Marika pursed her lips. "But as the captain, I don't know what's going to happen."

"If you don't know what's going to happen, don't you think you should share all the information you know now?"

Marika stiffened as Lynn put her arm around her shoulder. She leaned closer to Marika's ear. "If I’m in danger, help me."

"I'll do everything I can."

"Sorry, I'm late!"

Kane rushed into the faculty parking lot in the basement of the old building.

"You're late!" Misa started up the gasoline engine of her antique car. She drove off without even checking that Kane had jumped into the passenger seat. "What were you doing?"

"I told you, I'm going to the middle school princess again."

After hearing that from Kane, who had jumped into the passenger seat, Misa pulled the handbrake and spun the classic commuter car around. "I guess it's useless."

The underground parking lot used for teachers in the basement of the old building has two entrances: the south entrance at the front and the north entrance at the back. The back entrance is not used much because you can go straight to the school gates from the south entrance at the front.

The car ran up the ramp to ground level and suddenly stopped in front of the gate. The large doors began to automatically open slowly.

"It seems like Gruier has an information network that even we don't fully understand."

"I've been waiting for you." As the large upward-swinging doors were fully raised, Gruier stood in front of them in her uniform. She bowed slightly and greeted them.

"I would like to ride with you." Gruier said, looking straight at Marika.

"Y-Yes, um…"

"I guess going around to the back door was useless." Misa folded her hands on the steering wheel. "What are you going to do, Captain?"

Looking at the president next to her, and then at Gruier standing in the commuter's path, Marika raised both hands.

"There's no way I can win negotiations with Gruier. I have a feeling that something bad will happen again, but go ahead." Undoing her seat belt, Marika opened the back door of the commuter car.

"Thank you." Gruier climbed into the back seat as if it was a given.

"You might not be able to come back by curfew, you know?"

Gruier answered with a smile as she sat in the center of the back seat and pulled out her seat belt. Since she decided to study abroad at Hakuoh Girls' Academy, she and her sister Grunhilde have been living in the school's student dormitory. "It's fine." Fastening her seat belt, Gruier looked straight ahead. "I've taken all the necessary steps. There's no problem."

"Somehow, watching Gruier makes me lose confidence in the security at Hakuoh Girls' Academy."

Gruier looked up at Lynn. "Don't worry. I won't do anything underhanded to cause you any trouble."

"That's why it's a problem."

"Well, let's go." Misa started the commuter car, which was now full to capacity.

The commuter car got onto the freeway and headed straight for Shin-Okuhama Airport. She parked the commuter car in the staff parking lot and they entered the staff passageway, which allowed them to move around the airport without coming into contact with regular passengers.

"Where did you get that ID?" Marika asked Misa, who expertly swiped her ID card through the reader.

"That's easy to fake." Misa showed Marika the card, which even had a 3D photo of herself on it. "I'd like to say that, but I’m a pirate recognized by the Sea of the Morningstar Government. I applied officially and got it issued. It's quicker that way."

"Ah."

"Be careful not to get separated, there's a lot going on in here."

"Wow!" Marika has been here several times with her mother, but it's not a place that ordinary citizens can easily enter. With her school bag in one hand, Lynn looks curiously around the corridors that have been in use for many years and the surrounding offices and workshops. "I didn't know there was a place like this at Shin-Okuhama Airport. You can't tell from the outside."

"When they built the new terminal, they said they wanted to renovate this area as well." Marika repeats the explanation she heard from her mother. "There was opposition from the people inside, and there were a lot of issues with where to operate during the renovation, so it seems like it's remained the same."

Misa went deep into the staff cafeteria area, following a route that even Marika only vaguely remembered.

When she opened a door in what appeared to be nothing more than a wall completely blackened by oil stains and aging, a familiar smell wafted to Marika. In the middle of the kitchen, filled with the smells and steam of spices, seasonings, and ingredients from all over the world, all stimulating the appetite, stood a giant man in a chef's hat.

"Hey, here you are." With his rough, scarred face contorted, the man raised his right hand, which was holding a giant knife that looked like it could cut a cow in half. "Ririka's already here." He pointed to the back with his left mechanical arm, covered in a silicone cover.

"I've been looking forward to this. Please go easy on me."

"It's been a while."

Following Marika and Gruier, Lynn bowed and asked Marika in a low voice. "Who is that?"

"The boss of the food court at the airport." Marika told her exactly what her mother had told her. "The most important person at the airport."

After saying that, she suddenly looked back at the giant man in the chef's hat. Holding a huge knife as tall as Gruier in one hand, he confronted the raw meat, eviscerated, hanging from the ceiling, and began slicing it smoothly. With each glimmer of silver light in the light, the huge chunk of meat was quickly taken apart with almost no resistance. "Amazing."

Just as Marika was about to become entranced, Kane, who had entered the kitchen after her, called out to her. "Let's go."

Misa led everyone through an oval armored hatch like those used on combat vehicles, into a private room with a large round table.

"Hey." Ririka, still wearing her controller's uniform and sitting alone at a round table, raised a small glass to Misa as she came in. The glass was half full of a brown liquid that was slightly steaming, and in front of Ririka was a large ceramic teapot.

Misa furrowed her brows. "Are you drinking already?"

"If you don't drink when you’re with the old man, he'll get angry." Ririka put her empty glass on the seat next to her. "After all, the condition for him to tell you his story is that we can eat whatever food we like."

"I thought so." Marika muttered softly. "Is it the old man who's going to tell us his story today?"

"That's right." Ririka clinked her glass with Misa and took a sip. "Former commander of the 58th Mobile Assault Fleet of the 7th Fleet, Gin Kuron[[2]](#footnote-2). If you don't know the face of the boss, you're a smack in the face of this airport, but I guess it's a little secret that the meat-grilling old man was also a fleet commander."

Marika tilted her head. The 7th Fleet shouldn't exist in the Sea of the Morningstar System. The only fleet that was usually referred to as the Seventh Fleet was the Empire's Numbered Fleet. "... Wait, you mean the Galactic Empire's?"

"Yes."

After hearing that simple answer, not only Marika but even Lynn raised their voices. "Is there someone who was even the commander of the Imperial Fleet in a place like this!?" "Is there a retired admiral of the Imperial Fleet at the Sea of the Morningstar!?"

The Galactic Empire, which boasts a vast territory from the center of the galaxy, including the core star systems, to the periphery, possesses a powerful military force. The First Fleet is essentially the Imperial Guard Fleet, the Second and Third Fleets are responsible for half of the core star system, divided into east and west, the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Fleets divide the periphery into three fan-shaped parts, and the Seventh Fleet is deployed in the outskirts that are not part of the Empire's territory.

Independent star systems and interstellar nations within the Galactic Empire each maintain various military forces for self-defense. However, the military strength of the Imperial Fleet, which has the entirety of its assigned star sector as its operational airspace, cannot be compared to that of the star systems military or defense forces. Because its operational airspace is so vast, the military strength it maintains and operates is on a completely different level.

"He was not the supreme commander of the Numbered Fleet. He was the commander of one of its fleets, the assault fleet." Ririka explained, glass in hand.

"Even if you say that, the Seventh Fleet is the largest fleet in charge of the frontier! And an assault fleet is the one with the most combat experience on the front lines."

"As I well know." Ririka smiled at Lynn. "Of course, that was a long time ago, before you guys were born. If you'd gone as far as to command an assault fleet in a numbered Imperial Fleet, you'd be in high demand in related companies or the defense forces of any planet even after you retired. What was he thinking, retiring to be the owner of a Chinese restaurant?"

"What is he thinking!?"

"He won't tell me. That's why it's so hard to even ask."

"Okay then." With a deep, thunderous voice, the giant man in the chef's hat opened the armored hatch. A huge plate of appetizers was placed on the turntable in the center of the round table. "Now, eat with enthusiasm."

Ririka put her glass down, picked up her chopsticks, and rolled-up her sleeves. "If you're not a good eater, the old man won't take you seriously!"

"I see."

Gin Kuron, the huge owner of the Chinese restaurant, emptied his glass of Shaoxing wine with ease and looked around at the faces of the group that filled about half the round table.

A black and white image of two people

Description automatically generated

"Looks like you girls don't know what's buried under your feet."

Marika exchanged looks with Lynn, who was sitting next to her. "Under our feet... you mean Hakuoh Girls' Academy?"

Misa poured Shaoxing wine from a teapot into Gin Kuron’s glass.

"As you know, Sea of the Morningstar is an ocean planet. It's partly due to the current climate, but there isn't much land. Thanks to that, the ocean cities are well developed, but the land area suitable for living is not that large. Have you ever wondered why the girls' school is built on such a huge site with plenty of room to spare?"

Marika and Lynn exchanged looks again. Lynn returned her eyes to Gin Kuron. "I'm ashamed to say, but I've never thought about it. For us, it's something that's always been there."

"I’ve heard that Hakuoh Girls' Academy was once the governor's office of the Stellar Alliance." Lynn and Marika looked at Gruier as she answered. "The government office of Sea of the Morningstar was built in a different place, but the governor's office was preserved as a historical building and was used as a school after the Unification War."

"As expected, you've done a lot of research." Gin Kuron took a sip from his glass and a terrifying smile appeared on his face. "If you want to colonize a star system, by the time you send out an immigrant fleet, you'll have already done a survey of the composition of all planets, and even a crust survey for rocky planets. Unless you're taking a really shoddy report at face value, important buildings will be built on old, stable ground. In other words, Hakuoh Girls' Academy is one of the oldest buildings on Sea of the Morningstar, and it's also built on the most stable ground on Sea of the Morningstar. Now, have you heard where the Federation of Colonial Stars Fleet HQ was located during the War of Independence?"

This time, Lynn, Gruier, and Marika looked at each other. Marika raised her hand hesitantly. "Well, I heard that it was placed in the current relay station."

"Even back in the days of the War of Independence, a relay station was equipped with FTL communications, so it was easy to give orders to the entire fleet under your command and receive status reports. That's certainly true, but it's actually not a very wise idea to place a command center in orbit. After all, it's only a single shot from outside the system with precision fire."

Gin Kuron, who was holding a small glass in his muscular, scarred right hand, quickly spread out his left mechanical arm. "Even if they don't go that far, there are many inconveniences if the headquarters is located in a place where the communication system is completely visible. The relay station serves as the fleet headquarters and handles everything from supplies and maintenance to construction and repairs, but in reality, the headquarters is not located there. Relay stations of course have the equipment and role of relaying orders from the headquarters, but the headquarters is not located there."

"Was the fleet headquarters of the Federation of Colonial Stars located at Hakuoh Girls' Academy?"

Gin Kuron turned his eyes to Gruier. "As expected. That's right. At first, it was the headquarters that commanded only the forces of the Tau system, and later the fleet of the entire Federation of Colonial Stars. Do you know why the fleet headquarters was located in the Tau system among the Federation of Colonial Stars?"

"...Is it because the Tau system is the farthest from the Stellar Alliance in the Federation of Colonial Stars?" Marika answered, using all the vague knowledge she could remember.

"That's right. It would be inconvenient if the headquarters that controls the Federation of Colonial Stars’s fleet didn’t survive until the end. That's why the fleet headquarters was located in the basement of the former governor's office, which is on the most stable ground in the Tau system, which is the farthest from the Stellar Alliance among the main colonial planets. I'm not sure if the Stellar Alliance knew that the fleet headquarters was located in the basement of its former branch office, but I'll leave that research to the experts."

As Misa poured him some Shaoxing wine, Gin Kuron looked at the faces of the three students attending Hakuoh Girls' Academy. "In other words, the former Federation of Colonial Stars Fleet Headquarters is resting exactly as it was in the basement of Hakuoh Girls' Academy. Of the war ruins around here, it's the only one I can think of that isn't open to the public or well-known."

"President, did you know?" Marika asked Lynn. "I can't believe there's something like that in our basement."

"I'm sure all of our students have heard of the Seven Wonders, that a prehistoric civilization's underground labyrinth is buried under Hakuoh Girls' Academy, but I never thought that something as grand as the Fleet Headquarters from the time of the War of Independence was buried there."

"Then are the ghosts in the courtyard and the auditorium people who died during the War of Independence?"

\*Gahahaha\*Gin Kuron laughed, his mouth wide open, as if he was about to eat. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there are no direct battles for the War of Independence on Sea of the Morningstar's surface. The construction of the headquarters was rushed, but it wasn't on such an unreasonable schedule that there were casualties. I don't know what kind of ghosts are appearing, but I don't think it has anything to do with the War of Independence."

"It is said that some ghosts appear at any time and place." Gruier said, looking at Gin Kuron's face. "If the atmosphere is pleasing, ghosts will come. May I ask one question?"

"Permitted."

"Why is the fleet headquarters in the basement of the Hakuoh Girls' Academy not open to the public? Is there a reason why its existence is kept secret even from the students?"

"Unknown." Gin Kuron answered in one word and sipped from his glass. "It's a fleet headquarters large enough to fight an interplanetary war. Even though they were annexed by the Galactic Empire, the colonies were fighting a war of independence with their master planets, even going so far as to assume annihilation, so it may have been that they were trying to preserve their facilities for a possible next war, or it may have been because, not only had the war ended, but the annexation by the Galactic Empire had left them in a state of chaos, and there were no officials anywhere who were willing to actively manage it."

"Is the fleet headquarters from 100 years ago still there exactly as it was?"

Gin Kuron answered Lynn’s question simply and sipped his glass. "I don't know. Even if it was called the Fleet HQ, it was built by the Federation of Colonial Stars. Even if it had been left in active service, it would have quickly become outdated due to technological advances and changes in military tactics after annexation by the Empire, so it would be impossible to use it without constantly updating its facilities and equipment, not to mention the space. The financial situation of the Star System Military, which disbanded the Federation of Colonial Stars, would not allow such a thing."

With the annexation into the Galactic Empire, an all-out interstellar war became almost impossible. The Star System Military's budget is not so generous that it can maintain facilities that are not even sure whether they can be used in preparation for a highly unlikely event.

"However, the fact that the former Fleet HQ is sleeping in the basement of a girls' school seemed to be convenient for those involved. After all, outsiders can't easily enter, and since the Governor's Office was turned into a school, there is no shortage of space to store junk as a research facility."

"Ah!" Marika spoke up as if she had noticed something. "So, not only is our library ridiculously large, but it also has a bunch of weird reference rooms and archives and stuff!?"

"It's not just documents. There's also an old simulator that can be used for military pilot training, an orbital shuttle owned by the school, and even a pirate ship that was used as a disguised cruiser." Gin Kuron's face twisted in amusement. "So that's the reason, I guess."

"It's not like it's not open to the public." Misa added, pouring Shaoxing wine into Gin Kuron's glass. "They just don't advertise it. A fleet headquarters in the basement of a girls' school doesn't have much strategic value now, never mind what it used to be. The location of the Federation of Colonial Stars's fleet headquarters was top secret during the war, but it was declassified after the war, so you can find it if you look into it properly, but not many people are interested in looking into it in the first place."

"It seems that the star system military was trying to maintain it as a reserve headquarters before Hakuoh Girls' Academy was established, but since it became an all-girls school, it's probably just a junkyard. People who know the history seem to have brought in old documents and forced various facilities on it for fun."

"...Now that I think of it," Lynn said after thinking for a moment, "there are old military fighter planes in the hangar at this airport, too, though they've been disarmed."

"What a military, using a girls' school as a cover for old secrets."

Gruier’s eyes sparkled as she clasped her hands together in front of her chest. Lynn, leaning one elbow on the table, pressed her temple.

"What in the world is our star system military thinking?"

"It may have been different in the past, but they're not thinking about it these days." Ririka said, speaking in a low pitch, with a glass in her hand. "The Odette II was moored at the relay station for twenty years until you guys finally pulled her out."

Marika suddenly realized something and looked at Ririka. "So, the military knows all about our club's activities?"

"You don't think they haven't noticed this before, do you?" Ririka looked at her daughter with a smile. "The captain of the pirate ship Bentenmaru and a training sailing ship that was once a pirate ship. You didn't think the star system military, which is already concerned about the troubles in space, wouldn't be concerned about the movements of a spaceship full of problems, could you?"

"Well, I had a feeling that they were turning a blind eye to it." Marika muttered. "I can't believe the Star System military knew that much."

"The intelligence department here is excellent." Gin Kuron said as he took a gulp from his glass. "The military of independent star systems varies widely, but the Sea of the Morningstar system military is quite excellent every respect, aside from their frontline equipment."

"General Quadron will be happy to hear that Admiral Gin said that."

Gin Kuron glared at Ririka who mentioned the name of a familiar person. "Don't say that. In this business, it's better to be praised after you retire."

"I'll keep that in mind." Ririka nodded with a straight face.

"Can I ask you one more question?"

Gin Kuron raised his glass to Marika who asked. "Allowed."

"We know that some of our school's equipment comes from the military, and that there's an ancient fleet headquarters underground. But is that all? Is there anything else our school has that a galaxy-spanning conman could be after?"

"I don't know." Gin Kuron answered simply, sipping his glass. "I was with the Imperial Fleet, not the Sea of the Morningstar System Army. And I wasn't here during the War of Independence." Gin Kuron looked around the guests at the round table with amusement. "When you do business like this in a place like this, you get all kinds of information, but that's all. The stories I've told so far are just stories I've heard from people involved, I haven't seen them with my own eyes."

Gin Kuron fixed his eyes on the three people in their Hakuoh Girls' Academy uniforms. "Do you know the secret to living a long life in space? Never neglect to verify. As long as you understand the situation correctly, there are many measures you can take. However, if the situation you understand is different from reality, no matter what method you choose, the results will be wrong."

"I will keep that in mind." Marika nodded.

"Okay, good kid." The old man broke into a smile, showing off his sturdy fangs. "I'll give you something nice as a souvenir." Gin Kuron placed his empty glass on the table and flicked it with his sturdy fingertips. A clear sound reverberated.

"Yes." Through the armored hatch door, a large man in a chef's coat with sharp eyes entered, holding up a large plate covered with a silver dome cover. He placed it on the turntable in the center of the round table and stepped down.

Everyone at the round table stared silently at the large plate covered with an intricately carved silver dome cover, large enough to fit a severed head.

"What big thing will be served this time?"

"The main dish is already here. This is just a little souvenir." Gin Kuron casually lifted the dome cover with the mechanical hand of his left arm. On the platter there were several long, thin cylinders covered in old cloth piled on top of an old leather briefcase.

"What is this?" Lynn and Marika looked at the objects on the plate with wide eyes. Aside from the large briefcase, they had never seen such neatly tied cylinders, let alone such large ones.[[3]](#footnote-3)

"...Scrolls?" Gruier had seen this type of old-fashioned paper book before, when she attended a coronation ceremony of an ancient imperial family, the ceremony procedure was written on a long roll of paper and distributed. That was the only time she had seen a scroll in practical use outside of an art museum or museum.

"Yes, they’re ancient books. Even during the War of Independence, there's no way something like this would have been used for official documents, so I wonder who was interested in making something like this." Gin Kuron put down his glass and picked up one of the scrolls that were piled up in a pyramid on top of the briefcase. He untied the decorative knot with his thick fingers and shook it lightly.

With a rustling sound, the scroll unrolled straight to the other side of the empty round table.

On the front were rows of ancient type and drawings.

"What is that?"

"It's a map of the escape routes, secret passages, and secret entrances that were created when the Stellar Alliance Star Government Office and the Colonial Star Alliance Fleet Headquarters were built underground, along with instructions on how to pass through them."

"What!?" Lynn’s eyes changed and she stood up from her seat. She peered at the letters printed on the thin paper and the drawings attached to it.

"The Government House was built with a lot of hidden rooms, secret passages, double walls, and other devices from the beginning, because it was the hobby of the Governor at the time. It wasn't built like a fortress, but it was designed to buy enough time for the leaders to escape through the back door in the event of a minor attack. After the Government House was surrendered without bloodshed, they started building the fleet headquarters underground, because they knew that if the headquarters were to come under direct attack in an interstellar war, they would lose for sure, so it didn't have the ridiculous resistance to orbital bombardment, but they still added several secret passages to maintain secrecy."

"Oh." Lynn looked over the long piece of paper that had fallen from the table, over the chair, and onto the floor, then picked up the end of the scroll. "There are a few that I know about. Our school has alumni among its faculty and staff, so many of the shortcuts and secret passages that students know about are also known to the teachers."

"Without the school ethos of Hakuoh Girls' Academy, which values ​​student autonomy, all of these would be blocked."

Looking at the pile of scrolls, Gruier turned her eyes back to Gin Kuron. "Are these all the documents?"

"The briefcase below contains only a portion of the blueprints for the construction of the Fleet Headquarters." Gin Kuron handed Lynn the end of the scroll he was holding. "If I were to include all the blueprints for the headquarters, they wouldn't fit. Construction on the ground isn't my specialty, so I haven't seen the inside. The scrolls and blueprints were left at my shop when the old design office in Sea of the Morningstar closed down. Could you throw them in the reference room for the War of Independence at Hakuoh Girls' Academy?"

"Understood." With unfamiliar hands, Lynn began smoothly rolling up the scroll she had once unfolded. "As the president of the Hakuoh Girls' Academy Yacht Club, I, Lynn Lambretta, will be sure to take care of the documents related to the War of Independence."

"Are you sure you're okay with not going home?" Marika asked Gruier for the umpteenth time. Gruier answered with a smile.

"It's okay. I've prepared an overnight stay notice so I can submit it at any time, just in case something like this happens."

"Overnight stay notice..."

"I just contacted Grunhilde and asked her to submit the overnight stay notice for tonight."

"Oh, right." Seeing Gruier sitting happily in the middle of the bench seat of Ririka's self-driving pickup truck, Marika looked out the window. Her stomach hurt a little from eating too much.

Suddenly realizing something, Marika turned her eyes back to Gruier.

"Just to be sure, where did you stay overnight?"

"The state guesthouse." Gruier answered so nonchalantly that Marika was at a loss for words. "The state guesthouse is safer than the dorms, and there's no need to worry about being checked on by the dorm supervisor."

"Well..." The state guesthouse doesn't answer inquiries from outside about guests.

"...Hey, Gruier, it seems like you have been doing a lot of research on our school, so I wanted to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"What do you think Jackie is trying to do?"

The only sounds filling the cabin were the news radio Ririka was playing at a low volume as background music and the wind noise of passing cars. Gruier spoke. "Honestly, I have no idea. All I know is a little bit of history about Hakuoh Girls' Academy, and a few hidden passages."

"I know, right?" Marika looked at the scenery passing by outside the window. The car was driving autonomously, with safety as its number one priority, so it was driving much slower than Ririka's usual pace. "Even if there was some valuable treasure beneath our school, there should have been plenty of opportunities to take it out since the end of the War of Independence, and the government, which has had wars and annexations and doesn't have a sufficient budget, wouldn't just leave it there."

Gruier chuckled. "That's what I think. So, even if something has value, it probably had no value at the time, or no one noticed its value and it's only now, more than 100 years later, that it has become valuable."

"Isn't that the kind of thing historians should be looking for, not high school girls?" Marika looked at the driver's seat. Leaving the driving to the freeway, Ririka folded her arms and leaned back in the seat. "I wonder if we can find it by looking for it."

"You'd better think about what to do if we find it." Gruier said with a chuckle. "I don't know what in the world we'll find, but if we find it, I think we can claim a certain percentage of the ownership."

"How can you think about it when you don't know what's there or what's going to come out?" Marika muttered, leaning her head against the car window. "Besides, we don't know if that scammer will come after our stuff again. Oh, I have to look into all of those things."

Ririka's pickup truck arrived at the Kato family garage via autonomous driving. Ririka opened the armored shutter-like door with a special remote control, left parking to the autonomous mode, and got out of the pickup.

The garage, which doubles as a storage space, is large enough to park three four-seater commuter vehicles at once. Following the pickup, which automatically moved to a parking space in the corner, Misa drove her commuter vehicle into the garage.

"We're here." Misa called out to Kane in the passenger seat and Lynn in the back seat, who had dozed off on the way back from the Shin-Okuhama Airport. "Come on, wake up! Or are you going to sleep here until tomorrow morning?"

"Maybe that would less physically exhausting." Muttering to himself, Kane got out of the passenger seat. He opened the trunk at the rear of the commuter vehicle and pulled out a briefcase and scrolls wrapped in arabesque-patterned cloth.

"I've contacted the military." Misa reported to Marika, who had gotten out of the pickup truck. "The star system military is aware of the possibility that a suspicious person named Jackie Fahrenheit may have infiltrated Sea of the Morningstar, and the police have been warned. However, since we don't know where he is or what he's doing, and nothing has happened, no dedicated staff has been appointed, and of course no investigation headquarters has been set up."

"It'll be too late once something happens." Marika nodded with a sullen look on her face. "What about Hakuoh Girls' Academy?"

"There are a lot of important people there, not just princesses and pirate captains."

Hakuoh Girls' Academy is the most prestigious school not only on Sea of the Morningstar but in the surrounding star systems, and many children of VIPs from various fields attend.

"Since the DEFCON level is already high for Hakuoh Girls' Academy and its surrounding areas, there will be no change to the alert state. If we tried to be more vigilant, we would end up conspicuous."

"I Understand." Marika raised one hand. After clearing the security of the door from the garage to the interior with her key number, retina scan, and voiceprint, Ririka called out.

"It's open. Welcome to my home."

"I'm sorry to bother you." Kane, carrying a large, cloth-wrapped package, entered the house.

The largest room in the Kato household, the dining/kitchen/living room, was set up as a makeshift investigation headquarters.

Misa brought out a portable high-precision scanner from the commuter and set up a high-speed connection with the Bentenmaru in orbit through an information system that was too powerful for an ordinary home, even taking into account the special circumstances of a housewife being an air traffic controller.

After repeatedly testing the lines with Hyakume and Coorie aboard the Bentenmaru, to check their independence and confidentiality, Marika, together with Misa and Lynn, began scanning the documents she had been entrusted with.

There were a total of 16 scrolls, each measuring anywhere from a dozen meters to several tens of meters in length. From inside the large briefcase, dozens of large-format blueprints were found, precisely printed not on paper but on extremely thin sheets of synthetic fiber.

The high-precision scanner read all the data and transferred it to the Bentenmaru.

"This is serious stuff."

The blueprints were so large that they wouldn't fit on the dining table. They had no choice but to move the table and sofa to make room on the floor to spread out the blueprints for the Fleet HQ, and from a chair they aimed the scanner at them to collect data.

"I had no idea how big the fleet headquarters was, and even at that size, I didn’t think so much information about it would fit in only one briefcase. But dozens of sheets like this could be useful in various ways."

"I'll send the underground headquarters blueprints to the Bentenmaru and have them process them." The image data scanned into the scanner is corrected and sent to the Bentenmaru in orbit for three-dimensional processing. "No one can read these battleship-sized blueprints as they are printed."

"They may be as large as a battleship, but even if they’re reduced in size through precision printing, these blueprints are just an abridged version." Kane is checking the image data captured by the scanner. "A battleship's blueprints wouldn’t fit in two or three containers. If these blueprints were the original version, how many cabinets would they require?"

"We can manage as long as we know the structure. How about you?"

Misa started transferring the image data sent from the scanner to Bentenmaru. Marika, Lynn, and Gruier spread out the scrolls in the empty space and put their heads together to decipher them.

"Well, it seems like there's a complicated link between the hidden passages from the Governor-General’s office and the secret passages from when it became Fleet Command." Leaving aside the blueprints, the accompanying explanations were written in archaic language and were hard to follow. Marika reported only what she understood for now. "Some of them have been destroyed or are no longer usable since the school was established, but some remain and are known, so I wonder how many of the hidden passages and devices shown here have survived."

"The fountain in the courtyard has been turned into a flower bed, so there's little hope, but perhaps the gazebo on Sunrise Hill or the underground passage under the Pegasus statue in the Western Forest could be used. If the structure is exactly as shown here, it may have collapsed somewhere since it's been left alone for 100 years."

"Now that I think about it, wasn’t there was a rumor a few years ago that there was an entrance to an underground labyrinth under the stage of the auditorium, and that a skeleton was found there?" Marika remembered a rumor she had heard in middle school. "The police came, then the military came, cleaned up, and when the ban on entry was lifted, everything under the stage was brand new."

"Oh, I remember that story." Lynn was tracing the structure of the hidden passages that ran throughout the dorms. "I was in middle school then too. I heard that the high school exploration club was teaming up with the architecture and physics clubs to use sensors to find out what was under the decorative panels, but I wonder if they found anything."

"Around here, right?" The auditorium from the time of the Governor-General's Office is still in use today, almost exactly as it was. Gruier moved sideways, hands clasped behind her back, peering at the scroll, and stopped at one point. "The auditorium's stage, um, seems to have been an anti-aircraft combat command center." With both knees flat on the floor, Gruier traced the words with her fingertips. "It seems that during the War of Independence, the auditorium's floor was removed and turned into a hangar for anti-aircraft interceptors."

"Were there fighter planes in the auditorium?" Marika imagined the structure of the auditorium, which was used daily for school assemblies and cultural festivals. "I thought the door was so big that it was for bringing in props and such, so I guess that's the reason."

Lynn stood up from the floor. "During the War of Independence, Sea of the Morningstar was not a battlefield. No actual battles were fought at the Fleet HQ, so there should have been no casualties. Professor Kane, do those blueprints show an entrance between the surface and the basement?"

"I don't know which blueprint I'm spreading out now." After scanning the blueprints, Kane folded them back up and spread several ultra-thin sheets out on the floor. "Oh, take that one and pin it up."

The image data for dozens of blueprints were sent to the Bentenmaru along with the scrolls.

Hyakume and Coorie reconstructed the 3D data of the Underground Fleet HQ based on the blueprints they had been sent. The 3D data of the Fleet HQ, built deep underground at Hakuoh Girls' Academy, was sent to the surface as dawn broke in Shinokuhama City.

"*I think we were only able to reconstruct about 70% of the whole thing from the blueprints we were sent.*" Yawning loudly, Hyakume said from the other side of the communications monitor while yawning loudly. "*These are high-resolution blueprints, so the amount of data is quite large, but there are some parts that don't add up. Since we don't have the actual thing, there's no way to make any adjustments, so we're just leaving it as it is. As for the ground, the current buildings and terrain have been arranged according to the public data and the observation data from orbit, so you can trust that.*"

"Sorry for asking such a ridiculous question out of the blue." Misa tried to expand the data she received in 3D on the information system. The electronic data, which reconstructed the 2D blueprints into 3D, was sent in both a standard map format and a standard used for design. "If it's 70% of the whole, does that mean there aren't enough blueprints?"

"*I guess so. The blueprints you sent me were a mix of the original concept version and the final version, so the timings don’t line up, and there were some missing drawings when you looked at the serial numbers. During the reconstruction, we happened to pass right above Hakuoh Girls' Academy, so I tried aiming the radar at it from orbit, but some parts didn't match the underground cavities that showed up in the reaction, and there were also some open spaces that weren't on the blueprints.*”

“Did you aim the Bentenmaru's radar at our school?' Misa glared lightly at Hyakume on the communications monitor. “I'm shocked. The star system military will intercept us.”

*“It was only for a moment, at low power, as we passed by. If we accidentally aimed a full-scale radar at it, it could cause all the electronic equipment in the school to fail.*”

“Did you find anything?” The Bentenmaru is equipped with not only a high-power radar, but also a variety of sensors.

*“The radar only hit the ground for a moment. A pirate ship like ours can't get such reliable sensing data in passing, we’re not an exploration ship.*" Hyakume on the other side of the communication monitor waved his hand in annoyance. "*Analyzing the data obtained may yield some interesting results, but unfortunately there are no experts on that kind of thing aboard the Bentenmaru. If necessary, can I send you the observation data all at once?*"

Hyakume dropped his eyes to the panel in front of him. "*Well, it should take two or three minutes to send over this line.*"

"I don't need that much raw data." Misa enlarged the unfolded data to its maximum size, then reduced it and rotated it thoroughly before turning her eyes back to the communications monitor. "Thanks, good job. Is anything happening over there?"

"*It's peaceful. The star system military is operating normally, there are no suspicious ships or accidents.*”

“We haven't had any problems here so far. Well, I'll contact you again at the next scheduled time.”

Ending the call, Misa turned to the living room. Kane had sunk deep into the sofa and was dozing off, and Ririka had already retreated to her bedroom. Marika was rubbing her sleepy eyes as she and Gruier put their foreheads together to decipher the second scroll that had been spread out on the floor. Looking over at Lynn, she saw that she was still asleep, face down on the table that had been moved.

“Go to bed now. If you stay up any longer, you'll only make your efficiency worse.”

Having been told this, Marika looked at Gruier, whose face didn't show the slightest hint of sleepiness. It was beginning to lighten slightly outside the window. "No, I'm not sure I'll be able to wake up if I go to sleep now, so I'm awake."

"Just go to sleep." Misa smiled menacingly. "When it's time to go to school, I'll give you an injection or whatever to wake you up."

Marika looked at Gruier's face again.

"I think it's better to sleep even for a short time."

"...I see." Marika laughed helplessly. "That's right. Well, see you tomorrow."

The next morning, Marika, Gruier, Lynn, and Kane were woken up by Ririka, who had retreated to her bedroom and made sure to get some sleep. After a lavish breakfast, which was made from whatever was on hand, Ririka took her pickup truck to the airport, while the rest of them took Misa's commuter car to Hakuoh Girls' Academy.

Marika entered the classroom with a fuzzy head due to lack of sleep.

Her sleepiness disappeared instantly when she saw the face of the new student teacher that her homeroom teacher, Kipling, had brought to the homeroom. "She is a student teacher from Azure Meadow star campus, an independent university."

The female student her homeroom teacher had brought along had unmistakable purple hair that flowed straight down her back. Marika looked at the student teacher's face without making a sound.

"I'm from the Azure Meadow star. I'll be studying history with all of you." The student teacher, wearing a suit that didn't really suit her, looked around at the female students in the classroom and greeted them. "I'm Noel Blue, a master's student in the history department. Nice to meet you."

"Misa, something's wrong!" As soon as her first period of ancient languages class ended, Marika ran to the nurse's office. "There's a bounty hunter at our school!"

As Marika opened the door and rushed into the nurse's office, Misa, who was at the desk, raised her hand. "She's just stopping in to show her face."

As Marika almost fell over, Noel, who was sitting in the examination chair, stood up.

"I knew that this was the school the captain went to, but I was planning to show you my respects later." Noel, dressed in a slender business suit, stood up and bowed politely to Marika. “I apologize for the late greeting."

"Well, well, it's not like this is gang territory."

"A new teacher, who is already attracting attention, suddenly greeting one of the students makes her stand out even more." Misa reached for the teapot on her desk. "What would you like to do? Would you like some tea while you're here?"

"Um." Marika looked at the clock in the nurse's office. There was only five minutes of break left. "Sorry, I don't have time, so I'll do it next time. Noel, I just want to confirm one thing." Marika looked up at Noel, who was still standing. "Are you here chasing Jackie?"

Noel nodded straight ahead. "We don't know where Jackie went after he disappeared on the Shenandoah. To be honest, there's no evidence that he landed on the surface of the Sea of the Morningstar. And it's his usual tactic to suddenly appear out of nowhere."

"If Jackie's purpose is unknown, why did you come here?"

Noel closed her eyes. Then, she opened them and answered. “Because this is the only military ruin that hasn't been opened to the public."

"Oh, I see." Marika shook her head, looking gloomy and downcast. "Misa, I have to go back to class now, so please gather the rest of the information. Well, Noel, see you later."

The fourth period for class 2 was interstellar history, which was the major of student teacher Noel Blue. "Don't I have to prepare for class?"

After seeing off Marika, who had rushed out of the nurse's office with the same vigor as when she had arrived, Misa called out to Noel. "Today is the first day."

Noel turned to Misa. "I'm just observing the class. Besides, I've played the role of a teacher elsewhere."

"So you have plenty of acting experience. Well then, shall we continue our conversation?"

"A bounty hunter? That's quite an old-fashioned one." Lynn opened a carton of fresh juice she had bought in the yacht club room during lunch break.

"She’s a bounty hunter with an Imperial license." Misa used her teacher's authority to get packed lunches from the school store while it was still empty and placed them on the table. "Even though she only has a teaching qualification, she managed to sneak into this school, so she must have some really useful connections. And, of course, she has a solid track record."

"I've always thought something was strange ever since Professor Kane and Misa came." Marika said in a joking tone. “Maybe it’s actually a lie that our prestigious school has strict background checks.”

"Oh, it's well-known in this industry that background checks for Hakuoh Girls' Academy are reliable."

Marika glared lightly at Misa. "What industry do you mean?"

"The military is helping provide information." Misa pointed upwards. "With so many important people attending this school, we have to assume that any scandals on campus will spread outside the school. Many people from this school are also in the political and financial world, so if there is a problem that can be prevented by providing information, anyone would cooperate."

"I see." Marika looked away from Misa. "So that's why pirate crew members, who have a suspicious status, can easily get into the school."

"They're not suspicious at all, they're pirate crew members with licenses issued by the government."

"They don't issue licenses to each individual crew member." After saying that, Marika realized something. "So that means bounty hunters with an imperial license have a much more reliable identity than we do."

"Having a reliable identity and being a reliable negotiating partner are completely different things." Misa looked around the yacht club room, where only Lynn and Marika were present. The other club members were not there during the average lunch break, as the students were busy preparing for lunch and afternoon classes. “At this rate, it looks like Kane isn't coming.” Misa took out a pocket watch from inside her lab coat and checked the current time. "He said he might not be able to leave because he was preparing for the middle school sports festival."

"Maybe it's the same reason why Gruier isn't coming?" Lynn looked at Marika, lunch pack in hand. "What should we do? You’re not going to wait until after school, are you?"

Marika nodded. "I think I'll just check it out." Marika opened the lunch pack on the table. "It would be weird if the president and I weren't there for the afternoon classes, and Misa can't leave the nurse's office empty during lunch break, right?"

"That's right." Misa put the closed pocket watch back into her pocket. "Then I'll leave this one to you."

Marika closed her lunch pack and stood up from the table. "President, let's go."

"Okay."

It took until dawn to decipher the scrolls and digitize the blueprints for the fleet headquarters in the basement of Hakuoh Girls' Academy, and several hidden passages and escape routes had been discovered.

The Fleet Headquarters was built underground, leaving the old Government-General's building above ground intact, and apparently communication with it was via an elevator that is still in use. The old main building, which houses the high school, is a four-story Baroque-style building with a luxurious design with high ceilings on each floor, and there are several classic elevators around the main hall that are still in use today.

The elevator that was originally in the Government-General's building was extended downward to connect the ground to the basement. When the Fleet Headquarters was closed, the elevator control panel was replaced in its entirety, and it is no longer possible to connect to the underground space.

When the Fleet Headquarters was in operation, it seems that all of the elevators in the new building, which houses the junior high school, also connected to the Fleet Headquarters. The new building, which is more than a century old, is not as old as the main building of the old school, which is designated as an important cultural property, so there are many elevators that have been removed and underground passageways that have been closed.

According to the scrolls, in addition to the former government building, there were several other entrances to the Underground Fleet Headquarters, the largest of which was a subway station connected to a long-abandoned and now disused administrative district.

The Fleet HQ managed the Federation of Colonial Stars Fleet, keeping track of the front lines that stretched across tens of light years. It operated on a 24-hour system with three shifts, so there was no morning or evening rush hour. The soldiers and staff who worked at the HQ commuted from the residential areas of the old and new towns of Shin-Okuhama City by public transportation, or by car on the highways, which were not yet automated at that time.

The hidden passages and escape routes described in the scrolls were extensive, including the former government office, the old main building of the current Hakuoh Girls' Academy, the old annex, the library, the auditorium, and gardens, as well as the new main and second buildings, which were literally new at the time. It seems that there were secret passages and escape routes in every imaginable facility and place, not just in the buildings, but also in the gazebos and fountains in the gardens, the stone-paved paths, the ornamental wells, and under the large trees in the botanical gardens.

The main building of the old school, which was the center of the former government office and is the oldest and largest building, has the most elaborate mechanisms. As expected, the suspended ceilings, traps, and other ancient facilities have been removed or filled in during subsequent renovations, but there are still many hidden passages between walls, closed rooms, and secret rooms, some of which are not secret at all as they are used by teachers and students for practical purposes.

A large number of hidden rooms and passages in the old buildings have been investigated by students, and some of them are put to practical use. However, neither Marika nor Lynn, with their insider connections, have yet to find anything that can descend to the underground fleet headquarters. The truth of the legend that there is a great labyrinth beneath Hakuoh Girls' Academy has yet to be confirmed.

During their lunch break, students flock to the cafeteria, which is Hakuoh Girls' Academy's biggest source of calories. In addition to the cafeteria, there are also several stores in the school store and smaller cafés, and many students who commute to school make their own box lunches or buy lunch sets on the way to school.

A group of girls with long hair

Description automatically generated

Behind the old school building, where the high school is located, there is a forest park. Unlike the garden in front of the old school building, which is designed with geometric patterns and has a large fountain in the center, the forest park is a reproduction of the Sea of the Morningstar’s land as well as vegetation from other planets that have been transplanted and reproduced. The back of the forest park, which also serves as a botanical garden, is an untrodden virgin forest, and even further behind it stands a towering mountain.

Unlike the bright front garden, the forest park is home to large trees hundreds of years old, and just behind the old school building, a small path stretches out that is dark even in the daytime thanks to the dense overlapping branches and leaves. The pebble-paved promenade is well maintained, and when the sun goes down, outdoor lights that resemble gas lamps are turned on, but there are hardly any people around.

"I can't walk around and eat anywhere else." While munching on the sandwich in her right hand, Marika put her mouth to the straw of the fresh juice carton in her left hand. "If you do something like this in the school building or courtyard, the teachers and discipline committee will come running right away."

After finishing the first hamburger wrapped in paper, Lynn stuffed the folded up trash into the daypack she was carrying and took out a second one. "So, what are you going to do? Are you really just going to check it out?"

The hidden passage in the main building of the old school, which was once the governor's office, is too conspicuous to sneak in during lunch break, although it may be possible during class. There are several routes in the front garden, but the base of the statues next to the large fountain is known to both teachers and students as an escape route from the main building. Fewer than half of the garden's gazebos and huts still have the same appearance as when the scrolls were written at the time of construction, and the rest have completely changed.

The park behind the main building of the old school was originally a garden, but over the years it has become a forest park. After 120 years, even saplings have grown into large trees, so it is unclear how much of the structure remains, not just above ground, but underground. But at least it is less crowded than the school building and the front garden.

"If that was the case, I should wait until after school when Kane and Misa could be there, and if possible, I should ask our combat captains Schnitzer and Hyakume to come and join us." Marika shoved the rest of the sandwich into her mouth. She put her mouth to the straw in the pack and washed it down with fresh juice. "But if I do that, I'll end up doing nothing in the afternoon. I really wanted to do something in the morning, but that was a bit difficult." Marika put the backpack she had brought from the clubroom back on over her uniform. "If the captain of a pirate ship and the president of the yacht club were to both miss afternoon classes without permission, they'd definitely think we were up to something, so I don't think it's a good idea."

"I thought you'd say that." Lynn started munching on her second hamburger. "You've probably already arranged for someone to answer for you in the roll call. "

"I don't know how much I can get away with."

"At worst, you can make up any excuse if you’re back before club activities after school." Still munching on the hamburger, Lynn took out her mobile device from her uniform pocket. Using just her right hand, she brought up a three-dimensional figure on the display. "Although it's hard to tell what remains of what of ruins from 120 years ago."

The trail in the forest park behind the old school building is wide and covered with gravel. However, the further in, the fewer paths there are, and the narrower they become.

The gravel trail is on the map, but the animal trail that leads from it is not. The dense, overlapping foliage only allows for sparse undergrowth, and in some places the narrow animal trails are covered with moss and fungi.

Because it's a protected area, there are many birds and animals native to Sea of the Morningstar. As Sea of the Morningstar is an ocean planet, the evolution of life took place mainly in the ocean, so no large carnivores developed on land, and only small omnivorous mammals and large herbivorous even-toed and odd-toed ungulates have been found. A few large carnivorous birds of prey have been spotted, but they are not large enough to warrant concern about attacking people.

Lynn had installed the latest version of the overall map of Hakuoh Girls' Academy, which is updated every year, on her mobile device. The map, which combines surface surveys from orbit with field surveys by the Nature Studies Club and field training, is reliable, at least in terms of topography and vegetation.

A hundred years ago, when the trees were thought to be less dense than they are now, the forest park also had a temporary parking lot for staff, and there were apparently several passages that led directly from there to the fleet headquarters underground.

The large, old-fashioned greenhouse that once stood in the forest park had a large elevator installed, making it the perfect entrance and exit. However, about 80 years ago, when the surrounding trees began to grow and blocked the sunlight for the greenhouse, it was moved to a sunny location on top of Sunset Hill.

The move was a major undertaking, with the entire greenhouse, including the facilities and buildings, being moved.

"The big old greenhouse must have been around here." Lynn displayed 3D data on her mobile device. Marika peered at the 3D aerial photograph. The plan of the large greenhouse that still remains on Sunset hill is almost square, and the young trees here are also almost in a square.

"That's true. You can see it from above." Marika looked around the climax forest visible from the trail. The vegetation is diverse and the woods are thick and dark, so it's hard to tell the difference as you walk.

"The underground should be in this area…" Lynn closed the aerial photograph on her mobile device and displayed an overall map of Hakuoh Girls' Academy instead. She overlaid the rough geological map sent by the Bentenmaru in 3D and zoomed in on her current location.

"I can't see anywhere that looks like we can get in." Marika said as she peered at the large 3D display that was unfolding on the mobile device. It seems that the relocation of the large greenhouse was a large-scale project that involved moving the surrounding ancillary facilities as well. Even with the observation data from the Bentenmaru, which is not as accurate or penetrating as an exploration satellite, it is clear that the area where the large greenhouse once stood has had its soil replaced, and that this area has become a homogenous layer of soil. "I thought that would be the case, they weren’t kind enough to go to the trouble of rebuilding it and leaving an entrance to the underground."

"If they dug up the whole thing, they'd fill in any escape routes."

Marika compared the reduced 3D map with the forest in front of her. "What should we do? Should we try and see if there's anything left?"

"Instead, I think we should try the other entrances mentioned in the scroll. If it's in the original place, the underground structure would not have been disturbed, and it would be better to try the other entrances that were in the scroll instead of the one that has changed so much."

It was an ancient Ent[[4]](#footnote-4) cedar standing closest to the old government office. Estimated to be over 2,000 years old, this giant tree had stood long before the discovery of the Sea of the Morningstar, and was also one of the oldest living things currently confirmed.

Ent cedars over 500 years old are called ancient. The center of a growing Ent cedar dies over time, leaving a hollow space in the center, but in the case of large trees this space is about the size of a small room, and an entrance to the underground command center was made in that space.

"Is this it?"

Deep in the forest, away from the walking path, even the few remaining animal trails are completely covered in moss, and beyond that, there is an ancient Ent cedar that is covered in a variety of parasitic species such as ivy and mistletoe, creating an ecosystem all by itself.

"Probably." Marika played the image from the scroll that she had copied onto her mobile device, and compared the enlarged projection of the intricate print with the ancient tree in front of her. "It seems like it's grown quite a bit."

Looking at the image in Marika's hand, Lynn went around to the right of the ancient Ent cedar, where its thick roots were twisting and spreading. On the other side of the wall-like roots, there should be an entrance carved into the hollow of the tree. "Oh dear."

"What's wrong?" Marika followed the president's voice and saw the reason for it with her own eyes. "Oh dear."

According to the diagram and explanation in the scroll, there should be a camouflage door made to resemble bark at the base of the ancient Ent cedar, and behind that should be a small elevator lift. However, over the years, the door made to resemble the surface of the Ent cedar has been completely swallowed up by the roots, and even the doorknob made to resemble a twig is no longer visible.

Lynn stepped between the thick roots and tried to push the camouflage door that was buried deep inside the tree. The door, made of special building materials, is completely discolored, but its structural strength seems to be intact and it won't budge.

"The structure inside seems solid, so if we can just break through this area, we might be able to open the door." Lynn tapped on the surface of the large tree that had engulfed the door. She felt a heavy response, typical of ancient Ent cedar, known for its dense grain.

"I'm sure we can do it with tools." Marika looked up at the ancient Ent cedar, whose trunk alone was the size of a small hut. "Are you reluctant to cut down such a magnificent ancient cedar?"

"It would be different if there was a guarantee that the passage below was usable." Lynn unfolded the 3D map on her mobile device that she had taken out of her pocket. She zoomed in on her current location to see what was underground. The roots of the ancient Ent cedar spread deep into the ground, and although she could make out the silhouette of what seemed to be a vertical shaft leading to an underground space, she couldn't tell if she could get through. "Shall we go to the next one?"

Marika fast-forwarded the pictures on the scroll she had downloaded onto her mobile device. "There's still plenty more ahead."

Deep inside the forest park, there is a small lake. The name Deep Green is written on the map, but not many students know the official name of the lake, which is said to be the birthplace of the yacht club. Back when it was a colonized planet, boating took place here, and the Hakuoh Girls' Academy Yacht Club started with a boathouse and small yacht that were left behind.

The old stone maintenance hut on the lakeside has been left abandoned and hardly used since the wooden pier attached to it collapsed due to aging. However, the hut, which has a four-sided structure made of classical stone walls and a triangular roof made of a lightweight new material, has maintained its shape without collapsing.

Lynn put her hand on the door lever of the maintenance hut, whose path was also covered in undergrowth. The door, made of the same new material as the roof, was moss-green like the stone walls, but the door lever, with a keyhole for an old old cylinder lock, turned without resistance.

"It wasn't locked?" Lynn opened the door, with the universal key for the mechanical lock she had intended to use in one hand.

"I've been waiting for you."

"Wow!" Lynn cried out when she heard a voice from inside. A slim-fitting figure in a uniform stood in the light shining through the dirty window.

"Gruier!?" Marika cried out as she peered into the dimly lit maintenance hut from behind Lynn.

"I thought you'd be here a little earlier." Gruier bowed slightly in greeting, her face calm. Lynn entered the maintenance hut. It seemed like no one had been here in years, and there was a thin layer of dust on the wooden floor.

"Wasn't the middle school rehearsing for the sports festival?"

"I was worried because the opening ceremony rehearsal was on a tight schedule, but we managed to make it in time." Gruier answered. "Are you planning to return in time for the afternoon class?"

" I don't think it's much use asking." Marika also came into the hut. "Why are you waiting here?"

"Misa told me that the two of you were heading to the forest park. I heard that since the large greenhouse was moved from the botanical gardens behind the old government office to Sunset hill, this area has been left almost untouched and kept in its natural state. That being the case, I decided that of the hidden passages in the scroll I saw last night, the hut by the lake was most likely to retain its original structure."

Lynn and Marika looked at each other after hearing Gruier's smooth answer.

"...Did you think about that?"

"No, I didn't know what remained and what was gone, so I thought I'd just have to check everything."

"Do you think that is archaeological talent?"

"No, isn't that the rational thinking of the Imperial education?"

"Hey, Gruier, didn't you think we might not come here?"

"Of course, I considered that possibility." Gruier answered with a smile. "If you hadn't come in another five minutes, I was planning to go see the old well of forgetfulness and the Three Witch Sisters Statue. I heard today that the old well and the witch statue are still there."

Marika and Lynn exchanged glances again. Lynn shrugged, put down her daypack, and took out her work gloves. "First, we'll remove the floorboards and look for the stairs to the underground storage area."

The inside of the maintenance hut was like a storage room, with tables covered in old sheets, stacked wooden boxes, and container cases. Because there is no one to clean it, the light coming through the window, which has become like shaded glass due to the dust, was dingy.

According to the illustration and instructions on the scroll, the entrance to the underground storage can be found by peeling back the floorboards beneath the goblin-weave[[5]](#footnote-5) carpet underneath the round table in the middle of the maintenance hut.

I moved a round table that had been covered with a dust sheet for what seemed like decades, over to the container case by the window, and removed the goblin-weave carpet underneath, thickly woven from natural fibers and with all its color faded. The corners of the carpet were pressed down by a pile of wooden boxes whose contents were unknown, so it was a little difficult to pull it out, but the floorboards underneath, which had accumulated dust over the years, were surprisingly undamaged.

According to the instructions, the floorboards were simply fitted in place, but in reality they were fixed in place with nails. Lynn took a tool knife out of her skirt pocket, opened one of the folded tools, and deftly pulled out the nail.

"You carry something like that around?" Gruier stares with wide eyes at Lynn's hands as she skillfully begins to pull out nails from the floorboards.

"When you're doing electrical work, most of the circuits are inside a case or under an access panel." Lynn picks up a nail that she pulled out surprisingly easily and examines it. The head of the nail has discolored and turned black, but the shaft has retained its silver color as good as new, probably because it hadn't been exposed to air.

"I see."

After pulling out a few more nails, Lynn closes the nail puller and stabs the open knife into the wood. She gently pries one of the boards up. "So the lid is made of wood-engraved building panels." Next, Lynn takes out a flashlight and turns it on, holding it in her other hand, and points it at the darkness beneath the floorboards. A wooden-looking staircase is illuminated. "Looks like we can go. Marika, prepare for an expedition."

"Yes." While Lynn was removing the remaining nails from the floorboards, Marika pulled back the sheet from the table that had been moved over to the wooden box. She took out her expedition equipment from her daypack and arranged it on the table, which had a beautifully polished inlay mosaic. "Did you bring anything, Gruier?"

"Not much, but..." Gruier held up a heavy-duty light she had taken out from somewhere. "I thought we would be going underground, where the energy supply had been cut off for a long time, so I brought an environmental analyzer." Gruier rolled up the sleeves of her uniform. A compact environmental analyzer containing analytical equipment was strapped to her left wrist.

"Did you take it off your training space suit?" The environmental analyzer is used to convert the external environment into numerical data and check it while wearing a space suit. The outside air pressure and atmospheric components are constantly analyzed and displayed, and an alarm is issued immediately if the living environment becomes unsuitable or harmful components are detected.

"Yes."

"Okay, it's open." Opening the floorboards just enough for one person to enter, Lynn shined her flashlight down the wooden staircase.

The underground storage area, which has an area only slightly smaller than above ground floor, was much cleaner than the aboveground floor. It seemed that it hadn't been used since the floorboards were nailed down.

"Gruier, lend me your analyzer."

"Yes."

Removing the strap that was triple-wrapped around her wrist, Gruier handed the analyzer to Lynn. After turning on the main switch and checking that the analyzer was working, Lynn inserted the machine into the hole, hanging from its strap.

The analyzer, which analyzes the surrounding environment in real time, did not detect any abnormalities in the atmosphere of the underground space. In an atmosphere, it sounds an alarm, and even in a vacuum, the display flashes brightly, and notifies of abnormalities through vibrations. The three-dimensional values ​​and visualized graphs displayed by the analyzer did not indicate any changes.

"No harmful ingredients, no breathing problems." After hoisting the analyzer from the hole, Lynn put it over the left sleeve of her uniform. The strap to secure it was quite long so that it could be worn over a space suit. "Well, let's go." Lynn stood up and put her daypack back on her back.

"Please be careful." Marika lit up the stairs leading to the basement. Lynn stepped onto the first step to the basement. She slowly put her weight on it. The stairs didn't even creak.

"It's fine." After kicking the step lightly, Lynn slowly started to go down the stairs. "It looks like wood, but it's probably made of new building panels like the floor. There's no need to worry about it rotting in a hundred years or so."

An old-fashioned light was built into the wall of the basement. She tried to flip the switch connected to the wiring that ran along the wall, but there was no sign of it turning on.

Lynn expanded the light's range and shone it into the basement. "There it is." The spreading light illuminated a huge safe the size of a chest of drawers, placed against the wall. After descending to the bottom of the stairs, Lynn walked through the thin layer of dust in the basement, and stood in front of the safe.

There are two large, finely graduated dials vertically, with a large lever between them. Lynn blew on the dials illuminated by the light, to blow away the dust, then touched it through her work gloves. With just a slight touch, the dials turned easily. "Wow, I've seen it in period movies, but I never thought I'd see it in person."

"Do you know how to open it?" Marika came down to the basement next and shone her light on the large safe. Lynn nodded.

"There was a movie about safecrackers. First, you turn the dials a few times to align the cylinders inside." Lynn vigorously turned the two combination locks, one above the other. Marika projected the image she had taken from the scroll on her mobile device.

"There are numbers written there, like 18 on the right, and 27 on the left, correct?"

"Yes."

"Read them out loud. From the top."

"Yes."

Marika enlarged the image. She read out the description, which looked like a code. "Top, right, 42, left, 68, right, 56."

"Okay."

The mechanical structure of the cylinder lock seems to be assembled with a high degree of precision. She turned the dials left and right to match the numbers on the scale, but she could hardly feel any resistance. Lynn, not knowing if she was doing the right thing, adjusted the numbers on the top and bottom dials.

"That's it." Marika looked up at the safe. Lynn put her hand on the lever between the two dials.

"This should open it, but..." She tried pushing down on the horizontal lever. With the sound of the mechanism engaging, the lever swung straight down and the door of the safe, as big as a chest of drawers, was lifted up. "All right, we can go!" Lynn used all her strength to open the thick door. The double-tiered door of the safe slid open. Marika shone a light into the inside of the safe.

A stone staircase led to the back of the safe. She narrowed the light from the diffused one and shone it as far as she could, but she couldn't see the destination of the dark underground staircase. "It doesn't seem to have collapsed, does it?" Marika switched the display on her mobile device to the blueprints of the underground headquarters and the underground analysis data from Bentenmaru. A thin line continued diagonally underground.

Lynn shone her own light on the back of the safe door. There was a similar lever on the inside, but there were no dials.

She placed her left hand, holding the light, on the stone staircase behind the door. The analyzer didn't detect anything abnormal.

"It's just like the diagram." Marika compared the illustration on the scroll displayed on her mobile device with the scenery in front of her. As she shone a light on the stone steps at her feet, Lynn asked

"Were there any instructions for the passage inside?"

"There wasn't. This is definitely an emergency escape route, so there shouldn't be any traps or poison arrows or anything like that."

"So I guess it's safe then."

The stairs, which look like they were made of carved and stacked stones, are apparently just made to look old using new building materials. Even if the remains are over 100 years old, there's no need to worry if they're made with high-strength new building materials.

Lynn shone a light on the back of the stairs again. There were lights installed at regular intervals on the wall. There was a switch at the entrance to the stairs, but when she turned it on, there was no sign of them coming on.

Lynn checked the remaining power of the analyzer on her left arm and the light in her right hand. There was no need to worry about the batteries running out for a while. She also checked the current time shown on the analyzer's display. Even if they went back now, they wouldn't make it in time for their afternoon class. "Well, let's go."

"We’re off." Marika pointed her light at the stairs to the basement.

A black rectangular object with white border

Description automatically generated

After descending a dozen meters down a straight staircase with no landing, the floor became flat. The humid air had a moldy smell, but the results of the environmental analyzer showed that the atmospheric components were not much different from those on the ground, and no harmful substances were detected.

"Is the ventilation system still working somewhere?" Lynn, who was leading the way, shone her light on the left and right walls, ceiling, and floor in turn. The ceiling is covered with ducts that seem to be used for ventilation, electric wires, and cables that seem to be used for information transmission. "I was taught to be careful of toxic gases and even oxygen depletion when coming to a place like this, but there's nothing here, which is almost a surprise."

"Who taught you that, and when?"

"A senior from the exploration club." Lynn answered without turning around. "When you go into underground caves, or prehistoric ruins (not found on Sea of the Morningstar), or even if you don't go that far, haunted houses or abandoned factories, be careful of things you can't see. If you can see them, you can deal with them unless you're really stupid, but if it's air, gas, or bacteria, you can't see them, and you won't notice them unless you smell them."

"Now that I think about it, Ririka said that you'll be shot by the enemy you can't see."

"Well, I don't think there's any need to worry about toxic gases or serious diseases in the basement of our school, but oxygen-deprived air can happen anywhere."

"It's going down a bit, isn't it?" Marika said, shining her light ahead of her.

"I think it's probably sloped to prevent water from accumulating." Gruier said, following behind. "Old waterways were cleverly designed to allow water to flow with only a slight gradient. If the underground passage also had a slight gradient, water would flow away even if it leaked in from somewhere."

"According to the underground scan from Bentenmaru, there is no place where water has accumulated." Lynn said, walking ahead. Marika nodded. "It seems that there is a cavity that looks like it could fit the entire Fleet HQ, as shown in the blueprints. It's not a crazy structure like some anti-orbital bombardment armor, but it seems to be built sturdy, so even if there is water, it's probably only at the bottom."

"There's a lake and an underground water vein, so we can't complain if it's submerged." Lynn cast a narrow beam of light down the hallway that seemed to go on forever. "Aren't we almost back under the school building?"

"They're not even halfway there yet." Marika projected a 3D map from her mobile device and quickly reduced the brightness of the dazzling image. A flashing red dot indicated their current location, and they still had more than half way down the narrow underground passage to go. Lynn scanned the current time displayed on the analyzer wrapped around her uniform jacket.

"Afternoon classes are about to start. As expected, walking in the dark slows down your speed."

"This is the first time I've been at school but not attended class." Gruier said happily. "So this is the illegal act of skipping class."

"There's still a lot to come." Lynn said without even turning around. "If everything goes according to plan, we may have to enter a forbidden zone without permission, and then take things out without permission or carry out sabotage if necessary."

"What are you saying, president?" Marika spoke in a reproachful voice. "Besides, we don't even know if we can get into the Fleet HQ yet. Is something that we don't even know exists off limits?"

"Adults are sneaky, so when they're dealing with children, they tell them it’s off limits unless they get permission. There are plenty of places on campus that are off limits to students."

"That's true, though."

"It's hard for teachers to follow the rules all the time, so they cut corners, but when it's necessary, they're adults and can make up any number of excuses to get angry. So, we have to deal with it appropriately."

"What do you mean by deal with it appropriately?"

"If possible, it's best to do it secretly so that the adults don't notice." Walking ahead, Lynn raised her fingers and began counting. "The second thing is to adapt to the other side's position and situation so that they'll overlook it even if they notice."

"Yes."

"And what if that doesn't work?" Gruier asked curiously. Lynn held up a third finger.

"If that still causes a problem, prepare some negotiating material in advance to make it easier for the other party to keep quiet. For example, they are not fulfilling their administrative responsibilities, there are security holes, or if it's dangerous, you can use personal reasons."

"President, aren't you saying something terrible?"

"Well, what's really terrible is when the negotiating materials you prepared don't work, or when you can't use the escape route you secured. When it gets to this point, the other party doesn't care about anything, so force is necessary."

"It's like diplomacy has failed and the only thing that can be done is to resort to force." Gruier chuckles.

"When it comes to using force, it will be a battle of physical strength between us and our opponent, so we will be at a disadvantage."

"I know that using force is no good against someone who's been following you for years as their main job. I tried to do something with a hit-and-run tactic, but I failed to escape. It's okay, I'll do better next time."

"President, is that how you got caught?" Marika sighed. Lynn laughed heartily.

“It was a good learning experience. I learned a valuable lesson.”

"What is the lesson?"

"You should only fight wars when you can win them. You should never fight wars you can't win."

"That's a valuable lesson." Gruier said. "As long as you follow that, you won't have to worry about losing."

"How do you plan to win this time?" Marika asked just to be sure, and Lynn turned around and purposely shone the light on her face, smiling.

"I have two secret weapons."

"Secret weapons!?"

"A pirate and a princess." Lynn pointed the light forward again and started walking. "With these two, we probably won't have to worry about losing within a radius of a dozen light years."

"That's not true." "Don't count on it."

Marika and Gruier said at the same time. Laughing, Lynn, who was walking ahead, raised her left hand, which had the analyzer on it. "Don't worry, if we have to use you two, it's probably something that can't be contained within this school. At that point, that con man has already lost."

"There are battles where there are no winners." Marika said with a worried voice. "Just because the other side loses doesn't mean we've won."

"So we have to be careful not to make a mistake about when and where to escape." Lynn pointed her light down the corridor. "Once we're inside the Fleet HQ, all the nearby escape routes will lead to the school. We can either hope that no one sees us or we'll have to use the nearest emergency bell or alarm to attract people." The light illuminated a closed door. "Well, we're finally at the entrance to the Fleet HQ."

The underground passage leading to the Deep Green management hut is not a hidden passage to the Fleet HQ, but one that was built as an evacuation route. It was built in anticipation of a situation in which it would be necessary to escape from the Fleet HQ for some reason, and there was only one road from the Fleet HQ to the underground storehouse of the management hut, with no forks or junctions.

Even if an emergency escape route that is not normally used was locked, it would only make it less convenient in an emergency, so the door to the escape route had no lock or anything. The door, made of cheap new building materials, opened easily with just a simple lever-type knob.

First, Lynn pointed only the analyzer in her left hand at the space ahead. There was nothing abnormal in the atmospheric distribution, and no harmful substances were detected. "We're here, huh?" Opening the door wide, Lynn pointed her light at the dark space beyond. A narrow passage bordered by steep walls continued. The ceiling had exposed structural materials and lights and cords attached, but not a single light was shining, not even an emergency light.

"Where are we now?" Lynn asked, pointing the light here and there. Marika pointed her finger at the 3D map displayed on her mobile device, zoomed out, and moved to confirm their current location.

"We're at the northern edge of the Fleet HQ. Directly above is near the entrance to the forest park, I think?"

"What is this place according to the blueprints?" While keeping an eye on the display on the environmental analyzer, Lynn stepped through the door. It was more humid than inside the hallway, and the temperature was slightly higher. The air was a bit dusty, but there was no unpleasant smell.

"There are a lot of similarly sized rooms lined up, with a corridor on the other side, but the blueprints don't include names for the rooms."

"For now, is this a storage room?" After confirming that the light was shining on a line of containers and box cases, not on a wall, Lynn went further in.

"What's inside?"

"Didn't they move out when they closed down the fleet headquarters?" Gruier looked up at the boxes that had been stacked up to the ceiling by her light.

"When the War of Independence ended, there was no longer any need to command the Federation of Colonial Stars Fleet, let alone the military strength of our own star system."

Lynn found a door at the very back of the room. The plain, new building material door that wasn't even automatic and the simple, practical knob showed that this wasn't a very important room.

“The battlefront, which stretched across light years and hundreds of simultaneous battles, all came to a halt at once. Depending on how the story unfolded after that, it’s possible that the fighting could have resumed, not just against the Stellar Alliance, but also against the Galactic Empire, but in the end the War of Independence ended as it was, and there was no need to worry about an all-out interstellar war."

Lynn touched the old-fashioned switch panel next to the door. She tried moving a few toggle switches, but there was no response. The lights on the ceiling remained dark and silent. "Well, if they're going to close it, they might as well shut it off first."

Lynn put her hand on the doorknob , thinking about how much electricity the Fleet Command Center must have consumed when it was in use.

The mechanical structure, which hadn't moved for over a hundred years, resisted for a moment before unlocking the door.

"Okay, the door isn't locked." Lynn slowly opened the door. On the other side was a homogenous darkness that hadn't been illuminated by light for some time.

"If the headquarters only has to look after one star system, there's no need for a large facility like this. Thanks to this, a fleet headquarters fighting an interstellar war is no longer of use. The Federation of Colonial Stars was a gathering of colonial planets, so there must have been a lot of staff brought in from various places, but since the War of Independence was over, there was at least no need to worry about interstellar war again, so there was no need to move."

"I wonder if there are other things left behind, not just facilities from the War of Independence."

Following Lynn through the door, Marika also left the room.

"Since our ancestors loved records, I'm sure the relevant records are in the public archives or the star system military records library, but our archives are overflowing with them anyway."

The light from the hand light is diffused to illuminate the darkness ahead. A wide, gently curving corridor continues endlessly, with doors lined up at regular intervals on the same side from which we had just emerged.

There were lockers and shelves on the walls, and it seemed as if they had wandered into a disused multi-tenant building in the middle of the night.

"It’s surprisingly normal."

The hallway was wide enough that small commuter cars could easily pass each other, but the ceiling was not very high, as it was underground. Gruier cast her light on both sides of the wide hallway. "So, where are we going?"

"First, the central command room." Lynn started walking aimlessly.

"Even if you can't trust all the blueprints, a simple calculation shows that the underground command center is five times larger than the school above."

"F.. five times!?" Marika raised her voice. Even though she had been attending Hakuoh Girls' Academy since elementary school, there were still countless rooms she hadn't entered.

"We don't know how long it will take to walk the whole place. Let's look around the largest area first."

The central command room of the Underground Fleet HQ is an inverted cone-shaped space with a huge shaft in the middle. It is a seven-story space that gets wider the higher you go, and on the fifth floor there is an aerial corridor that spreads out all four sides from the central shaft.

When the colony planets formed an alliance and planned a war of independence against their ruling planets, the only headquarters to fight such an interstellar war was on their ruling planets. Even then, the entire war was not ordered from one place, but was a headquarters that collected, analyzed, and evaluated information from the front lines and gave orders, and was not designed for an all-out interstellar war that would spread over light years and change by the second.

When the Federation of Colonial Stars envisioned a war of independence against the much more powerful Stellar Alliance, they needed an environment where they could see the entire situation on the front lines, which would be expressed over a wide area, in one place, and where all the staff at the headquarters could share that view.

The design that was selected in the rushed competition was by a university student who was still studying architecture at the time, and the central command room was an improvement based on that design, incorporating the opinions of field staff and researchers, and ended up with a structure similar to that of an old arena or amphitheater.

The thick shaft in the center also serves as an elevator shaft for entering and exiting. The central command room, which has a maximum of seven floors of space carved into an inverted cone shape, is almost circular on each floor, and gets wider with each higher floor.

Around the central shaft were huge displays that could display images in all directions, multiple layers of the most advanced 3D image projection systems at the time, and a map of the entire universe was projected onto the dome-shaped ceiling.

The stadium-like levels surrounding the central shaft are divided into sectors, where information from each planet was gathered, along with staff to analyze, evaluate, and issue commands. Since it is not known where and how large an operation will be launched, or how large a battle will break out, the sector blocks responsible for each star district are not strictly fixed.

The Fleet Command was connected by a large-scale FTL communication system not only to the headquarters of each star system military and defense force on the home planet of each colony planet, but also to all ships directly participating in the battle. Maintaining a FTL communication system across the entire front line, which stretched over light years, was a massive undertaking, as it was not as stable as it is now and the communication rate was not as high. However, even history textbooks say that the reason the Federation of Colonial Stars, which was far inferior to the Stellar Alliance in terms of direct fighting power, was able to fight the War of Independence on an equal footing was largely due to the information network that instantly connected the entire battlefield and the command of the Fleet HQ, which was able to make effective use of it.

"It's huge..."

From the top of the wide bridge, where three commuter cars could line up side by side, Lynn cast her light into the huge space that spread far below. Not only the floors, but also the rows of consoles, chairs, corridors, and stairs were lit up in fragments.

"So that's how it was." Marika projected the structure of the central command room, recreated from the blueprints, on a 3D display enlarged to the limit of what her mobile device could display. She thought she understood the structure from the blueprint, with a thick shaft that penetrated the center of a large inverted cone like a large teacup all the way to the ceiling, and bridges stretching out on all four sides from near the ceiling, but when she was actually there, it was much larger than she had imagined. "How big is it according to the blueprints?"

With her light pointed in the wrong direction, Lynn looked at the 3D display drawn with lines of light. The structural diagram of the central command room reached to the top of her head. "It's about half the size of the front yard."

Marika put her hand into the 3D display and slid the scale, overlaying the ground data of Hakuoh Girls' Academy with the underground blueprint. "There are two more floors above this, then there is the front yard of the old high school building. At its widest it's probably big enough to fit the entire auditorium inside."

"Even the Serenity Star System Military Headquarters, which protects seven planets in three star systems, isn't this big." Gruier pointed her diffused light in all directions over the railing of the bridge. "So this much equipment is needed to fight an all-out interstellar war."

"If we were to do the same thing now, I think it would take about one-tenth of this." Lynn shone a light on the command center from the bridge connecting the shaft to the corridor on the fifth floor. "The performance of electronic devices hasn't changed much, but communication systems, display devices, and software have improved a lot. Things that are now done by computers were done manually in the past, so a lot of people were needed, which is probably why it ended up being such a large space."

"That's one side of the truth, but there were more complicated reasons for it."

The lights the three of them were holding flinched at the voice they heard from behind them.

"As you know, the Federation of Colonial Stars was a collection of autonomous colonies, including the star system militaries and defense forces of four colony planets, the security forces of two pioneer planets, space cities, and relay stations. The Federation of Colonial Stars Fleet Headquarters was the supreme command center of one side of the Orion Arm Unification War, so it brought together staff officers, ambassadors, liaison officers, and people with various titles from each military force. That's why this much space was needed, to gather all the important people in one place."

Marika aimed her light as slowly as possible at the source of the voice. A silhouette appeared surprisingly close, wearing a colorful patchwork suit and a bowler hat.

"Hey, it's been a while." Jackie, who was directly illuminated by the flashlight, was wearing dark glasses for night vision. He raised his right hand in a friendly manner. "I'm glad to see you're doing well."

"I'm glad I didn't bring a weapon." Pointing her light at Jackie, Marika spoke in a low voice. "Even though I know it's useless, I still want to shoot you."

"That's not very nice." Jackie raised his dark glasses slightly to show his true face, and looked around at the three with a dazzling smile. "Captain Marika, president Lynn, and the princess studying abroad. What are you doing here?"

"That's my line!" Lynn shouted as she pointed er second light at him. "What are you doing under someone else's school!"

"Hey, I’m looking for something." Jackie raised his hands as if a gun was pointed at him. "Aren't you guys still in class? Is it okay for you to be wandering around here?"

"I take responsibility for my own actions." Gruier said, standing tall, without pointing her light at Jackie.

"Can you say that you are acting responsibly?" Jackie put one hand on his patchwork jacket and bowed to Gruier.

"I am doing my duty."

Jackie looked up, a smile on his face as he looked around at the three of them. "But you guys came right on time. This planet isn't that small, so you're pretty impressive for aiming for a place like this and reaching it."

"There were a number of hints." Marika took her light off Jackie and shone it around him. She couldn't see anything. "Besides, you were the one who showed yourself."

"Well, if you wandering around in the quiet depths of the planet with a light on and chatting away…" Jackie spread his arms dramatically. "I went to the trouble to get equipment like night vision glasses and heat sensors so I wouldn't stand out, but if you come out and show off like this, I'll know you're here whether you like it or not."

After lighting up the surrounding area, Marika pointed the light at Jackie. His bizarre patchwork suit was illuminated in vivid colors on the dim bridge. "What are you looking for?" Marika spoke as she looked at Jackie's face in his dark glasses. Perhaps the dimming function was working, but he didn't seem to be dazzled by the direct light from the flashlight. “What in the world is there here that you would want?”

"You're asking me that out of nowhere?" Jackie shook his head in admiration.

“I'm not asking how you got in here, or ordering you to leave, or demanding you to surrender, but what are you looking for?”

"Well, you're not going to listen anyway."

Marika looked at Lynn and Gruier, then turned her attention back to Jackie. "I don't know how you got in here, and I don't know how you got from the Shenandoah to the Sea of the Morningstar in the first place, but you're not the kind of person who would meekly listen to me telling you to get out or get arrested."

"Well, that's not necessarily the case. Depending on the time, place, and situation, it's not uncommon to follow the other party's requests. You see, I actually surrendered to you completely last time."

"We're not your negotiating partners now." Marika slammed him down. "We’re your enemy. Depending on your answer, you will be immediately targeted for elimination. Answer me. You are a wanted man being chased by bounty hunters. Why did you come to a place like this instead of running away? What exactly are you looking for?"

"I’m not running away, lately I’m always on the run." Jackie raised his right hand in disapproval. "I'm used to being chased, but this hunter is special. No matter how well I thought I was dodging her, I’m being chased with unbelievable timing. I wonder what kind of magic she is using."

Jackie pointed to the dome-shaped ceiling of the central command room with his index finger. "Is she still up there?"

"So you even have all that information?" Lynn muttered. "But you're not going to run away?"

"If you’re being chased no matter how much you run away, then the situation won't change much if you just keep working." Jackie closed one eye conspicuously. “The key is to get my work done before they catch up with me. Don't worry, as long as I get the timing right, I'll be fine.”

"The fact that you've come out in front of us and explained everything to us so politely means that we're not even on the list of pursuers, right?" Gruier asked to confirm, and Jackie bowed.

"I may be your enemy, but I don't see it that way. I see you as trustworthy business partners." Jackie looked around at the three of them with a frivolous smile. "It's a pity that I don't have your trust."

"Oh, I trust you." Marika sighed lightly. "I don't doubt for a second that you're an untrustworthy conman." Marika glared at Jackie. "Can you tell me what you're looking for?"

"Well, you see." Jackie put his hand to the brim of his patchwork bowler hat, as if he was thinking for a moment. "I wonder if you will believe me. I'm looking for a surrender document signed with the names of the plenipotentiaries of the Federation of Colonial Stars: Sea of the Morningstar, Sea of the Forest Star, Sinclair, Minerva D, Green Sea, and Silver Fields."

"A surrender document?" Lynn asked back. Marika tilted her head. "You mean the armistice agreement from the War of Independence? It should be on display in the archives, not here."

"It's not the armistice agreement. It's the surrender document." Jackie looked around. "Just the three of you?"

"For now." After saying that, Marika added as if she had noticed something. "Don't you know? Knowing you, you must have brought in the necessary sensors and deployed them already."

"But I didn't have enough time and I didn't have enough equipment, so I don’t have any good tricks up my sleeve." Jackie shook his head with a miserable look on his face. "I didn't intend to stay long, so I didn't bring enough luggage and didn't have enough time, so yes, I’m having a hard time." Jackie pointed underfoot. "But I can manage with this number of people. Would you like some tea?"

"Tea?" Marika and the other three looked at each other, their lights shining on his colorful patchwork suit.

"Building a nest like this..." Marika cried out in astonishment.

"The secret to maintaining a comfortable working environment is to create a comfortable living environment." Saying this nonchalantly, Jackie turned on the lights in the room and put his dark glasses in his suit pocket. An old-fashioned stand lamp connected to a highly efficient energy pack cast a soft light on the room, which seemed to be for a high-ranking official.

"Well," Lynn looked around the room, which resembled an old hotel room, with functional lights hanging from the ceiling and a primitive but still respectable information system, with interest. "It's ruined."

"Well, it's a home away from home."

From the beginning, the underground command center was required to operate 24 hours a day. The staff was supposed to work in three shifts, but it was easy to imagine a situation where they would have to deal with an emergency at full capacity.

Ample food supply facilities were built above and below ground, and accommodation facilities were also installed at the Fleet HQ so that they could continue living without taking a single step outside. Even though the worst case scenario of the home planet becoming the front line was not anticipated from the beginning, the Fleet HQ was built to continue functioning while holed up there.

For the top brass and staff, who were expected to work the hardest, and the military attachés and ambassadors sent from each planet that joined the Federation of Colonial Stars, private rooms with facilities comparable to those of a first-class hotel were prepared. Equipped with high-definition displays instead of windows, which could project the scenery of the planet of the senior official's choice, and are equipped with not only a bathroom, toilet, and shower, but also a simple kitchen.

Jackie was using one of the private rooms for senior officials near the central command room.

The external energy supply that had once supported the fleet command center had now been cut off from the main control. It would not be impossible to restore the energy supply if they followed the prescribed procedures and performed inspections and maintenance, but after weighing the effort and danger involved, Jackie decided to solve the problem on his own.

A high-density energy pack the size of a small bag can power an entire building, allowing you to use as much energy as you want without relying on an outside source. Any form of energy usage will cause a small increase in heat radiation inside the underground command center, but there is no way around that.

Jackie chose not a suite for an ambassador or an admiral, which would have a reception room for visitors and a separate room for secretaries, but a private room for a high-ranking official, which was not very large but functional. The bed that had been prepared in advance was still there, with the cover still on, as it had been locked when the Fleet Command Center was closed.

The furniture, such as the table, chairs, and sideboard, had been removed, and the room, decorated with old, elegant wallpaper, was empty. Jackie had built a tent in the middle of it, like a simple clean room, made of lightweight sheets, and secured a workspace connected to a laptop computer and some mysterious electronic equipment.

Several lights for outside work were hung from the walls and ceiling as illumination, and there was even a table and chairs like those used for outdoor camping. A portable workstation equipped with a multi-screen display was spread out on the table, along with some half-eaten rations and drink packs, and a three-dimensional display was slowly rotating a schematic diagram that seemed to be a diagram of the underground Fleet Command Center's structure.

"A small but pleasant home." Jackie, who was leading the way, called out to Lynn, who was about to touch the bed with the sheet still covering it. "You shouldn't touch it."

Lynn stopped for a moment and then touched the bed without any hesitation. There was no resistance, and the more she pushed, the more the sheets sank in.

"It seems the cushioning has deteriorated over time." With a wry smile, Jackie removed the transparent sheets that were hanging like curtains, surrounding the room on all sides. "The mattresses on the beds in the remaining rooms are all mushy and falling apart. If they had been made of natural materials, it would have been fine, but I guess they were synthetic, which prioritized cost. Thanks to that, I had a terrible experience when I tried to sleep on them in the first room."

"You’re totally at home here." Marika frowned and looked around the room, which was dotted with lights, as she stepped through the transparent sheet. The room felt like an old hotel, but the only lights were from handheld lamps, which made the situation even more uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, but I wasn't planning on inviting any guests." Jackie pulled out a container case from somewhere and placed it next to the table. He pulled out a folding chair and turned his attention to Gruier. "Please come in."

After glancing at Marika and Lynn, Gruier walked over to the chair as invited. "Thank you."

"Well, make yourselves at home." Showing Marika and Lynn the container case that was placed next to the table, Jackie picked up a crudely made black iron teapot from the hot plate on the floor. "Would you like some tea?" Without waiting for a reply, Jackie pushed aside the display on the table, which was slowly rotating in 3D. He filled the empty space with mismatched mugs and teacups of different shapes and sizes, and began pouring tea from the teapot. "This is the last of the Shenandoah stock from West Claire. They say last year's tea leaves were good."

Marika had been watching the tea being poured into the cup with a suspicious look on her face, relaxed as she sniffed it. "Oh, it smells really good."

"Do you want to try a taste[[6]](#footnote-6)?" Jackie handed Marika the first mug.

"There are plenty of easier ways to poison me, aren't there?" Marika stood in front of the table and picked up the mug. She shone her light on the black tea in the cup to check the color. It wasn't bad.

After looking at Lynn and Gruier’s faces, Marika took a sip of the tea from the cup.

"Please forgive me if it's lukewarm." Jackie raised the pot.

"I don't like it hot." Marika swallowed the tea in her mouth and glared at Jackie. "It's delicious. You’re disgusting."

"It's an honor to have you drink it." After pouring tea into the other three cups, Jackie put the pot on the table and sat down on his container case. After taking his Sierra cup and taking a sip, he looked around at Gruier, who was sitting in a chair, Marika, who was still standing, and Lynn. "So, what were we talking about?"

"The surrender document." Lynn said bluntly and sat down on a worn shipping box. "We’re talking about the document you're looking for."

"Oh, that's right." After carefully placing the Sierra cup on the table, Jackie clapped his hands as if he had just remembered something. "What's the easiest way to explain it? Well, first of all, a surrender document is a contract between the parties involved in ending a war. Is that okay?"

"I'll ask you questions if I don't understand something." Gruier said, staring intently at Jackie's face as she sat at the table. "Is that surrender document the one that was supposed to be used in the recent Orion Arm Unification War?"

"That's right. Generally speaking, it's harder to end a war than to continue it. For the Stellar Alliance, which had overwhelming military power, defeat would have meant simply withdrawing military forces from the Federation of Colonial Stars, but the Federation of Colonial Stars must have anticipated a mainland battle in which their own planets would be overrun. Your ancestors were pretty cold about that."

Jackie looked at Marika and Lynn.

"I suppose it was understandable that, considering the circumstances, the political struggle to secure a slightly better living environment hadn't produced the desired results, and they had no choice but to resort to war, a poor diplomatic strategy, but it seems the ancestors of the colony planets had no intention of fighting a war of annihilation. Of course, if they didn't give the appearance of continuing the war and getting the Stellar Alliance to commit forces, even if the battle on the mainland had been a complete defeat, they couldn't continue the war, so I'm sure those policies were kept top secret only among the leaders."

"The Federation of Colonial Stars, which fought the War of Independence, must have anticipated the worst case scenario." Gruier's voice was calm. "For a leader, war is the worst outcome. No matter how nicely they use words to gloss over it, war is the result of all negotiations failing, and the result is the use of force."

"As expected, the Serenity royal family's imperial studies are pragmatic." Jackie grins and laughs. "In other words, the natural course of events in a war is for the parties involved to want to end it as quickly and easily as possible. However, it is ten times more difficult to end a war than to start one. This is especially true for the Federation of Colonial Stars, which started it despite being inferior in military power. However, in situations like this, it is often the side with no military power or funds that approaches things sincerely and realistically, and a lot of interesting things happen."

Jackie looked around the guests at the table with amusement. "I think it was a desperate measure to issue privateer licenses to civilian spaceships and add them to the pirate force, but the result is well known. They focused on trade wars and avoided direct combat as much as possible. If they faced the Stellar Alliance system's military head-on, the result was obvious. They focused on extending the enemy's supply lines and dragging them down. Buying time and making them work for free would force the side that maintained the fleet to spend more. It is obvious that both sides want to end the war as soon as possible, but they also want to win. However, unfortunately, once the war has begun, it is impossible for both sides to become winners. Therefore, the Federation of Colonial Stars, which was inferior in military power, chose not to win but not to lose as a strategic policy."

The history of the War of Independence is taught in elementary school classes on Sea of the Morningstar. It is a history that every Sea of the Morningstar citizen knows.

"Of course, the war will drag on. The front lines will expand to all the colonies. To be precise, interstellar wars are mostly skirmishes along pre-determined routes, and no one wants to fight a large fleet unless they can guarantee victory, but I'm sure you all know the details of the Unification War better than I do, so I'll skip them for now."

Jackie took out a pack of food from somewhere. It had a red military symbol printed on it that neither Marika nor Lynn had seen before, and when he opened it, small baked goods were packed tightly together inside. "These are butter sandwiches from a place called Marstar. They're high in calories, so I don't recommend eating too many, but they taste good." Jackie picked one up, put it in his mouth, took a sip of tea, and resumed his tale.

" Well, that's why, in order to make the most of all their limited forces, the Federation of Colonial Stars built a fleet headquarters here to centralize their forces. As you can see, it's a large-scale facility, but it was easier and cheaper than building several space battleships, and best of all, it was a success."

Jackie spread his arms wide.

"After all, if we're talking about a simple comparison of military strength, the colonial power's space fleet is more than ten times the total strength of the Federation of Colonial Stars. Of course, they couldn't allocate all of that to the colonies alone, but if they fought honestly, the war wouldn't have been viable in the first place. And the people who were more aware of this than anyone else were none other than the military and government officials on the colonial side. Otherwise, it would have been difficult to continue a war for such a long period of time against an enemy that was supposed to be overwhelming. There wasn't much difference in the perception of the situation between the parties involved, which is probably why the Federation of Colonial Stars, a ragtag bunch, was able to continue the war. Well, I'll leave that to the research of historians."

Jackie cleared his throat and continued.

"The fleet headquarters established on the Sea of the Morningstar was expected to not only directly control the battles in front of them, but also to control the direction of the war itself. Of course, since the main leaders of the Federation of Colonial Stars were gathered in one place, they would carefully consider not only how to proceed with the war in front of them, but also the outcome of the war beyond that. An old wise man once said that a battle is always fought by thinking two or three steps ahead."

"Who are you talking about?" Gruier didn't take her eyes off Jackie's expression.

"Well, I think he was a captain who had been an ace pilot. Anyway, your ancestors, who had the opportunity to gather in one place and centrally control the war, discussed various things about what would happen in the future. After all, even if they gathered all the big shots, the fleet command center of an interstellar war would be waiting 99% of the time. The rest of the time, the big shots would be waiting for the results of the intelligence department's analysis, watching the progress of the battle on the front lines, and waiting for new information to be brought to them."

Jackie looked at Marika.

"In other words, there was plenty of time to consider, consult, and debate. So your ancestors considered all the possible developments that could be expected in the future, and thoroughly studied how to deal with them."

Jackie started on the second baked good.

"Well, in reality, the best intelligence elites and the sharp-tongued think tanks have just selected the results of their investigations into various cases, but if you imagine possible situations and think about how to deal with them, you can respond quickly when the time comes. Both sides, those with superior and those with inferior in military power, have equal amounts of time, so if you use it wisely, it's not a dream to turn the situation around."

"If you're waging an interstellar war as part of diplomacy, that's the natural stance to take," said Gruier. "A leader's job is to accurately assess a situation without being overly optimistic or pessimistic."

"That's right. So, Fleet Command ran simulations of realistic war outcomes, from the easiest way to win to the worst way to lose, and how to deal with them. So, what do you think would be the best win for the colonies?"

"It's not a typical movie plot where they control the parent planet or anything, is it?" Lynn reached for the baked goods from the pack Jackie had opened. "Our ancestors started a war of independence. So if the colony planet Sea of the Morningstar can gain independence from the Stellar Alliance, that's fine."

"That's right." Jackie pointed his index finger at Lynn, as if to say, "That's perfect."

“The Federation of Colonial Stars Command was full of stingy realists, not dreamers hoping for an overly convenient turn of events like taking over the Stellar Alliance and colonizing it. The greatest victory would be for all the forces in the Federation of Colonial Stars to gain complete autonomy, just like the president said. But there are many ways to lose."

Pretending not to notice Lynn's slightly uncomfortable expression, Jackie pointed his index finger at Marika. "What do you think would be the worst case scenario for losing?"

After a moment's thought, Marika answered. "The total destruction of the colony."

"That's also correct." Jackie pointed his index finger at the ceiling like a fired pistol. " Even though it was an interstellar war a long time ago, they still had high-energy beams and atomic bombs. If they wanted to, either side had the science and technology to turn an entire planet into ashes. But considering the difference in their military strength, it's not that difficult to imagine how much of a win they could realistically expect, and how far they would be pushed back and lose. Thanks to the intervention of the Galactic Empire, the war of independence against the Stellar Alliance didn't end up being a long-term battle, as is often the case, but by then, the headquarters had envisioned a variety of possible ways to lose, and had even considered the necessary preparations for that and how to rebuild after the war."

Jackie nodded in agreement at his words. "They had great people in the past. They didn't just think about what would happen if things went well, but also what would happen if things went bad, and even the worst case scenario, and they thought about what to do in each situation and how to minimize the damage. And among the worst case scenarios was the option of unconditional surrender to the Stellar Alliance."

Jackie looked at his audience one by one. "To what extent can you endure a losing war? How much must the odds be stacked against you before they raise their hand? To what extent will you compromise, or will you keep the peace negotiations just a pose? Of course, on the surface, you have to act like you're willing to continue the war even if one or two colonies are destroyed, otherwise in interstellar negotiations, the more you show weakness, the more you'll be exploited. You can't fight a war against an overwhelming opponent."

Jackie picked up the black iron teapot. "But no matter how brave the words they preach, the conditions for survival are tougher on a colonized planet than on their parent planet, and a colonized planet still in development can't even keep its local development personnel alive without continued investment. So, an unconditional surrender, assuming the worst case scenario, was anticipated and prepared for at a fairly early stage."

He refills his cup and looks around at the three people at the table. "Would you like another?"

No one answers. Jackie puts the pot back on the hotplate. "Unconditional surrender from a colony that started a war of independence may seem shameful to an outsider, but for the people involved, it's just a return to the way things were. Of course, no one is so naive as to expect everything to go back to the way it was, but as long as the planet and its people remain, there is plenty of hope for the future. I haven't been able to find out what conditions the Federation of Colonial Stars set for unconditional surrender to the Stellar Alliance, but if even one of the colonies in the alliance was on the verge of collapse, it would be common sense to step aside at that point."

Jackie took a sip of his second cup of tea. "As I said before, the Federation of Colonial Stars had a policy of having the Fleet HQ not only command individual battles, but also control the war itself. Of course, they would have been in close contact with their home planet on a regular basis, but the fact remains that the battle situation in space changes at faster than light speed, whether it was 100 years ago or now. If the battle situation changes at faster than light speed, then that means the war posture also changes at faster than light speed. So, in order to do their best, the Federation of Colonial Stars gave the Fleet HQ full authority to wage the war. And that full authority included the last resort of surrender, is that correct?"

Jackie looked around at the three faces of Lynn, Marika, and Gruier. No one nodded. Lynn was just giving Jackie a suspicious look as proof that she was listening, and Marika did not have a good look in her eyes. Gruier, too, had a serious look on her face and didn't take her eyes off Jackie.

Jackie continued, knowing that Gruier was someone who could gauge the sincerity of someone’s words and actions from their facial expressions.

"And so, while it probably wasn't immediately after the war began, it was probably after the fighting had intensified and the pirates had begun to achieve notable results. In considering how to end the war, a document of surrender was also prepared. It was an unconditional surrender document signed by the four colony planets, two pioneer planets, the relay station, as well as the plenipotentiaries of the space cities, all of which were members of the Federation of Colonial Stars."

Jackie looked around at the three of them, as if to enjoy their reactions, but there were none.

"With this, the Federation of Colonial Stars could immediately stop fighting on all frontlines by accepting unconditional surrender. Well, the cleanup and post-war processing would be difficult, but no matter how desperate the situation was, it would be possible to avoid even more horrific damage, and the existence of a surrender document that can be issued at the discretion of the leadership is significant."

Lynn and Marika look at Jackie with a puzzled look. Only Gruier is slightly furrowing her brow.

"The surrender document was prepared in accordance with the official format." Jackie continues.

"The Galactic Empire allows any star system that belongs to it to use their own forms as official documents within the Empire, as long as they meet certain standards. And there is no reason why the surrender document prepared by the Federation of Colonial Stars should not be recognized as an official document, both by the standards of that time and today."

Gruier hung her head slightly.

"It's a surrender document signed by the plenipotentiaries of the pioneer planets, including Sea of the Morningstar, Sea of the Forest Star, and others, which have now been fully developed and are secure." Jackie added even more information. "And here's the most important point: the four colony planets and two pioneer planets political systems have remained intact even after the War of Independence. In other words, even if it was created during the Unification War long ago, the surrender document is treated as an official document."

"What use is something like that?" Lynn spoke up. “Sure, it may be a historical document, but what value does an unused surrender document have other than as an antique?”

"Do you agree, Captain?" Jackie turned to Marika.

“The War of Independence was a war that ended 120 years ago, in which neither the colonies nor the ruling powers expected that they would be annexed by the Galactic Empire.” Marika said, staring at Jackie. "What use is an unused surrender document from a war that ended so long ago?"

"What do you think, Princess?"

"I'm currently studying abroad. I don't like being called Princess." After giving a formulaic answer, Gruier spoke slowly. "The Galactic Empire respects the autonomy and laws of each star system. It doesn't matter when it was annexed by the Empire. If the contracts that were in place were to become invalid or the laws no longer applied just because it became part of the Empire, it would be impossible to measure the amount of chaos that would result."

"Exactly." Jackie nodded with satisfaction. "That's why, no matter how long ago a law or regulation was enacted, a civilized person must obey and abide by it. That is the duty of a citizen living in a country governed by law."

"What part of you is a citizen living in a country governed by law?" Marika grumbled under her breath.

"The effective period of a law, like the expiration date of a contract, is left to the discretion of each star system. In a community governed by the rule of law, the laws up to the constitution can be rewritten all at once in the event of a defeat or revolution, in which the community's leadership is replaced all at once, but at least the Federation of Colonial Stars, including Sea of the Morningstar, has not experienced such a change since the Unification War."

Gruier looked at Lynn and Marika.

"Even now, there are many laws on Sea of the Morningstar and other planets that were part of the Federation of Colonial Stars that were enacted before the Unification War and are still in use."

"Now that I think about it, the date of Sea of the Morningstar 's constitution is before the Galactic Standard Calendar, right?"

At first, Sea of the Morningstar used the same calendar as the Stellar Alliance, but when the War of Independence was declared, a new calendar common to the Federation of Colonial Stars was issued, and after it was annexed by the Galactic Empire, the Galactic Standard Calendar was adopted. The new calendar was used in conjunction with the Galactic Standard Calendar for a while, and is still written on some locally produced calendars, but it has long since ceased to be used in official documents.

"In other words, the surrender document created by the Federation of Colonial Stars during the Unification War was created under a political system that still exists today, and was certified by each participating planet. I'm sure that even by modern standards, the archives officials and government officials would recognize it as a fully valid official document."

"But it was never used?" Lynn asked with a dissatisfied look. Jackie nodded with a smug look on his face.

"It's precisely because it was never used that it can be used." Jackie looked at Marika and Lynn again. "It's a surrender document signed by a political system that still exists, in accordance with the official format. There's no reason why it can't be used. In fact, if any government that was once part of the Federation of Colonial Stars, not just Sea of the Morningstar, were to invalidate it, it would only cause more problems."

Jackie gave Marika a meaningful smile. "For example, the privateer license that you rely on for your work. Sea of the Morningstar issues that license, and the Sea of the Morningstar government guarantees its qualifications. Privateer licenses were issued according to a format established during the War of Independence, and are still in operation under the regulations of that time. If the officially issued surrender document could not be used, then the privateer license and other official documents would lose their validity."

Jackie looked around at the three of them again. "That's what a contractual society that values ​​promises and trust means. The circumstances under which it was created are secondary, and a formal document created by the right people following the proper procedures will have the expected effect. That's why the universe runs smoothly."

"...So, does that mean that the surrender document signed during the War of Independence is still valid?" Lynn spoke, pausing between each word.

"That's right." Jackie nodded. "The Orion Arm Unification War, your war of independence, ended with your annexation to the Galactic Empire, which neither your parent planets nor colonies had anticipated. In other words, no surrender document was signed, let alone an armistice agreement."

Jackie looked back and forth between Lynn and Marika. "The Stellar Alliance, colony planets, pioneer planets and stations were all annexed by the Galactic Empire, and the situation and position changed drastically, becoming a much more serious situation than a war, so no one thought about cleaning up the aftermath of the war that was left unresolved. I think that's the correct way for bureaucrats to work when they have a lot of work to do, and thanks to that, this planet and Stellar Alliance are running smoothly. I don't think anyone would complain if our ancestors said they did everything they had to do."

"The war is over." Marika said in a low voice. "But the surrender document never went into effect. Even if you're right, what use is that surrender document now?"

Jackie looked at Gruier, who had a serious look on her face, and then back at Marika. "If you're the captain of a pirate ship working with a privateer's license, wouldn't you have already realized that?" Jackie raised the corners of his lips.

"Whoever obtains the surrender document will be able to own this planet.[[7]](#footnote-7)" Jackie slowly looked around at the three of them.

Lynn’s expression didn't change. Marika's gaze shifted rapidly. Gruier, who had been staring at Jackie, spoke up. "Is that why you came to this planet?"

Jackie picked up his cup and slowly looked around at the guests at the table. "Exactly." Jackie took a sip from the Sierra cup containing the now cold tea. "I came here for the document that will get me this planet." The sound of Jackie sipping tea echoed throughout the space surrounded by the thin sheets.

Gruier, who hadn't even touched her teacup until then, started to take a bite of the baked goods on the table. "If you're revealing your secrets to us to that extent, does that mean you haven't got it yet?"

Jackie held the Sierra cup to his mouth and turned a curious gaze at Gruier. “It's really great working with you guys.” Jackie put his half-empty cup on the table. "The tension is so high. Captain, you're blessed with great company."

"I'll admit it, but I don't want to hear that." Marika fixed her eyes on Jackie. "If you've come all the way out here with bounty hunters chasing you, and are willing to tell me this story at length, it means you haven't got it yet.”

After saying that, Marika looked at Jackie again as if she had suddenly realized something. "You're not going to get it?"

Jackie nodded with satisfaction and then burst out laughing. "As expected from the captain of the pirate ship Bentenmaru. It feels good to have you answer my questions so perfectly."

"If you are explaining it to me so thoroughly and politely, it must mean that the information is no longer useful to you!?" Marika exclaimed. "Gruier, is what he is saying true?"

"I don't sense any lie in it." Gruier answered, with her eyes fixed on Jackie. "If you are also a member of royalty, you know that the fate of a planet can be determined by a single contract, right?"

With a smirk on his face, Jackie turned to Gruier. After watching Jackie's expression for a while, Gruier nodded. "And there should be sufficient precautions in place to prevent that."

"By the way, how much do you guys know about the situation here?" Jackie pulled out a three-dimensional diagram of the underground command center that was slowly rotating next to the table. At a glance, it doesn't look much different from the one Marika and the others have. "I've only checked the area I walked around, but I still managed to find a place that looks like it might have the treasure I’m looking for."

Jackie put his hand into the slowly rotating 3D image, zoomed into a part of it, then picked up his cup.

A group of people in a room

Description automatically generated

"What do you think? If you'd like, I'll be happy to show you around."

Marika, Gruier, and Lynn looked at each other. "We’re sure you're thinking of something no good." Realizing that the other party was listening right in front of her, Marika lowered her voice apologetically. "Since you're willing to show us around, we'll accept."

"There's just one thing that bothers me." Lynn glanced at Jackie. "Why would a conman who came here to look for such an important document talk to us at length and show us around?"

Marika and Lynn looked at Gruier, as if looking for an answer.

Gruier shook her head slightly.

"As you can see, he doesn't seem cornered. Rather, it seems like he's enjoying the situation."

Marika, Lynn, and Gruier all looked across the table at Jackie.

"Have you come to an agreement?" Jackie, pretending not to hear, put his cup on the table. "Well then, let's go."

"I'm sure you know, but even though it's data from 120 years ago, most of it is electronic." Jackie explained as he walked ahead, his back turned to the three of them. "The advantage of electronic records is that they don't take up much space. The disadvantage is that you need some kind of reader to read the recorded data. If you can read it with a general-purpose reader or cable or whatever and transfer it to a modern machine, you can restore it, decrypt it, or do whatever you want, but if you can't read it, any data becomes just junk."

"What's the big deal now?"

As long as technology develops, media will continue to innovate. It's been a long time since hardware reached the atomic limit, but software innovation continues. Technological innovation is not as fast as the industrial and information revolutions that most civilizations have experienced, but old technology is still gradually being replaced by new technology.

"So, digitized data is also stored on the network at the same time, and kept in raw form. That's common sense, isn't it?" Lynn, who often works with old media and mysterious formats as a hobby and special skill, complained.

"You know that not all of the data in the world is preserved." Jackie said as he walked ahead. "Just as memories that are not recalled gradually fade, records that are not accessed slowly die. Even if it's backed up in various places, you won't know if it's in a place where you can easily access it when you need it until the time comes. And ever since intelligent beings learned how to record, the amount of information stored increases infinitely, regardless of the form it takes."

Jackie walked smoothly down the wide corridor as if he knew the structure well. Marika suddenly had a bad feeling and glared at his back. "You don't know where to find what you're looking for, do you?"

"Don't worry, this is definitely the closest I've ever been." Without even turning around, Jackie, wearing dark glasses with night vision, walks down the corridor that runs around the outer perimeter of the underground command center.

"Also, it's been a tradition since ancient times that official documents are left in physical form. In the days before paper, they were carved into stone or written on wooden boards. Of course, the latest information was recorded electronically and sent in digital form to each planet that was part of the Federation of Colonial Stars, but necessary reports were printed out and stored in paper form as well. They say that the amount of paper consumed by the Fleet Headquarters during the war was more than the newspapers handled by the news agency on this planet."

The Shin-Okuhama Newspaper, which has been published since the same era when the development of Sea of the Morningstar began, still publishes a paper version as well as an online version. However, it is only available in very small number as souvenirs for visitors to their headquarters and for some luxury hotels and members-only clubs, so there were few opportunities to pick up a paper newspaper in one's everyday life.

Even in the old days, when ultra-thin paper-like readers called "electronic paper" were not as cheap as they are now, the number of copies of paper newspapers printed was not that large. Most news was distributed online as soon as it was published, and only a limited number of customers were willing to pay the extra fee to have it printed and sent.

However, the news agency that published the newspaper was still the largest consumer of paper on Sea of the Morningstar. After the start of the War of Independence, the amount of paper consumed by the military and other government agencies exploded, and Sea of the Morningstar's only paper company was converted to a public corporation with funding from the executive branch.

"Well, paper is bulky." Marika muttered, remembering struggling with a large volume of paper documents just recently. "However, compared to stone slabs and wooden tablets, the density is on a different level, and paper made with modern technology doesn't change when it gets wet, so there's not much worry about deterioration. And best of all, our eyes are the reading device, so there's no need to worry about whether we can read it or not. That’s important."

"Data from the time of the War of Independence could have been read and written with the systems they had here. The Fleet HQ was equipped with the latest equipment and the best staff that the Federation of Colonial Stars could provide." Recalling the description in her history textbook, Lynn’s excitement suddenly rose. "So maybe there are a lot of antique computers and parts from the War of Independence left here!?"

"Unfortunately, I can't hope for that." Jackie raised both hands apologetically. "After the Unification War ended and the Fleet Headquarters was no longer needed and had to be vacated, the computers and servers used inside were taken away for use elsewhere. Did you see the underground HQ? The control panel was full of holes. The specialized equipment and displays that couldn't be used anywhere else were left as they were, but you can assume that all the reusable parts were taken away."

"…What?" Lynn shook her head boredly. "If I had new parts, I might be able to build an interesting computer."

"I didn't look all the way through the spare parts warehouse, so there might be something there if I search there, but anyway, the colonies were poor after the war, and there was a serious shortage of supplies, especially when it came to industrial products. I don't think they left any supplies that they intended to use, and even if they were considering the possibility of restarting this place, it would be more efficient to put in the latest machines at that time, and it would be easier to adapt to the modified technology and standards."

In reality, the colonies had no power left to fight another interstellar war after the War of Independence, and their incorporation into the Galactic Empire greatly reduced the likelihood of an interstellar war.

"But with paper files and books, there's no need to worry about whether a reader can be used or whether the electronic signals that should be recorded can be read. It's a sense of security that comes from using the primitive means of obsolete technology."

Jackie stopped in front of a door that was larger than the others. The double doors, which look as though they were carved from natural wood, are so large that they could even drive a work vehicle through them. "Welcome to the Fleet Command archives." Using both hands, Jackie moved the large lever-type knob and slid the doors open to the left and right, revealing a large room filled with rows of shelves reaching all the way to the ceiling.

"What is this place?"

With a wearisome look on her face, Lynn shone her light into the depths of the room, where endless rows of files, books, filing cases, and paper bags were lined up on shelves that reached all the way to the ceiling.

"These are the archives of the Federation of Colonial Stars Fleet Command." Without even entering the room, Jackie turned to the three people holding the lights, still wearing his dark glasses. "All the materials from the Unification War and probably from the post-war settlement have been printed out, documented, and stored here. Not just battle records, but economic files, original reports, and personnel records related to staff appointments and awards and punishments are also plentiful."

"That's a frightening amount." Gruier was the first to enter the archive room, and read the titles typed on the spines of the files lined up on the shelves. "The Third Lucia Route Trade War, Battle Records of the Disguised Cruiser Daikokumaru 4, Solar Route 3-5, Battle Records of the Second-Class Cruiser Akonkaguya near Gold Dust. Judging from the dates, it seems that these are records from the early days of the Unification War."

"I just had a quick look at the titles, but unfortunately, it seems that the movers in charge of the archives weren't all that interested in organizing the materials." Jackie pointed to rows and rows of shelves. "There were fleet organization and battle records from the middle of the war, colony planet production white papers and technological development status, and beyond that were organization tables from just after the war began, a list of staff members at the fleet headquarters, and even a fanzine about historical research that seemed to be done as a club activity."

"There are probably a hundred thousand books in this room alone?"

All four walls were filled with shelves, and files and briefcases that seemed to be the same size. Jackie nodded at Gruier's assessment. "Yeah, that's about it."

Jackie looked around at the three of them with amusement. "By the way, I have some sudden news to announce. As you can see, the Fleet HQ was built as the supreme command center for the Federation of Colonial Stars's military forces. This underground space has a huge amount of space. In other words, there will be no problem with space to store documents." Jackie said with a bright smile. "I’ve found eight more document rooms the same size as this one."

"Jackie..." Marika spoke in a low voice. "You've lost interest in finding the surrender document, haven't you?"

"Not at all." Jackie replied, grinning. "Searching for lost or missing items is part of my job. Look, I found the bowsprit of your sailing ship."

"Nobody asked for it!" Marika looked at the rows of bookshelves that filled the vast archive room, where only a small part of the front shelf had signs of being rummaged through. There were shelves lined with files with matching spines, shelves lined with luxurious leather-bound books that looked like antiques, and shelves closed with locked transparent doors. "After all, how are you going to find it if you don't even know where it is?"

"Hiding a tree in the woods is an old trick, but hiding a piece of paper in an archive is indeed a good one." Jackie stepped into the archive room and took out a thick file bound in a synthetic cover from a nearby shelf. "This is an archive that mainly contains battle records, so it's fine. I can look at the cover and check the contents and they match up. But in other archives, there are files with barely labeled notes, with staff performance evaluations and defense estimates for enemy fortresses inserted into them, and endless observation data for other star systems."

Jackie put the closed file back on the shelf. "The surrender document is not a very small document. I was hoping it would be stored carefully in a special case, but at this rate I wouldn't be surprised if it was tucked away in some atlas or star chart."

"If it's such an important document, it wouldn't be in an archive like this, would it?" Lynn asked. "Maybe it's in a safe, or a vault for important documents, or something like that."

"As for the safe in the Commander-in-Chief's office, I checked it first." Jackie nodded slightly. "I've checked the safe in the secretary's office, the head of the intelligence office, the three vice commanders, the four special counsels, the chief of staff, and the ambassador's room. This Fleet Command didn't lose and run away in a panic. Some of the safes in the rooms were opened without even needing to be broken, and when I opened them, they were empty. Well, the biggest find was an unopened bottle of brandy and antique glass set in the ambassador's safe."

"How long do you expect it to take to find it?"

Jackie looked at Gruier, who asked the question. "It will probably take 20 days to turn this archive upside down and make an index. There are eight other archives of the same size, so by calculation it will take 180 days to index all the documents."

"Are you serious?" Marika looked at Jackie again. “Are you really planning to spend six months searching in a place like this?”

"I’m looking for a document that could get me an entire planet, after all." Jackie looked away from Marika's gaze. "According to my calculations, it should be a worthwhile job even if it takes that long. Besides, here's a non-zero chance that the document I’m looking for will be in the next bag I open. "

"Is it about one in ten million, or one in a hundred million?" Gruier smiled and said a number with a lot of zeros. "I wish you the best of luck."

"Well, my calculations should give me a slightly better number, though.” Jackie looked around at the files, document cases, bags, and books on the endless bookshelves. "Besides, even if I'm unlucky, I hope that the document I'm looking for won't be the last one I find after searching all the archives."

"Oh, I think you should also consider the possibility that it's not even in the last place you searched." Gruier said in a calm voice. "Unless there is solid evidence that the surrender document you are looking for is mixed in with the documents in the archives, I don't think you should be optimistic."

"You're right." Jackie bowed to Gruier. "There's no doubt that the surrender document from the Unification War remains in this Fleet HQ. It's a historical document, and there's no way that an emerging planet that values ​​history would destroy it, and according to the postwar records, all important documents from the war were left inside the Fleet HQ when it was closed. So, even if the surrender document is in the Fleet HQ, there's no guarantee that it's in the archives. Well, the basic principle of this business is to check all possible places."

"I understand." Marika responded in a matter-of-fact manner. “This is a job that will take a long time.” Marika pointed her light at Lynn and Gruier as if to signal them. "Let's not get in the way. Let's leave."

"Eh?" Lynn pointed her light at Marika with a perplexed look on her face. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to see each other's expressions. "Is it okay to leave this guy alone?"

"I understand why he came here and what he's looking for, but do you think he'd listen to me if I told him to stop looking for the surrender document and leave right now?"

"Ah, well…" Lynn pointed her light at Jackie. "I'm sure he's not going to listen, but shouldn't we just say something?"

“It will be useless, trying to explain to someone who is not willing to negotiate.” After shining the light as far as it could reach, Gruier turned her back on the archvie room and came out into the hallway. "We have flown in the same space as Jackie more than once. Having flown with him, and we understand, to a limited extent, how he perceives things and how he thinks."

"Huh?" Jackie, with Lynn's light pointed at him, deliberately raised his dark glasses and smiled.

"That's exactly what a spaceship crewmember would say, isn't it?" Gruier nodded, smiling at Jackie. "It's all thanks to Captain Marika and the yacht club."

"Assuming we return now." Lynn raised the environmental analyzer on her left arm, which was still activated, in front of her. "We probably won't make it to afternoon classes, but I think we can manage club activities."

"Well then, please take your time." Marika pointed her light at Jackie. "I hope your work goes well. No, I hope it doesn't go well. Please don't ever succeed."

"What? Are you going home? Seriously?" Jackie put his dark glasses back on and looked around at the three of them.

"You seem to be busy with work." Marika nodded as if it was obvious. "It must be hard to find that one document in an archive like this, with no end in sight. Fortunately, there's nothing we can do for you. The only thing we can do is leave you alone and not get in the way of your work."

"Oh, so that's how it is." Jackie pressed his fingers against his temples.

"You weren't thinking of getting us to help you or anything like that, were you?" Gruier spoke in a reproachful voice. "Surely you wouldn't dream of such an unlikely scenario that we would find the surrender document before you do, or that we would be able to borrow it, or even that we would cooperate in searching for the document?"

"It's a document that can control the ownership of this planet, you know?" Jackie raised both hands in front of him. "With the surrender document, I can claim ownership not only of this planet, but of all the planets that joined the Federation of Colonial Stars, and even of Sinclair and Minerva D, which have now been developed and are on the market. Aren't you interested?"

"I'm not interested in owning planets." Marika looked at Jackie's expression. "You're not interested in having your planets either, are you?"

"What?"

"All you care about is how much it sells for, right?"

"Oh dear." Jackie took off his bowler hat with a troubled look on his face and ruffled his hair. "So you read me that well? I think I may have shown my hand a little too much."

"So I'll keep quiet." With a mischievous look on her face, Marika put her index finger up to her lips. "I will not tell the school or the authorities that you're here looking for the surrender document from the War of Independence. Please take your time and concentrate on finding what you're looking for." Marika declared, looking intently at Jackie. “However, only for as long as you stay quietly down here."

"Are you sure?" Jackie said with a smile. "Would you be okay with the surrender document from the Unification War being taken from here without your knowledge and put up for sale somewhere, causing a sudden change in the political system of Sea of the Morningstar?"

"I'll think about it after you find the actual surrender document." Marika smiled back at Jackie. "It would be easier to take it back from you, if you found it, than to help you search for it here. It won't be easy though. So, until then, please feel free to search here."

Marika pointed her light at the archives, which was filled to the ceiling with shelves stuffed with documents, files, books, and cases. "I have no intention of getting involved with you unless you come upstairs. But if you do come upstairs, I will immediately take appropriate measures."

"What are appropriate measures?" Jackie asked curiously. Marika pretended to think carefully.

"I'll call the authorities. Or maybe it would be quicker to contact the hunter who's chasing you? The bounty on you in the frontier must be pretty big, right?"

"Oh, yeah." Jackie nodded, not really wanting to admit it. “Some places offer such generous bounties that I sometimes think about turning myself in.” Jackie thought deeply. "If it doesn't matter if I’m dead or alive, don't you think it would be okay to pay it directly to the person?"

"Give it a try." Marika said coldly. "If possible, without us knowing."

BRINNG. A metallic bell rang without warning. Lynn and Marika, startled, pointed their lights in all directions.

"Excuse me, this way." Jackie took out a chiming alarm clock from his jacket pocket, stopped the bell, and opened the dial. "There are a lot of guests today." Jackie muttered with an obviously displeased look on his face. "Maybe I didn't get the sensors placed in time?"

Lynn had somehow slipped behind Jackie and peered into the open alarm clock. The compact 3D display was densely packed and moving.

"Ah, I would have liked to have scattered sensors throughout the entire underground command center, but I only set up sensors at the upper entrance and a few prominent intersections, and other than that, I only set up mechanisms to detect if anyone entered the other archives." Jackie closed the open dial with a snap. "They're moving incredibly fast and heading straight for me. Judging from the way they're moving, uh..."

Jackie threw the alarm clock into the pocket of his patchwork suit and looked around, fingering the brim of his bowler hat. "They're way earlier than expected."

Jackie started walking into the middle of the wide corridor. Lynn, who was left behind, followed him with her eyes. "Where are you going!"

"Ah, don't get too close." Jackie raised his hand to stop the three of them. "Also, you should close your eyes."

"Huh?" The environmental analyzer on Lynn’s left arm sounded an alarm. A moment later, a powerful beam of light pierced the corridor. Even though she was holding a light, it was bright enough to dazzle her eyes, which were accustomed to the dark, and filled her field of vision.

"Do you know the way home?" Jackie said quickly, sticking to the wall on the other side of the passage to avoid the beam. "Another guest has arrived, I have to run, see you later." A second beam ripped through the underground passageway.

"Do you think there's anything left!?" Marika quickly turns her back to the beam to protect her eyes, then points her light at the other end of the passage where the remaining afterglow is still scattering. His bizarre patchwork suit is nowhere to be seen, leaving no trace behind. She quickly waves the light at the end of the passage, and a figure sprinting at full speed, holding his hat, raises one hand as a greeting.

"He got away..." The high frequency sound of a jet turbine approached rapidly. The low-slung black silhouette of a hoverbike suddenly decelerated, doing a large wheelie to slam a jet of water in the direction of its travel. "You guys!"

Noel Blue, carrying a huge rifle with an added sniper scope under her arm like a lancer, landed her hoverbike without the lights on, wearing a student teacher's suit and goggle-type visual sensor. The ion-driven turbines quickly stopped roaring.

"Noel!?" "Noel Blue!?" Gruier and Marika cried out at the same time. Noel, who was driving the hoverbike with one hand, raised her visual sensors to her forehead to show her true face. She quickly looked around at the three of them.

"Have you seen the crazy patchwork clown guy?"

Marika and Gruier called out his name at the same time, looked at each other, then pointed in the direction Jackie had run off to.

"Thanks!"

Noel put the visual sensors back and placed her left hand, which was wearing a glove over her suit, back on the handlebars of the hoverbike. She slammed the throttle to restart the jet turbine, and the hoverbike, which was floating in the air, accelerated rapidly, almost to the point of stumbling.

The hoverbike sped off with a high-frequency metallic sound, leaving behind the smell of room-temperature jet spray and ion-driven ozone. As it disappeared, a flash accompanied by plasma characteristic of an energy beam dazzled at the end of the passage, as if someone had fired a rifle again.

"Um..." After seeing off the hoverbike, Marika and the other three looked at each other blankly.

Marika gave a weak smile. "Why don't we head home before we get caught up in this and make things even more troublesome?"

"I have a feeling we're not only involved, but we're also in trouble." Lynn looked around again. "Well, it doesn't look like there's anything more we can do here, so let's head back."

A black rectangular object with white text

Description automatically generated

"I didn't know there was a way out here."

Marika, Lynn, and Gruier all agreed that they didn't want to take the long way around to the maintenance hut in Deep Green on their way home, so they headed up the underground headquarters toward the old school building.

The underground headquarters has no power supply, and the elevators and moving walkways are also out of service. The only way to move up or down is by stairs or ladders.

According to an analysis of the blueprints and the school building above ground, it seems that many of the elevators that are still working in the old building are still connected to the underground headquarters, and have simply had their control panels replaced. Emergency exits are also designed to be usable even if the power supply is cut off.

Noel, who came to Hakuoh Girls' Academy as a student teacher, rode her hoverbike straight into the underground command center. Lynn suggested that if a bike that big could be ridden in, it would be easiest to retrace its steps, so the three of them headed upwards.

The ion-powered hoverbike flies on fan jets. It is not an internal combustion engine, so it does not eject high-temperature gas. However, it leaves an infrared response, and more importantly, it propelling itself with a great thrust, which blows away the dust that had accumulated in the passageway.

At first, Lynn followed the hoverbike's path using the infrared response shown on the environmental analyzer, but quickly switched to visual tracking. A hundred years' worth of fine particles and dust that had wandered in from somewhere and accumulated on the floor were being blown away by the hoverbike's thrust. By seeing the dust on the floor being blown away, or seeing the fine particles dancing just by shining a light into the darkness, it was immediately clear where it had been.

At the top of the underground command center, there was a warehouse for storing supplies and an underground road for bringing in large cargo. At the top of a ramp as wide as two truck lanes, there was a wall made of reinforced artificial stone, with a large hole and debris scattered as if it had just been attacked.

"I see, she fired on it from this side." Lynn swung the light toward the ramp, looking at the scorch marks on the reinforced fiber frame inside the nicely drilled round hole in the reinforced stone material. It seemed to have been smashed through from the outside, and most of the debris was scattered on the ramp side.

"Next door is the underground parking lot for faculty and staff."

Marika looked up from the 3D map on her mobile device. On the other side of the reinforced stone were several machine rooms in the basement of the old building. The heat exchangers for the air conditioning and the electrical substation supplied by industrial energy cables from outside to the entire old building were lit up by lights that she felt hadn't been seen in a long time.

"Where's the exit?" Lynn turned off her own light and looked around the machine room. She found a door underneath a familiar emergency exit sign, and walked over. She put her hand on the doorknob. As expected, it wasn't locked.

Lynn opened the door narrowly and peered outside. It was well known that there was a parking lot for faculty and staff in the basement of the old building, but students rarely came there.

There was no one in the parking lot, which had far more parking spaces than the number of faculty and staff working in the old building.

"We can get out. Afternoon class is still in progress, and I'll rewrite the security camera data when we get back to the club room, but now we can get back to the school building without being seen."

"No matter how you look at it, it looks like they destroyed part of the school building for their own purposes." Gruier was looking at the large hole that was opened up in the reinforced stone wall.

"She had a big rifle that looked like it could shoot down a satellite, didn't she?" Marika checked the area around the hole from the machine room side. “I wonder if she used it as a burner to bore the hole before blowing it up?”

The damage seemed to be concentrated on the other side of the wall, and there was no damage other than burnt debris scattered on the machine room side.

"What should we do?" Marika looked at the big hole in the wall.

"If that teacher is planning to come back through here, I guess we'll just have to leave it like this." Lynn came back after checking what was happening on the other side of the door. " Only regular inspection workers should come into the machine room anyway, and the fact that she did something so extravagant and no one came means they must have set up some kind of plan."

There are security cameras in the machine room too. Hakuoh Girls' Academy's security system is so sloppy that the students suspect it's not working, but it's also true that no violent incidents such as murder or terrorism have occurred on campus since it was founded.

"The teacher probably didn't think about us getting down there first, or coming back this way. If she's a hunter who has an Imperial license, surely she's thinking about how to clean up after herself?"

"The Imperial license is only there to get the authorities to turn a blind eye to illegal activities when securing bounties." Marika said, remembering the lecture she had heard on the Bentenmaru about bounty hunting. "To maintain your license, you need to renew it before it expires, and any trouble you cause during work will also be evaluated."

"I see, so if you're not good, your hunter license will be taken away."

"If Noel was the type of hunter who would stop at nothing to achieve her goals, what would you do, Marika?" Marika looked at Gruier who had asked the question.

"It's fine if they’re the type of person who pays attention to their surroundings while working, but if they're not, it's a pain." She remembered Noel's work on the Shenandoah, which she had read about in Schnitzer’s report.

"This is the second time I've met Noel Blue."

"What?!" Marika was shocked and looked back at Gruier.

"When? Where!?"

"Just the other day, in downtown Skull Star." Gruier turned her gaze to Marika. "At that time, too, Noel had a big weapon."

"She also had something big this time." Lynn said. "At that size, it's class 4, or even 6, and if fully charged, it could even penetrate tank armor."

"Even if you're up against Jackie, do you really need such a big weapon?"

"No matter how big a rifle you bring, I don't think it'll work against that brazen guy." Marika crossed her arms and tilted her head. "Whether a weapon is big or small is a matter of necessity. If you bring lots of different weapons just because you don't know what kind of situation you'll be in, you'll end up with too much baggage, and if you keep it to a minimum and don't have enough, it'll be a problem."

"Isn't it the case that bigger is better?"

"Well, a large rifle gives you a wider range of power adjustments, but it's hard to handle and you can't maneuver very well. And yet, she came into the underground headquarters with her hoverbike and started swinging around a big rifle like that."

"It looked like she had the power adjustments right, didn't it?" Lynn said. "Look, we didn't even get a single burn even though the energy beam from the big rifle passed right in front of us. It didn't hit the conman directly, so it seems like he was fine, so I don't think she was planning on firing it at high power so carelessly."

"That’s because if you fire a full charge from a rifle like that, you could end up buried alive."

"Well, she's not afraid to punch through walls if she has to." Looking at the big hole in the wall, Lynn turned her eyes back to Marika. "We need to think of various countermeasures, but what should we do now?"

"I'm going to the nurse's office." Marika said. "If it's during class, Misa should be free."

"A signed surrender document?" With her back to the desk in the nurse's office, Misa repeated Marika's words. "And it was from the War of Independence over 100 years ago?"

"That's what Jackie said." Marika nodded. "I don't know where that information came from, but he said he came to look for the unused surrender document from the War of Independence."

"He didn't seem like the type to value administrative procedures or paperwork. Did you hear that?" Misa looked at the bridge crew of the Bentenmaru, whose faces were on the communications display on the desk.

"*The surrender document is something from the past.*" Hyakume seemed to be searching around with both hands. "*If it's genuine and signed by the plenipotentiary ambassadors from the War of Independence, there's a chance it could be considered valid.*"

"It can be used!?" Marika exclaimed.

"*If it's genuine and unused, it wouldn't have a date on it. If it's genuine, it would be valid without the need for a court ruling. However, now that it's been 100 years since the War of Independence, whether the governments of what were colonial planets at the time and are now independent star systems will comply with it is a different matter.*”

“That's what someone as shrewd as him would do.” Gruier said. “I think we've considered all possible possibilities. Even if the surrender document is genuine and currently valid, it's hard to imagine that the current executive governments of each star system would comply with it as is. We can first ask the Interstellar Court for a ruling, and if necessary, revise the laws that are the basis for it. Unless we move things forward so quickly that the other side has no time to argue, or unless we have completed all the preparations for that, I think it will be difficult to get the executive governments to bow down even if he brings the surrender document.”

“*I don't think what Jackie is trying to do is to use the surrender documents to conquer the former Federation of Colonial Stars.*” Coorie, who was also moving her hands and holding a candy bar in her mouth, said on the communication monitor. “*He's a con man. Selling useless things as valuable is part of his business. But if it turns out to be a document that allows you to own a star, surely there are customers in this universe who would want it?*'

“That's what he said.” Marika nodded with a gloomy look on her face.

“The surrender document, huh?” Misa repeated the words. “It's a historical document, so it'll definitely fetch an antique’s price, but if it comes with an entire star system, I have no idea how much it would sell for. Who in the world would buy something like that?”

“Isn't Sea of the Morningstar being targeted by general trading companies and tourist companies?” Everyone's eyes were on Gruier's face as she spoke.

"The Serenity kingdom has been subject to many plots in the past, such as annexation, takeover, and transfer of administrative power. Fortunately, our kingdom is not currently on a state of war with any other kingdom, but we have fought in interstellar wars many times in the past. If the procedures for ending a war or ceasefire were not completed and documents that could be exploited under interstellar law were put up for sale, I think many people would want them."

In the silent infirmary, Marika and Lynn exchanged glances.

"Fortunately, no one has found the signed surrender document yet." Lynn looked at Misa as well as Hyakume and Coorie, who were on the communication monitor on the desk. "Even if we leave it like this, there's not much chance that that eccentric person will find the document he's looking for anytime soon."

"I think the possibility is extremely low, but it's not zero." Gruier said. “If we believe him, the surrender documents will be found, given enough time.”

"We don't know if that will be tonight, a week from now, or six months from now." Marika looked up at Misa. "How long will Noel be doing her internship here at Hakuoh Girls' Academy?"

The internship period for student teachers sent from universities or specialized teacher training institutions varies depending on their qualifications.

"Two weeks." Misa ran her finger over the control panel and easily displayed the information about the student teacher Noel Blue. "She's only qualified to teach high school history, so I guess that's about it. I heard there's an option to extend it."

"I wonder if Noel can catch Jackie?" Marika looked around at everyone in the infirmary and the faces on the other side of the communication monitor.

"If Noel can catch Jackie, at least that'll solve the immediate problem, right?"

"Well, I suppose it's not impossible for that big rifle to catch the colorful suit." Lynn shook her head back and forth.

"What do you think, Marika?" Misa asked. Marika looked away with a difficult expression.

"Sorry, but I don't think it'll be as easy as Jackie finding the documents he's looking for. After all, Jackie escaped from the Shenandoah right before our eyes."

"Why don't you just ask her directly?" Misa took out a pocket watch from her lab coat pocket and checked the current time. "The students are supposed to be given various instructions by their teachers in the guidance room next to the staff room after school."

"Eh?" Marika looked at Misa's face again. "...Do you think she's back?"

"I don't know much about the bounty hunter Noel Blue, but if she's really a capable hunter and has made the necessary preparations, I don't think she'd go to the trouble of infiltrating as a student teacher for a job that can be completed in a day. If she goes missing and never reappears, then she must have finished her business, and if not, she's probably still here for a while."

The bell signaling the end of class began to ring in the old school building.

Leaving the rewriting of the surveillance system's recorded images to Lynn, who was returning to the club room, Marika headed to the guidance room with Gruier.

The guidance room was next to the staff room. Equipped with a sofa and a table as a reception set, the guidance room is usually a place where teachers give career guidance and consultations to students and their parents.

One of the many guidance rooms was used as a waiting room for this term's student teachers. After class, the guidance room in the old building was bustling with teachers returning to the staff room and students coming out of their classrooms, and when she knocked on the door, there was a reply.

"Come in."

"Excuse me." Thinking that she heard Noel's voice, Marika opened the door. "There you are..."

The bounty hunter, who had been in the underground headquarters just a few minutes ago, stood up from one of the four sofas, still wearing the same suit she was wearing when she was straddling her hoverbike.

"When did you get back!?"

"From below?" Noel pointed to the floor. "Just now."

"So that means..." Marika looked around the room just to be sure. There were no other student instructors, students, or instructors. "You couldn't catch him?"

"Unfortunately." Noel answered with the face of a student teacher, not a hunter. "I'm still not familiar with the underground structure here. Jackie has the advantage because he was ahead of me. But as long as he's here, I'll have plenty of opportunities to catch him."

Marika looked at Gruier, who was following her. "I wish you the best of luck. I have a few things to tell you, is that okay?"

Noel looked at the closed door to the guidance room. "As long as there are no interruptions."

Noel turned her gaze to Gruier. "I have a message for you from Gappi. The borrowed item will be returned to you personally sometime soon."

"Yes." Gruier nodded. "Please tell them I'm waiting."

"First, let me confirm my position." Marika said as she went over in her head the story she wanted to tell Noel. "I want Jackie out of here."

"Is that as the captain of the Bentenmaru?"

"But that's not all." Marika said, carefully watching Noel's expression. "I'm a student at Hakuoh Girls' Academy and a member of the yacht club. No matter what position I'm in, I don't want someone like that around me."

"I understand." Noel nodded. Marika continued.

"I'm not interested in the bounty on Jackie, beyond a bit of gossip. I'm curious about how much it is, but I don't know how to collect it."

"The bounty has been made public on the network." Noel answered simply. "Many planets have no restrictions on eligibility to receive the money if they are handed over to the government."

"I'm already busy being a pirate, I have no intention of getting involved with bounty hunting." Marika gave a wry smile. "In other words, we want to get rid of Jackie, who's been messing around down here. You want to catch Jackie, so I think our interests are aligned."

Noel looked almost expressionless. Marika said.

"I think we can work together to achieve our mutual goals."

"How?"

Marika glanced at Gruier, then returned her eyes to Noel. "There is Bentenmaru in orbit. There is a yacht club on campus. Everyone agrees that we want to get rid of Jackie. We have plenty of people and a variety of equipment. If you can capture Jackie and take him away, that's fine, but if we manage to capture Jackie, I’ll hand him over to you. But that's on the condition that you take Jackie away from this planet."

"There is one more condition." Gruier interjected. Noel turned her eyes to Gruier. "Please don't destroy this school. Even if we manage to capture Jackie, if the school is harmed as a result, we won't be able to cooperate with you, Noel. No, in that case..."

Noel raised two fingers of her right hand as if to stop Gruier from speaking. "It's the same in any job, trying to get the most out of the least amount of effort. Let me be honest. How much damage are you willing to tolerate?" Noel looked back and forth between Marika and Gruier. “The damage would come from catching Jackie. If we don’t do anything, won't Jackie, who we can't get rid of, cause damage himself?"

"We can tolerate it if the damage is something that can be hidden from the school." Marika said, looking straight at Noel. "However, we can't tolerate any casualties. I don't care about Jackie because he probably won't die even if I kill him[[8]](#footnote-8), but I can't tolerate any casualties to the students."

"Understood." Noel nodded. "There may be room for debate as to what extent we can hide things from the school, but we can think about that after a problem occurs. As for human casualties, we are trying not to cause harm to third parties. Is this okay?"

"I think we agree on the basics."

"What about the bounty?" Noel looked around at the two of them. "If we are able to successfully capture Jackie, we will receive a huge bounty."

"If we can capture Jackie and hand him over to the Pirate Guild, that is." Gruier subtly corrected Noel.

"It would be enough if we could remove Jackie from this academy, but that would be rude to a professional hunter." Marika said, staring at Noel's face. "How about 10% of the bounty?"

Noel looked back at Marika. Marika continued. "If we succeed in capturing Jackie and you get the bounty, we'll get 10% of it." That was an idea from Misa and Hyakume, who thought that if you work with professionals, you'll be more trusted if you demand a proper reward. Marika smiled. "Of course, it's a contingency fee. That is, if we can catch Jackie here."

"Can we calculate the necessary expenses separately?" Noel returned Marika's smile. "It’s 10% of the bounty after deducting my necessary expenses. If you wish, I’m willing to include your expenses for this operation in the calculation."

"What if we can't catch Jackie?" Marika asked.

"Of course, you'll have to cover your own expenses. But if Jackie stays here, you can carry out your next plan, and if he escapes, you'll at least achieve your goal, which is to get Jackie off the planet."

Marika nodded. She looked at Gruier to see if there was anything else she wanted to say. "That’s fine. Then we can work together." Marika held out her right hand. After looking at Marika, Noel seemed to notice and shook her hand.

"I forgot. Wasn’t it a ceremony to make sure neither of us had weapons?"

"Do you know why he came here?"

"No?" Noel shook her head. Glancing at Gruier, Marika said.

"We just heard it from him a while ago. He came here to look for the signed surrender document from the War of Independence, which was supposed to have been left at the Fleet Headquarters."

"The signed surrender document?" Noel let go of Marika's hand. “So that's the subject of Jackie's next project?”

"Apparently so. He plans to sell it for a high price."

“Didn't you think that by sharing that information with me I might try to get hold of the signed surrender document?"

"Jackie is having a hard time." Marika chuckled.

"I don't think it'll be easy to find him. Besides, if I keep chasing Jackie, I'll eventually hear about why he came here."

Marika nodded at Noel. "And if it turns out that you and Jackie end up fighting over the signed surrender document, we'll just have to recognize you as an enemy and eliminate you as well as Jackie."

Looking at Gruier who was waiting, Noel turned back to Marika. "That's clear. I’ve got it. I intend to continue my current job, and I have no intention of giving up my license from the Empire. As long as our interests are aligned, I will cooperate as much as I can. So, what exactly will you do?"

"Um," For the first time, Marika was at a loss for words.

"What are you going to do?"

"Whatever you do, I think it's best to do it as soon as possible." Gruier said. "Since he is dealing with such a large amount of material by himself, and considering his own motivation, the probability is low, but there is still a possibility that Jackie will find the signed surrender document in the basement. And the more time he is given, the higher the chance will be."

"I agree with the opinion that the more he lingers here, the more advantageous it will be for him." Noel looked at Marika and Gruier's uniforms. "Are you going to miss class?"

"We can't have the entire yacht club miss class." Marika answered. "Fortunately, the day after tomorrow is our founding anniversary and we're closed. If it's a holiday, we can all deal with Jackie starting in the morning."

"Are you working on your precious day off?" Noel looked at the door to the guidance room. It wouldn't be strange if a teacher came at any moment. "I have one question for you."

"What is it?"

"I understand that your goal is not to capture Jackie but to eliminate him. So why are you trying to do it by yourself, even if it means cooperating with me?" Noel looked around at Marika and Gruier. "Am I overthinking it when it seems like you're trying to do something difficult?"

"If that's the case, you should have reported Jackie to the authorities from the beginning and called in the police or the military. They have much more equipment and personnel than you do."

"Then why don't you do that?" Noel pulls back slightly and looked at Marika's face. "The reason I don't report the existence of a wanted person to the authorities is to prevent them from capturing my prey first, but all you need to do is get Jackie out of here, right? If you introduce a military organization into the school, you can at least prevent him from getting hold of important documents, and you can hope that he will escape from here."

"That's the thing," Marika's voice lowered. "I can't imagine that a conman like Jackie would give up and expose his hand to us just because there were so many documents he had to look through."

"Oh?" Noel leaned forward with interest. "If Jackie was serious about getting the signed surrender document, he wouldn't have had to come forward and tell us what he was looking for, so I think we need to think about why he did it."

"And you came here after thinking about it?"

"If you think about it normally, you would have notified the authorities and had the military authorities storm into the underground headquarters. They wouldn't have had time to look for the signed surrender document." Marika chose her words carefully as she continued. "Normally, that's something he would want to avoid. But he revealed circumstances that could lead to that happening, so there must be some reason for it. And then I realized, maybe that's exactly what Jackie wants."

"Not being able to find an important document?"

"Once the military has stormed into the underground headquarters, the next step will likely be a thorough investigation of the archives. These are valuable historical documents from the War of Independence 100 years ago. I think that if they mobilize a large number of museums, libraries, universities, and other such places to sort through them, the surrender document will likely be discovered. Knowing him, I think he might be thinking that it would be ok to wait until after that to get hold of the surrender document."

"If you think it's too much trouble, you'll leave the search to someone else, and then come back and get it at your leisure after they’ve found it?" Noel spoke in a deflated voice. Marika slowly nodded.

"Maybe he was trying to cheat and then revealed his hand." Noel nodded in satisfaction and then burst out laughing.

"If he was thinking of taking it easy at this point, he must be a formidable opponent. No wonder there are bounties on him not only from the Pirate’s Guild, but also from many other places." Noel, still smiling, turned her eyes back to Marika. "Let's discuss how we should corner him."

"The Bentenmaru's station keeping." Hyakume said. "Sea of the Morningstar, Shinokuhama City, 355 km above Hakuoh Girls' Academy!"

"I didn't expect the ship to be station keeping in such a low orbit." Sandaime, in the engineer's seat, was constantly grumbling and complaining. “In reality, we're on a low orbit that would take us around Sea of the Morningstar in an hour and a half, but if we're told to stay above Hakuoh Girls' Academy, we'll be in a constant state of low acceleration."

Hovering above a point on the ground in a low orbit means that the ship can only travel at a speed that is a fraction of the orbital speed it should, which means it is almost stationary. If the ship were traveling at orbital speed in space, there would be no need to worry about it falling into a star, but now that its speed is overwhelmingly insufficient, Bentenmaru will crash into Sea of the Morningstar if it does nothing.

The anti-gravity engine that controls Bentenmaru's mass cannot be used for this delicate operation. Unlike normal battles where radar is emitted into open space and sensors are opened, this time the scan range is below the surface of the Sea of the Morningstar. They don't want to use the anti-gravity engine, which affects both the transmission of radar waves and the reception of sensors, if possible.

"It's not the high-thrust acceleration that would be required by combat maneuvers." Hyakume adjusts the radar system. "It takes time, but there's no risk of being attacked. It's an easy job."

"Sure, the power you have to get out of the converter isn't that much compared to what you'd have in combat, but you have to pin the ship down pretty closely to the probe point."

"If the distance to the target isn't fixed exactly, the accuracy of the observation will decrease." Hyakume said as if it was someone else's problem. "After all, the observation target is only one person moving in the depths of the captain's school. I wonder if our radar can track such a small target."

"If we increase the output, it will destroy all the electronic equipment in the school, but it will probably pass through the ground and underground structures." Coorie is also busy adjusting the sensor system. "This time, it's not just the captain, but the yacht club as well. If we're going to hit living girls wandering around, we want to make the radar wave as weak as possible."

Military spacecraft are usually equipped with powerful radar that can be emitted from satellite orbit and heat objects on the ground in the same way as a microwave oven. It goes without saying that powerful radar waves are harmful to the human body.

"The only way to deal with that is to increase the sensitivity of the receiver." After completing the basic settings, Hyakume began ground observation. "Well, let's start then."

"How's it going?" Coorie, who hasn't finished adjusting the sensor system yet, asks. "Can you see anything?"

"Yeah. If the enemy is Jackie Fahrenheit, I wouldn’t be surprised if his Lunar Lion spaceship is hidden somewhere, but at least I can't see it around the academy."

The radar not only shows the buildings on the ground, but also the topography, geological strata, the pond, the bottom of Deep Green, the lake at the back of the forest park, and even the underground structure below that in great detail. It can even make out the model of a commuter car parked in the underground parking lot, but at least in the current scan area, there is no sign of a spaceship.

"Generally, it's a mistake to try to take on a single person with the Bentenmaru. Wouldn't it have been better to send in Schnitzer and the marines with their combat gear?"

"Even though it's the anniversary of the school’s founding and a holiday, there are clubs in session and there are students in the dorms, so are we really going to storm into this all-girls school?" Schnitzer, who’s huge body is tucked into the combat commander's seat, raises his hand over his back as if asking for a break. "There's no time for research or preparation. The captain has decided to leave direct combat to the bounty hunter."

"We're up against only one living human. If we pump in some sleeping gas first, won't that make the rest of the job easier?"

"He's alive, but he's not normal." Schnitzer said while examining the observation data. "According to Misa's diagnosis, Jackie's body isn't mechanized, but he does have a carefully blended mixture of nanomachines. They'll easily break down a disabling gas intended for the general public, and there's a good chance he'll survive even if he's hit with a deadly poison."

"So that means paralysis beams and tranquilizer bullets won't work. That's going to be troublesome." After completing the engine settings to hold the Bentenmaru stationary at a certain point above Sea of the Morningstar, Sandaime ran an automatic check and crossed his arms. "Does the bounty depend on whether the person is dead or alive?"

"According to the Pirate Guild's conditions, the bounty amount differs by an order of magnitude depending on whether the person is dead or alive. That's why the hunter is aiming to capture the person alive."

"He's not the type to just stay quiet even if he gets caught, anyway." The results of the automatic engine check are in. Sandaime checks the numbers and confirms that there are no problems. "How do we plan to escort them to the frontier?"

"That's not our job anyway." Surveillance data from the ground, specifically around Hakuoh Girls' Academy, was displayed on the battle display in front of Schnitzer. He made corrections by overlaying it with the data from the underground headquarters' blueprints. "The captain said she was going to freeze him."

"Freezing gun?"

The Yacht Club room in the old high school building had been turned into an arsenal. The desks for practice and the reception tables were not enough, and firearms of all sizes were brought in and lined up on the sofas and floors.

"That's right." Standing next to the table, Noel picked up a machine that looked like a large-caliber large launcher with a complex mechanism and a long guided barrel. It was equipped with a shoulder pad, a pistol grip, and a simple optical sight, so it looked like a large firearm, but the overall impression was more like an automatic tool. "It just arrived and I haven't even adjusted the sights yet, but it won't be useful over long distances anyway."

Marika compares the muzzle against Noel, who seems used to carrying the huge launcher on her shoulder. "Does the freeze gun fire freeze rays?"

"It's a novel application of the inertial control engine." Noel begins to fine-tune the position of the shoulder pad to suit her. "A miniaturized inertial control system is built into its engine."

"In such a small place!?"

An inertial control system is difficult to miniaturize due to its operating principle of converting mass and kinetic energy. Although expensive, they are widely used in spacecraft because they are expected to be extremely efficient, but they are only used in small aircraft and has not been put into practical use in personal equipment.

"Only the core of the inertial control system is built in. And it's just the inertial absorption system, with no mechanism for re-controlling the purified and absorbed energy as kinetic energy."

"Wow, a freezing weapon via an inertial control system is quite an impressive thing." Kane, who is working on his day off as the yacht club advisor, looks at the accompanying electronic manual with interest. "I've heard about it, but I've never seen a real freezing gun."

In outer space, even in an inner planetary orbit, a surface exposed to direct sunlight heats up to over 200 degrees, and the shadowed parts cool down to below -100 degrees. Spaceships are high-energy accumulations, so it's normal to have trouble releasing heat, so weapons that go out of their way to cool the enemy are not often used.

"How does it cool them in the first place?" As Noel begins to adjust the optical sight, Marika points to the thick muzzle of the freezing gun. "Does it emit a cold beam?"

"The first thing it fires is a guide beam." Kane slid his finger across the electronic paper display to show the operating principle. "The target's thermal energy is converted into inertia and absorbed into the engine’s inertial control system. I can't believe they managed to make such an absurd system portable and practical."

"Will it work?" With a suspicious look, Marika looked at Noel, who was aiming the freeze gun at the window of the clubroom.

"Who knows?" Noel was using her left hand to adjust the optical sight of the freezing gun that was resting on her right shoulder and supported by a pistol grip. "I've never used a gun like this before. I've dropped a fully living monster into a pool of liquid hydrogen, but this is the first time I'm doing it with a firearm."

"If you get a direct hit, it can easily remove heat from a mass the size of a human body." Kane flips through the pages of the electronic paper display. "The amount of heat that can be taken in the form of energy varies depending on the duration of continuous irradiation, after all, we're trying to bring the heat of the target here using only a guide beam, without an energy conduction tube. In a vacuum, it's possible to cool the target to absolute zero, but it's impossible to cool it that far in the atmosphere. Is that okay?"

"Poison gas and tranquilizer bullets probably won't work on Jackie." Noel took the freezing gun off her shoulder and opened the control panel of the engine to confirm that all mechanisms were working properly. "If he's alive, the most reliable way to capture him alive is to freeze him."

"No, instead, why don't you just cryogenically freeze him and kill him? Is it as easy as flash freezing raw meat?"

"He's not the kind of person who will die even if we try to kill him, is he?" Noel returned the huge freezing gun, which she had adjusted and inspected, to the table. Both ends hung over the edges of the table. "If he is frozen, there are many ways to revive him. I have also arranged for a container for cryogenic transport. Above all, this way there is no need to worry about him escaping during transport." Noel picked up a large, spear-like rifle that was also sticking out beyond the table. It was the same one she had carried while riding her hoverbike. "More than that, I'm worried about whether he will freeze properly, and whether even if he does freeze, will he remain quiet for the duration of the transport."

Noel lifted the huge rifle and pointed the thick muzzle at the window. It was a powerful energy rifle, equipped with a secondary barrel for firing solid bullets. "According to the data I received from you, the nanomachines in his body are probably of an unknown type." Noel unfolded the sight display while aiming her rifle and checked the charging status of the energy pack. "If he's that cautious, we should assume he has a blend of nanites that will allow him to handle most situations. Even if he is flash-frozen, it may be possible for the nanites to activate and generate heat from within."

"And the freeze gun can't absorb heat infinitely." Kane placed the closed electronic paper manual next to the freeze gun. He looked at Noel, who was still checking it at the ready. "You brought a scary class 6 anti-material rifle. Are you planning on shooting a tank?"

"I've faced ground attack aircraft before."

Kane looked back at Noel in shock at the answer, who didn't change her tone. Only a few people on the Bentenmaru, including Schnitzer, can handle firearms of this size.

"But I can't hit Jackie. I've been lowering the convergence and expanding the beam since yesterday, but even so, I can only manage to graze him."

"You can’t hit him? Even though you’re aiming?" Noel's shooting technique was impressive even to Marika, who had only received crash training. There were hardly any wasted shots either on the Shenandoah or in the underground headquarters, so there was no way her shooting skills were inferior.

"That's right." Noel placed the large rifle on the table after checking it. "I've had him in my sights more than once, both on the Shenandoah and here, but I've missed." Noel sighed lightly. "I've never seen a target like that before. I thought I'd hit it, but there was no response. It was avoided by a hair's breadth. I can only assume that the beam, which is supposed to travel at the speed of light, was avoided."

"No way." Marika tried to laugh, but realized that neither Misa nor Kane were laughing. "...Are you kidding me?"

"If this was space combat, even the captain would know plenty of ways to avoid the shot." Kane didn't take his eyes off Noel, who picked up a bulky machine pistol with a huge magazine.

"Even in person-to-person combat, there are plenty of tactics you can use, like optical camouflage and smoke screens. We should assume that the opponent has prepared a lot of things in addition to nanomachines in their body, since they are so aggressive in electronic warfare."

“By ‘prepared a lot of things,’ do you mean he’s hiding something in that patchwork suit?”

"Nothing came up during the physical examination, but he must have done a lot of training." Misa put her hand lightly to her mouth and thought deeply. "For example, if you use a trick that creates hallucinations for everyone in the vicinity, you can deflect optical targeting that relies on appearance."

"Huh?!?" Marika couldn't help but raise her voice. "What's that? Is that even possible?"

"Even if it's a machine that fires beams and bullets, it's a human being that aims and pulls the trigger. If there's an opportunity to make contact in advance, it's not difficult to create a mechanism that drugs them or makes them make mistakes without them realizing it, and there are plenty of 3D images that are indistinguishable from the real thing."

"Is that why he sometimes seems so elusive?" Gruier, who had been listening to the conversation in silence from a seat a short distance away, spoke up. "Sometimes I feel like I'm dealing with an illusion, not the real person."

"I think it's partly because of his carelessness and frivolous nature." Misa turned her gaze to Noel. "You seem to use a lot of magic tricks too?"

Noel put down the first machine pistol and looked up at Misa, holding the second of the same model. "Why do you think so?"

"Because if you're a doctor, you have plenty of opportunities to see samples." “Fufufu” Misa laughed. "I'd like to say that, but licensed hunters have activity records, so you can make a judgment based on those. You were a lone wolf operating without adequate support or information gathering, and yet you were blessed with an unlikely amount of luck in catching bounty targets. If you didn't rewrite the reports later to suit your needs, there aren't many possiblities."

Noel, who was mechanically checking her machine pistol, stopped. Misa continued.

"One is that you're just pretending to be a lone wolf, but in fact you're backed by a powerful organization. The luck that seems like a coincidence is the natural result of careful preparation and information gathering, but you're just making it look that way to make your job easier. The other is that you're a real witch and you're using magic to intentionally manipulate luck."

Misa looked around the yacht club room, where most of the members had left.

"Based on your behavior since you got here, the former possibility is low. So the latter is more likely."

"To make money in this job, special skills are useful." Still using polite language, Noel held up the second machine pistol, which she had just inspected, with both hands. "It's almost like intuition, but luckily it's worked for me so far."

"It's a necessary quality in this industry."

A knock came from the clubroom door. Marika looked around the room. It was normal for club members to come rushing in without knocking. Anyone who would knock, including Kane, Misa, and Noel, were all inside the clubroom.

"Can I shoot?" Noel, crouching slightly in a shooting stance, pointed the muzzle of her machine pistol at the door. Marika's eyes darted from door to muzzle.

"Not here." There was another knock at the door. Marika answered as usual. "Come in. It's unlocked."

The door to the strangely silent yacht club room opened. Only the top of a colorful patchwork bowler hat could be seen peeking out from the other side of the empty door.

"Can I shoot?" Noel asked again as she slowly lowered the power lever of the machine pistol. Marika sighed. "Please." Before she finished speaking, Noel pulled the trigger of her machine pistol. A weak energy pulse accompanied by a shock wave ripped through the clubroom, blowing away only the bowler hat.

"Things have gotten pretty dangerous around here." Jackie appeared on the other side of the door and caught the bowler hat that had fallen from the ceiling. He put it on his head and raised two fingers in greeting. "Hello, good morning."

"Can I shoot?" Noel asked a third time while pointing the machine pistol at Jackie. Marika let out a strong snort. "If you break anything other than Jackie, you'll have to pay for it."

"Hey, everyone, you’re all here." Jackie came into the clubroom with a machine pistol pointed at him from the other side of a table lined with firearms. He turned both palms towards Noel to show that he was empty-handed. "I'm glad to see you're doing well."

"What do you want?" Marika said as bluntly as possible.

"Well, it's a school holiday today. I thought I'd get some sunshine for once, and say hello to you all." Laughing, Jackie looked around the clubroom. "Even though I'm in the neighborhood, no one came yesterday, so I was wondering what you were doing."

"As you can see." Marika spread one arm across the clubroom. "I was preparing to chase you down to the underground command room and catch you. How did your job go?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you find the important document you were looking for?"

"Ah, the organization in the first reference room I showed you around is progressing smoothly." Jackie nodded agreeably. "I’m finding rare books and valuable documents one after another that could be sold to museums, libraries, or antique shops. If I were to release them on the market, it would definitely cause a crash in the used book market on Sea of the Morningstar."

"You do that kind of work too?"

"No, I have no intention of changing jobs to become a reseller or a used bookstore, but are there many people who like antique books on this planet?"

"It's a new planet, so everyone takes good care of old things."

"I see, it seems like I won't have any trouble finding customers even if I open a used bookstore."

"Please don't."

"But there is one problem." Jackie's face clouded over.

"What is it?"

Jackie answered Marika in a disinterested voice. "I told you that there are eight more archives filled with documents and materials besides the one I showed you. I got depressed working, looking at bookshelves that seem to go on forever, so I walked around to various places to improve my map."

"That's quite a hobby."

"Yeah, it's useful in many ways. I found a mountain of preserved food that had long since expired, a wine cellar that was like a test of courage no matter what you chose, whether it was vintage or vinegared, and a warehouse of electronic parts that I think your president would be interested in."

"What!?"

Lynn, who had been working on the information system, instinctively stood up. After glaring at the president, Marika turned her eyes back to Jackie.

"That's a big catch. Did you find any hidden treasure or secret military funds?"

"It's not that I'm not hopeful, but as you know, the headquarters here didn't get beaten badly and run away in the middle of the night, or bring in all the supplies they could to fight to the death. They didn't evacuate the museum's collection, and they didn't accumulate the wealth of the colony that they had unfairly exploited. The move and closure seem to have been peaceful and planned, so there are no mochi rice cakes that were forgotten on the shelves or millet that might come easily.[[9]](#footnote-9)"

Marika tilted her head slightly at the old expressions she had never heard before.

"That's not all. The problem is that I’ve found three new rooms full of documents and records that I have no immediate use for and little need for."

With a truly pathetic look on his face, Jackie looked around the clubroom. Noel was still pointing her machine pistol at Jackie, and the other club members were also looking in his direction.

"The more I walk around, the more new rooms I found. I thought I'd be able to find the surrender document in six months, but at this rate I'm starting to lose confidence that I’ll be able to finish the job in my lifetime."

"That's a lie." Gruier stood up. With a grin still plastered on his face, Jackie looked at Gruier. "Your words, actions, and facial expressions don't seem to tell the truth."

"As expected." Jackie nodded with satisfaction. "You’re right. I don't have the confidence to search earnestly in the depths of the earth for six months, much less continue until I find it. You know, there are treasure hunters who endlessly search for lost and ancient treasures. I've heard that the secret to success is to keep searching without giving up until the treasure decides to be found, but I could never do that. Working steadily at a mundane job is really hard."

"But you don't look like you've given up." Gruier said, still staring at Jackie. "You're very motivated."

"I see." Misa stood in front of Jackie. "You're boosting your speed, right?"

"Huh?" Jackie looked back at the female doctor in a white coat in front of him. "That's amazing, this is the first time someone could tell just by looking."

"Your eyes are different colors." Misa smiled. "If you have that many different nanomachines in your body, you can use them in all sorts of ways." Misa looked around at everyone in the clubroom and then back at Jackie. "Enhanced vision, accelerated nervous system, and information processing? What kind of nanomachines do you have that allow you to boost your body to that extent without worrying about the strain it puts on your body or the aftereffects?"

"That's a professional secret." Jackie raised both hands to stop Misa. "I've only used normal methods, sticking to the basics and not pushing myself too hard, and gradually pushing my limits."

"I don't know if you have a really trustworthy doctor or if you're a doctor yourself, but if you're accelerating that much, then your information processing ability is five times that of an ordinary person? Or ten times?"

"Not at all, I can't go that far." Jackie looked around the audience, trying to see how much of what he was saying was being understood. "As you know, my insides are still flesh and blood. If I could replace it here and there and turn it into a body that can do more, I'm sure it would be much more efficient, but my grandfather's will said that I should take good care of what my parents gave me as long as I can use it."

"I agree. Flesh and blood are delicate and difficult to maintain, but there's no initial cost, we’re used to using it, and if breaks down a little, it will heal, and unlike machines, it can be strengthened without needing to be replaced." Misa looked from the tip of Jackie's pointed shoes to the top of his bowler hat. "With that much boost, surely your clerical work efficiency has improved considerably? The 20 days it takes to index one reference room is calculated without boosting your body and taking time to rest and sleep. As you are now, you can clear one reference room in a day, right?"

"I hope I can do that much." Jackie nodded happily. "But there's a problem. With all these boosts, it becomes too much fun and I don't feel like finishing the mundane work in front of me. It's a boost that's not suitable for borning work."

"You heard that, everyone." Misa's voice rose as she looked at Jackie. "Even if the opponent has a human form, you should think that he's not human. His speed of thought and reflexes are on another level!"

An energy pulse exploded in the clubroom.

"I didn't say you could shoot." Marika said in a low voice. Noel, who was still aiming her machine pistol at Jackie, ran after the patchwork suit that had disappeared without a trace. "If you ask me, you won't hit him."

"Don't destroy the school!" Marika shouted,watching Noel’s back as she ran out with not only a machine pistol but also an anti-material rifle. Misa put her hand to the earphone she had in her ear.

"Misa to Bentenmaru, can you hear me? Yes, the energy response is coming from here. It's quite different from what we had planned, but it's started. Can you track it?"

Marika put the wireless earphones into her ears. She heard Hyakume's response.

"*Unlike the underground headquarters, they're above ground, so we can track them even inside the building. There's one that's running really fast, is this the target?*"

"Yes. Track them."

A hoverbike raced past the open clubroom, with the distinctive sound of a turbine.

"*Another one, probably a jetpack or hoverbike, started to move over here. It came out of the club room, into the center hall, and ran up the spiral staircase.*”

“That's our ally. Noel Blue, the bounty hunter who we took from the Shenandoah to the Sea of the Morningstar. She’s leading the way.”

“Are they chasing each other above ground instead of underground?” Lynn called out as she infiltrated the security system of Hakuoh Girls' Academy, which was operating on holidays just like it did on weekdays. “What are you going to do, Marika? There are clubs that are active on holidays, so if you cause a commotion on campus, you won't be able to hide it!”

“No one's gone down to the underground yet, right?” Marika flew to the information system and confirmed the location of the yacht club members who were planning to go down to the underground headquarters. "Noel is probably riding around the school on her bike. It's a small price to pay to get rid of Jackie if it's just a fuss."

"I hope they can make it up by canceling her teaching practice." Kane, standing behind Lynn, checks the diagram of the old school building on the information display. "And the enemy is boosting? Even with the Bentenmaru's support, I don't know if our system can keep up with a single person."

"Jackie will take responsibility for all damages." Marika said while informing the yacht club members of new arrangement. "Leave the direct attacks to Noel, everyone else will be enough to block Jackie's path."

"I haven't thought about the arrangement in case Jackie is on the ground. He can escape anywhere."

"Jackie probably won't escape."

Marika stood in front of the information system controlled by Lynn. The display that was supposed to show the situation in the underground command center relayed from Bentenmaru was switched to a structural diagram of the old high school building, and multiple images from security cameras that were supposed to be under the control of the security department were displayed.

"Misa, how long can he use the bioboost via nanomachines?" Kane asked, switching between the security system cameras one after another to follow Jackie. "If he’s a living being, he can't keep doing that forever, right?"

"As long as you're sane." Misa shook her head. "Nanomachines used for adjusting metabolic functions or treating injuries and illnesses only function within the scope of biological functions, but the ones Jackie has are different. I think each nanomachine has a built-in generator, so they're not only generating their own energy, but also supplying energy to his living body."

Kane’s response was delayed while he processed the explanation. "What?"

"I mean, the nanomachines he has are not normal." Misa sighed and shook her head. "If you put in all sorts of nanomachines that deal with multiple diseases and detoxification, they would either overreact and go out of control, or be neutralized by a safety device, but everything was working properly and in balance. The bioboost isn't supposed to last that long, so maybe he’s just putting the nanomachines in places that are overloaded to balance things out."

"So you don't know how long the bioboost will last?"

"Considering his purpose of investigating a huge amount of material, it's probably set to last for a long time. Even if you increase efficiency for a moment, if you rebound and can't move afterwards, your overall efficiency will drop, so there's no point in boosting it."

Jackie was running through the old building at a superhuman speed. While being chased by a hoverbike that should have superior acceleration, he seems to be taking advantage of his light weight and agility to draw her in and dodge her.

"So that’s what we are dealing with." Marika muttered watching Jackie's movements, which the security cameras couldn't keep up with.

"Probably not just this." Misa said. "The only thing he's using now is the boost from the nanomachines in his body. I wonder what other tricks he has."

"*This is the Bentenmaru, a new player has appeared!*"

"Eh?" Marika clasped her earphones. Coorie's voice sounded unusually urgent.

"*The Lunar Lion! Jackie's spaceship is flying low and heading your way!* "

"The Lunar Lion?!" Marika remembered the design of the awkward-looking ship, with disproportionately large antennas spread out on both sides. "Where is it coming from?! Who is running it?!"

"*It took off from the parking area of ​​Shin-Okuhama Airport with the proper procedures.*" The voice from Bentenmaru switched to Hyakume. "*Everything was faked, from the ship's shape to its transponder. I scanned all the spaceships on Sea of the Morningstar's surface, but I don't know if I'd be able to tell if the spaceships landed at the parking area were fakes, even if I scanned them one by one.*"

"*The purpose of the flight is a sightseeing tour of the skies above Shin-Okuhama City.*" Coorie added the information she had obtained by accessing the airport. "*It's heading straight for you.*"

"It’s coming here?!" Marika couldn't help but ask back. "Bring it down! I don't know who's controlling it or how, but I’m not sure we’re a serious match for Jackie right now, and if the Lunar Lion comes on top of that, we’ll have no chance!"

"*It'll be difficult.*" Schnitzer was the next to respond. "*The Bentenmaru's current position is over Shinokuhama City, and the Lunar Lion is flying over the city toward Hakuoh Girls' Academy. It'll be difficult to bring it down without causing damage on the ground.*"

Imagine the relative positions of Bentenmaru and Lunar Lion, and Marika understood what Schnitzer was saying. It’s easy to aim at a target flying on the ground from orbital altitude with Bentenmaru's beam cannon, but if they miss their target even a little, the energy beam will burn the city. Even if they hit Lunar Lion with certainty, it will crash to the ground if they shoot it down. "Is there anywhere we can crash it once it’s in the suburbs?"

"*There are a few places where we can shoot it down without causing any damage, but there's no guarantee that the Lunar Lion will choose a route that suits us.*"

If the Lunar Lion knows the risk of being targeted from the sky, it will only fly directly above the highway.

"...Okay, come here." Marika hesitated for only a moment. "Bentenmaru, enter the atmosphere and come here, and hold the Lunar Lion down directly. If the Lunar Lion gets this far, we won't be able to contact it because of his specialty, electronic jamming and communication jamming."

"*You want us to make Bentenmaru enter the atmosphere!?*"

The Bentenmaru is a spacecraft capable of not only atmospheric flight, but also diving into gaseous planets[[10]](#footnote-10). However, in its long history of service, it has only entered the atmosphere a few times.

"That'll be quicker than landing our ship and taking on the Lunar Lion. The Bentenmaru is stationed right above us. Hurry up!"

There was a sudden, violent noise and communication with the Bentenmaru was cut off.

"The Luna Lion has started jamming communications." Kane flicked his earphones several times, trying to restore the communication line. The Yacht Club's information system could not monitor the communication situation around Hakuoh Girls' Academy. However, he could guess that the Lunar Lion had begun to jam the communication as it approached.

"It's not just the communication lines." Lynn clicked her tongue as the security camera images from the security department were covered in noise one after another. “This guy has put some serious electronic jamming around this location. We can't contact him without a landline."

"Um, do we have an emergency alarm or something?" Marika looked around the information system. They had evacuation drills every year, but she doesn't remember ever hearing an alarm that reverberates throughout the entire school.

"There is, but…" Lynn looked at the security department's control system and found the command for a school-wide alarm. "If we kick off something like that, not only will our security department be sent to the scene, but the police and the military forces of the local star system will be sent to the scene."

"My spaceship will be coming anyway." Marika pointed upwards. "The culprit is bringing his spaceship in full force, so more spectators make it easier for us to do our job."

"Are you going to land the Bentenmaru here?"

Marika nodded and smiled at Lynn, who looked worried as expected. "My crew is excellent. Without any communication from me, they'll probably do a better job than if I told them what to do. Do you know where Jackie and Noel were last?"

"They were on the stairs at the east end of the third floor of the old building." Gruier said, pointing to a corner of the old building's structural diagram that was being shown on the 3D display, which no longer provided real-time information and only showed structural diagrams. "Around here."

"If Jackie is going to transfer to the summoned Luna Lion, it'll be above here."

After looking at the structural diagram, Marika ran off to grab the giant freezing gun that had been left on the table. "Let's go. We need to resupply Noel with weapons and ammunition. It's heavy!" Marika was struggling to lift the freezing gun with both hands that Noel was supporting with one arm.

"I'll take that one." Kane took the freezing gun from Marika's hands.

"I’ll get something smaller."

"I'll help you." Lynn, who had left the information system, grabbed a small missile launcher with a magazine from the pile of firearms that covered the table. "Even so, did that student teacher know that a spaceship was going to attack? I was surprised at how much equipment there was for just Jackie, but if a spaceship is coming, this wouldn’t be enough, right?"

"She said she had good intuition." Misa picked up one of the remaining machine pistols. "Of course, that intuition isn't just guesswork, it's the result of experience, information, and knowledge, but in her case, it's specialized for tracking prey."

Misa looked at the mechanical adjustment mechanism, which seemed to have been modified in various ways.

"Just take it, and don't think about firing it by mistake."

Misa also picked up another large rifle. "She’s increased the power output like crazy. If an amateur shoots it hapazardly, they'll get hurt. So, where are we going?"

"To the roof." Marika answered. "Because I think that's probably where Jackie would catch the Lunar Lion."

The old building of Hakuoh Girls' Academy, once built as the headquarters of the Stellar Alliance government, is an old-fashioned Gothic-style building with a number of gabled roofs decorated with graceful curves. The roof, decorated with countless small spires and angular chimneys, is covered with scaly tiles that look like they were carved from stone. The light metal tiles, which boast incredible durability, have completely blackened over the years, and combined with the chimneys that resemble brick construction and the decorations of the strangely shaped spires, it looks like a landscape from another world.

A large, steeply sloping roof spreads out on all four sides from the particularly tall and sharp bell tower in the center of the old building. At the top of the great roof, which serves as the peak of the building, a narrow ridge just wide enough for one person to walk on, is attached to a catwalk surrounded by a low handrail at knee height, but if you rolled down the steeply sloping roof, it would be difficult to stop unless you managed to catch on a bay window or skylight.

Noel, who had ridden her hoverbike onto the roof, found herself facing Jackie, with his back to the bell tower in the center of the old building, decorated with statues of grotesque monsters and heroes from ancient mythology.

"I can’t believe you came to a place like this where you have nowhere to run." With the muzzle of the anti-material rifle she held under her arm pointed at Jackie, Noel fixed the throttle of the hoverbike floating above the roof. Thanks to the strong wind, the hoverbike floating in the air was unstable.

"Someone who's thinking about running away isn't going to boost up and come say hello."

Marika comes out of the attic bay window and slowly walks along the catwalk on the roof. "Do you have enough ammunition?"

She holds up the huge, heavy magazine she's carrying in both hands. "It's almost gone."

The hoverbike, rising from the roof with the metallic sound of the turbine, stops next to Marika. Noel operates the lever at the base of the pistol grip of the mechanism and drops the energy magazine onto the roof with all her might. She pushes the new one she received from Marika into the mechanism. It starts charging automatically.

"The Lunar Lion is coming." Marika tells Noel briefly. Noel replies with the muzzle of her rifle pointed at Jackie.

"Is that his spaceship?"

"Yes."

"But he has no intention of escaping? Why?"

"It's just a little thing to make work more efficient." Jackie, standing with his back to the bell tower, raises one hand as the wind blows across the roof. "I have no intention of damaging or destroying your school or anything there. If you don't mind, could you just quietly watch for a bit?"

Marika looked up at the hand Jackie held out to her. From the sky, the Lunar Lion, with its huge antennas spread out on both sides of its chunky hull, descended with a listless engine sound.

"What are you planning to do!?" Marika cried out. Leaving the building, Noel flicked the guided barrel of his gigantic anti-material rifle towards the sky. She fired a powerful energy beam at the descending shadow.

The energy beam shot up into the air with a flash of light, expanding and scattering as if it had hit an invisible wall just before the Lunar Lion. The weakened energy beam scattered in all directions in the sky, where white stratus clouds were floating.

"An anti-field!?"

"It's no big deal." As if to signal the still descending Lunar Lion, Jackie snapped his white-gloved fingers. Marika noticed that the antennas on both sides of the Lunar Lion, which should have been facing in its direction of travel in space, were now pointing downward. "It won't take long."

The next moment, the Lunar Lion's antennas seemed to glow.

"Gwah!" Lynn, who had come up behind Marika, let out a strange voice. "You! What have you done!!"

"It might be a little dazzling, but it's okay, there won't be any lasting effects."

Marika had the illusion that light rain had fallen from the Lunar Lion over the entire old building, and turned to look at Lynn.

"What did you do?"

"You exposed us to such powerful electromagnetic waves that our eyes could see them as light!" Lynn glared at Jackie. "You scanned everything in the basement!"

Jackie looked at Lynn in surprise and laughed. "You're right. You figured it out."

"What is it?" Misa came out onto the roof with a machine pistol in one hand and saw the Lunar Lion in the air and Jackie underneath it. "What did he do?"

"He fired a powerful scanner from that spaceship and tried to copy all the documents in the basement at once." Lynn glared at the Lunar Lion, which seemed to be almost hovering in the air.

"What kind of equipment do you need to be able to do that?"

"It was hard work, even with this." Jackie said, moving his raised right hand back and forth as if he was controlling the Lunar Lion with gestures. "I've set up generators, reflectors, antennas, and other equipment so that I can scan all the archives and the newly discovered storage rooms, and all the contents of the paper documents at once. Now, if I scan from close range, I can get all the data in the archives at once. Of course, the data that comes up is not a detailed image of each piece of data, but a lump, so just untangling it is a lot of work, but it's a simple job with my computer."

Jackie nodded with satisfaction. "Now, my spaceship will tell me where the document I'm looking for is without me having to say a word."

Noel fired several more energy beams at the Lunar Lion. Even though she focused the shots, they were distorted and deflected before they reached the hull of the ship.

"Eh?" Jackie's left hand held his ear while his right hand reached out to the Lunar Lion. "...No?"

"What?"

"Wait a second, I'll have it checked again. I know the format and paper quality of the surrender document, so if there was a match, there's no way I'd miss it. ...No matches?"

"None?" Marika exchanged looks with Lynn, who had come up behind her. “That's what he says.”

"It doesn't look like he's lying." Gruier said, finally climbing onto the roof. Jackie held out both palms to Marika and the others.

"Wait a minute. I'll change the size and the conditions and check again. The scanning results were good, and the data from the archives was copied to my database in a recognizable state. But there's no data that matches the surrender document?"

"What do you mean, no data!" Marika exclaimed. "You've prepared so much, set things up, and even caused such a fuss, so what do you mean it's not there!?"

Jackie shrugged with a pathetic look on his face and raised both hands. "There are so many mistakes and misunderstandings in this world. It's hard to believe, but at least the surrender document doesn't seem to be left in the basement of Hakuoh Girls' Academy, is that true?"

"Do you want to use it?" Kane, who had come up to the roof with the freeze gun, called out to Noel on the hoverbike.

"Thanks." Noel suddenly rose up and tossed her anti-material rifle at Kane. She catches the freezing gun that Kane throws up in the air and quickly approaches Jackie, who has his back to the bell tower.

A white guide beam was fired from the guidance gun barrel.

"Oh dear." Jackie ducked his head, and only his bowler hat was captured by the guide beam.

"Even though my big project may have failed, there is no time to bask in the afterglow."

"If you accompany us until we hand you over to the frontier pirate guild, you can take it easy." Noel, who had once left Jackie, approached again on her hoverbike.

"Taking it easy is an attractive proposition." Jackie nodded. "I’ll think about it."

"Do that!" Noel shouted as she fired a second shot from her freeze gun. “If you do that, everything will be fine!”

"No, but..."

A huge shadow covered the large roof. The Bentenmaru, which had invaded the sky, slowly descended as if to crush the Lunar Lion.

"*Sorry to keep you waiting.*" The communication line was restored. Marika heard Hyakume's voice through her earphones. "*The Bentenmaru has just arrived.*"

"You’re late!" After replying, Marika glared at Jackie, whose bowler hat had been knocked away. "If you surrender, I'll accept it, okay?"

"I have no intention of doing that." Jackie grinned. “Even with all this, I'm confident in my ability to run away.”

Accompanied by the metallic sound of jet turbines, Noel zoomed towards Jackie a third time and made a sharp turn on her hoverbike. The Lunar Lion plummeted down with such force that it knocked the hoverbike flying, and came to an abrupt halt next to the bell tower.

"Well, I'll see you somewhere else." Just as Jackie had vanished from the rooftops, Lunar Lion began its rapid ascent.

"I won't let you get away!"

Noel on the hoverbike accelerates rapidly into the sky. Marika holds down her earphones and calls Bentenmaru.

"Catch him!"

"*Roger that.*" Hyakume answered leisurely. "*The Star System military is scrambling overhead and deploying in orbit. Do you want a ride?*"

"Of course!"

"*We don't have time. We'll attach the side of Bentenmaru to that roof.*"

Along with the roar of the auxiliary thrusters for use in an atmosphere, the Bentenmaru plummeted into the sky above the old high school building with its complexly overlapping gabled roofs. The ship's hull, longer than the old school building itself, approaches at an angle while opening the hatch of the port hangar.

"*Jump on directly.*"

"Ehh..."

Marika saw the huge hull of Bentenmaru descending next to the watershed of the gabled roof. Unlike in outer space, where there is nothing to compare it to, the spaceship seen from the ground looks many times larger.

The Bentenmaru slowly approaches, its wide-open storage deck floor perfectly aligned with the end of the gently curving slope of old light metal shingles.

"Are you okay?" Kane, carrying the anti-material rifle he received from Noel on his shoulder, stood next to Marika.

"You're piloting it, right? Hyakume. If you destroy the school building, the captain will be angry."

"*Don't worry, more than half of it is on autopilot. But it's a temporary fix for the sensors, so there's always room for error. The client is running away, so hurry up and get on board.*"

"Okay." Holding the long anti-material rifle in front of his stomach with both arms, Kane glanced at Marika. "Well, I'll get on first."

Holding the rifle with both hands, Kane sprinted down the gabled roof, using the gravity of the Sea of the Morningstar to his advantage, then jumped from the curved end into the Bentenmaru's hangar.

Inside the hangar, a maintenance man was waiting to catch them. Kane jumped into the hangar deck, and was caught by the deck crew along with his anti-material rifle, and turned to face Marika.

"I'm next." Misa, still holding the machine pistol in one hand, runs from the top of the roof toward the base.

"Give me a ride." Lynn jumped out next to Marika, aiming for Bentenmaru, which had not yet reached the closest point.

"No, president!" Marika screamed without thinking and ran down the roof. "The Bentenmaru is about to start fighting!!"

"I can't be left out when you do something like that!" Lynn, who had run to the end of the roof first, jumped toward the Bentenmaru. She landed neatly in front of the waiting deck crew.

"No way!"

Marika leapt towards the Bentenmaru's storage deck, whose approach was much closer than the pirate ship's forced docking during a raid. She placed one hand on a deck crew member who was ready to help her stop.

"Bridge from Marika, I'm aboard now." Marika turned to the roof of the school building, wondering if it was okay to give permission to depart immediately, and Gruier jumped into her arms.

"Wow!!"

Raising her voice, Marika unexpectedly grabbed Gruier’s slim shoulders. She looked up into Marika’s arms and smiled.

"Permission to board, please."

"Wow! Boarding is complete, let’s chase after the Lunar Lion now!"

Once the deck crew has confirmed that there are no more passengers on the roof attempting to jump on board, they begin to close the hatch to the storage deck.

"*Roger. The Star System's fighters will soon make contact with the Lunar Lion over the Sawanami mountain range to the east.*"

Marika ran out to the bridge while listening to Hyakume's current situation report.

"*The Bentenmaru is currently ascending into the sky. Schnitzer has decided to leave the combat in the atmosphere to the Star System's military.*"

"Can't we at least provide support!?" Kane and Misa, who should have been ahead, were long gone. Marika shouted as she sprinted from the port hangar to the bridge, taking the shortest route possible.

"*Don't be ridiculous, we're a cruiser after all. Schnitzer has decided that we'll have a better chance of winning if we ambush them in space, which is what we’re used to, rather than chasing after small things in an unfamiliar atmosphere.*"

"Got it!"

When Marika jumped into the bridge, Kane was already at the helm. Misa, in the observer seat, turned around with a face that looked like she had been there from the beginning.

"The Lunar Lion is engaged in combat with star system fighters. We're ascending straight out of the atmosphere, so we’ll enter orbit first."

"We're currently discussing the interception of the Lunar Lion with the star system fighters in orbit." Schnitzer told Marika, who had taken the captain's seat. "It's impossible to coordinate with the air force fighters in the atmosphere without prior discussion, but in orbit, all options are possible, including shooting him down, and we can fire our main guns as long as we're careful about the firing angle."

"Roger." Marika checked the battle situation between the Lunar Lion, which had risen into the stratosphere, and the interceptor fighter on the battle situation display in the captain's seat. There was a lot of noise, so it was unclear how much of the situation displayed could be trusted. "In other words, you're judging that there's a high possibility that the Lunar Lion will reach space. Is it going to be difficult for the air force to shoot it down?"

"Ever since Jackie boarded the Lunar Lion, there's been intense electronic jamming in the surrounding airspace."

Marika nodded at Schnitzer's explanation. "Well, that's what he would do."

"Normally, no matter how old an aircraft is, it's impossible for a spaceship that came down from space to be a match for an atmospheric plane, but thanks to the Lunar Lion's specialty electronic attacks, the air force's fighters can't use most of their normal means of attack. In a situation where only unguided solid bullets work in visual combat, this guy puts up a great fight."

"That assessment means there's little hope of the Lunar Lion being shot down." Marika sighed. "What about Noel's hover bike?"

"That's not just a hover bike. It flew close to the speed of sound and launched two hit-and-run attacks on Lunar Lion, and left the battle area after the third close encounter. It's probably on autopilot."

"Autopilot? Who was on board?"

"According to the last records, the hover bike left the battlefield unmanned."

These days, it's hard to find a form of transportation that isn't equipped with an autopilot. It's normal for the car to even be able to park itself in a garage.

"So, I guess Noel has transferred to the Lunar Lion."

Marika watched as the battle continued, gradually gaining altitude above the Sawanami mountain range, which spreads out to the east of Okuhama City. The distance from the Bentenmaru, which continues to rise into orbit, is getting farther and farther away, and the Lunar Lion is continuing to jam the surrounding area with strong electronic interference, so the exact situation is unclear.

"It looks like there's been no damage, considering that a bounty hunter loaded with weapons has taken over."

"Are we in time for the show!?" Lynn and Gruier belatedly rushed onto the bridge.

"The battle hasn't started on our side yet."

"How's it going?" Lynn jumped up to the right of the captain's seat, which was elevated from the floor, and peered at the battle situation display.

"The Bentenmaru hasn't started her battle yet. The Lunar Lion seems to be the same as always."

Gruier, out of breath, climbed up to the left side of the captain's seat. She was so busy trying to catch her breath that she didn't say anything.

"It seems that Noel has taken over the Lunar Lion, so I think if things go well, we'll be able to get on board."

"We've agreed with the star system military." Schnitzer forwarded the agreement to the captain's seat. "Two escort ships in high orbit will back us up. The Bentenmaru will be in charge of the frontal battle against the Lunar Lion, and the battle airspace will be closed to the public with a 15-minute time limit."

"If the star system military and pirate ships join forces and it takes longer than that, we'll lose." Marika used a light pen to sign her captain’s signature on the agreement displayed on the screen.

"Set the battle objective." Schnitzer sent the battle procedure to the captain's seat.

"Is it okay to secure the Lunar Lion and Jackie?"

"Shoot them down! Shoot them down!" Lynn shouted from her perch by the captain's seat. "Catching that pompous idiot will only cause trouble!!"

"Well, if we can catch him, I think Noel will take care of the rest." Marika muttered unsurely. The communication panel flashed red.

"Emergency communication!" Coorie announced. "The Lunar Lion, Jackie Fahrenheit, is sending an emergency message to the Bentenmaru."

"No!" "Ignore him!" Gruier and Marika shouted at the same time. Marika continued.

"Is he just stalling for time or whining? It's a waste of time to put up with this anyway."

"Roger. I'll ignore it. Huh? Huh? Huh?"

The communications monitor in the captain's seat was flashing red and showed a static-filled image of Jackie without his bowler hat.

"*Hey, how rude to ignore an emergency communication.*"

"Coorieeee."

"Sorry, he forced his way in."

Marika looked ready to spit curses, and Coorie twisting half her body out of her seat and bowed deeply. Marika glared at Jackie on the communications monitor.

"There's no room for negotiation now."

"Only unconditional surrender."

Hearing Gruier's whisper, Marika continued. "I'm not open to anything other than unconditional surrender!"

"*Um, well, could we just make that a future option and call a temporary truce? Somehow, that bounty hunter lady managed to get onto my ship, and although I was able to neutralize her electric projectiles with my safety devices, she started sabotaging the airlock with her bare hands, and it's really messed up.*”

“Please negotiate that with her.” Thinking that it was not enough, Marika spoke in as cold a voice as she could. “If you surrender unconditionally, I think Noel will accept it.”

“You don't look like you're in trouble.” Lynn kept her eyes on the battle display, which was still full of noise. “The fighters are blocking your path, but they’re only grazing you, and you’re gaining altitude and will be out the atmosphere soon.”

*“But the first thing that lady destroyed was the intercom, and it seems like she's not listening. If we're in the atmosphere, it's okay if there's a small hole, but if the air gets sucked out after going higher, it could be life-threatening, so I'm really worried.*”

“You're not the kind of person to keep quiet after your ship's interior is destroyed.” Marika glared at Jackie. “What happened to your special traps and devices?”

“*Yeah, they were destroyed before the intercom. I tried some gas that barely survived, but it doesn't seem to work on that lady.*”

“If you stop all combat operations immediately and surrender unconditionally, I think Noel will be appeased.” Marika ran her eyes over Gruier's profile as she looked at the communication monitor.

*“Okay, I've lost, I've lost, I've admitted it, so please stop with any more sabotage, otherwise I won't be able to fly anymore.*”

“That's a lie.” Gruier shook her head. Staring at the communication monitor, Marika said. "Battle objective: Destroy the Lunar Lion, shoot it down!"

"*No, no, no, wait a moment.*"

"You don’t want to lose, do you? If I’m serious about shooting you down, you won't be able to stop it."

"*That's terrible, it's true that I can't afford it.*" On the communications monitor, Jackie had a smile of amusement on his face.

"Roger." Schnitzer replied. "Fire with main gun as soon as Lunar Lion comes into firing range."

The Bentenmaru, in orbit, will aim at the rising Lunar Lion. If the Lunar Lion doesn't rise high enough, even if it hits the target, the penetrating beam will rain down on the ground.

"I'll leave it to you. Are you good to go?"

"They're coming up knowing they're being targeted. I'll use a full charge with scatter to increase the area of attack. Even if I miss my target a little, it should be easy to burn through their antennas."

"That ship is equipped with anti-field equipment."

"If the beam scatters, I can find the exact location of the target. If I converge the second shot, I can break through the anti-field."

"I'll leave it to you." Marika returned her attention to Jackie on the communications monitor. "If you're willing to surrender unconditionally, this is your last chance."

"*Okay, okay, I’ve lost, I’ve lost, I’ve lost! I'll surrender unconditionally or immediately, or whatever!!*"

"To be sure, I'll take away Lunar Lion's combat capabilities. Schnitzer, are you ready to fire?"

"The Lunar Lion is in firing range. Firing."

"*Oh noooooo.*"

Hearing Jackie's shameless, exaggerated scream, Marika looked away from the communications monitor. "Fire!"

The two triple-barreled class 40 main gun turrets of the Bentenmaru, charged with the maximum rated energy and adjusted to diffuse their beams, fired simultaneously at a single target. The energy beams, which ran along the ship’s orbit at the speed of light, spread out as they passed through the mesosphere of the Sea of the Morningstar and were sucked back into space.

"We Missed!?" Lynn exclaimed.

"No hits within the target range." Schnitzer said in a calm voice. "I don't think he's an easy enemy to see. Next, I'll sweep the target airspace with a low-powered, long-duration shot. There should be a hit somewhere."

"*That's scary. I thought you were really aiming at me.*" On the monitor, Jackie is alive and well, operating various devices. "*It's not a charge srong enough to get t through my anti-field. Are you planning to use it as a naval gunfire radar to find out where I am?*'

“I'm not going to tell you what I'm up to.” Marika stuck out her tongue. “It's not just the Bentenmaru, the patrol planes of the air force below and the high-orbit escort ships are also sending us data. If you're there, I'll definitely shoot you down.”

*“You've gotten so good at it, that makes you a first-class space pirate. Now, before you find out where I am, here's a present for you.*”

“High-energy reaction!” Hyakume cried out. 'Something big just fired up!!'

The symbol for a large missile suddenly appeared on the battle display. Marika couldn't decide if it was real or a decoy, so she instinctively ordered. "Intercept!!"

"Roger."

At the same time as the reply, the Bentenmaru’s three main class 40 guns focused on the target and fired simultaneously.

A dense smoke screen exploded in orbit. Not just one, but several explosions spread out with time lags.

"*I'll leave miss bounty hunter behind, so please retrieve her.*"

Amid the multiple explosions at such close range that all radars and sensors were disabled, only Jackie's voice was heard on the communication monitor.

"*Next time we meet, let's do a job where we can get along well and make money together.*"

"No way!" "There's no next time!" " Assume that the next one will really be the last!!"

Marika, Lynn, and Gruier all shouted at the same time.

Exploding a dense smoke screen not seen even in a fleet battle, the Lunar Lion leapt from low orbit and disappeared from the system at FTL speed. The Bentenmaru boldly entered the airspace immediately after the explosion and succeeded in rescuing Noel Blue from the detached airlock.

Subsequent investigations revealed that the electronic equipment in the old building of Hakuoh Girls' Academy's high school had sustained extensive damage from the Lunar Lion's powerful scans. It took a week to repair the destroyed equipment and restore the corrupted data from a backup server in Mikajima City, the second largest city on Sea of the Morningstar.

However, there appears to have been no damage to the yacht club's information systems and simulators, which had been hardened in advance to protect against optical and electronic attacks.

With the extensive damage to the electronic equipment, which is also educational equipment, caused some inconvenience to both teachers and students at Hakuoh Girls' Academy until the repairs were completed. Paper handouts, which were only distributed during special events, were well received by the general student body, but were extremely unpopular with some students.

Noel Blue, who was on assignment to Hakuoh Girls' Academy from an independent university as a teaching intern, completed her course in one week, shortening her schedule considerably due to damage to the facilities at Hakuoh Girls' Academy. Her instructor's evaluation was apparently not as bad as it could have been.

Regarding the Fleet Headquarters from the time of the Colonial Alliance in the basement of Hakuoh Girls' Academy, 3D data created by Bentenmaru was submitted to various parties to explain the incident. However, due to the special circumstances of the location being the basement of a prestigious girls' academy, there has been no talk of a reinvestigation at the moment.

Later on.

"A signed surrender document?" When Gin Kuron heard the full story at a Chinese restaurant for staff at Shin-Okuhama Airport, he glared back at Marika, who had come to report to him. "There's no way that the people in the colonies who were trying to wage war even by siding with pirates would leave something that dangerous somewhere in the depths of the earth, where no one can reach it."

"You know about it!?" Marika couldn't help but ask again. Gin Kuron looked at the picture hanging on the wall at the back of the kitchen.

"That's it."

In the frame, which had been stained brown by oil over the years, just like the wall, was an old official document.

**Afterword - The author's diary watching the anime broadcast - (Asahi Novels version)**

September 2009

I went to Koenji for a drink with Matsumoto Noriyuki, who is in charge of illustrations, and director Sato Tatsuo.

As the original author, I have told him my policy beforehand: "I won't check anything. Do whatever you want. I'll acknowledge whatever you create."

This was decided immediately when I thought about what I should do and what I could do as the original author.

Sasamoto likes the works of director Sato Tatsuo. If my favorite director is going to create a work for me, all I can do as the original author is create an environment where it's easy to work. In that case, the only thing the original author can do is "do nothing." Of course, I told him that I'm willing to help out in any way I can, anytime.

Director Sato and Sasamoto are roughly the same age. Their favorite works and hobbies are different, of course, but they both have a good grasp of the works that serve as basic knowledge, and their evaluations and values ​​are similar. I wasn't worried because if you look at the director's work, you can see to some extent how he writes and creates characters.

November 2009

The editor contacted me. It seems that the title "Miniskirt Space Pirates" can't be used. It seems that it's difficult to use an outrageous title like "Miniskirt" in the work under the current circumstances, and the editorial department, which was aiming for a synergistic effect, is in an uproar over the situation of having to change the title between the original and the anime version.

So, when asked for an alternative title, Sasamoto thought about it.

I can't imagine coming up with an obvious title right away. After thinking about it for a few days, I came up with the title "Bodacious Space Pirates." There's no way that being Bodacious is okay, but not miniskirts.

I laughed and said "Well, I guess that can't be helped" and hoped that the original title would be approved as it was.

Well, it seems that "Bodacious" was fine. From then on, the anime was produced under the title "Bodacious Space Pirates". The impact was more than enough.

January 2010

Scenario, storyboard, settings, etc. started to arrive. Of course, I was happy to look at the settings, but I was a lazy author who didn't even look at the scenario or storyboard.

Around this time, the broadcast schedule finally started to be decided. The broadcast was scheduled to start in July 2011, but due to various circumstances, it was postponed to January 2012.

April 2011

Dubbing of the anime began. It's not an experience I get to do many times, so of course I was happy to take my place as the original author.

If the broadcast is scheduled to start next year, I thought it would be better to slowly make the film and dub it after it was completed, but it seems that this is not possible with the current state of anime production.

After all, a huge number of anime are broadcast every week, including many long-running programs that have been running for decades.

Dubbing for anime is usually done in the same studio on the same day of the week. So when a regular voice actor is chosen for a long-running show, it means that "this voice actor will be doing dubbing on that day forever and will not be able to do other work."

So once the voice actor's schedule is confirmed, they have to record on that schedule. The chances that everyone's schedules will match again for the next season is significantly reduced. And there are many characters in "Bodacious Space Pirates," which is a two-front operation between space pirates and a girls' school.

This is the second anime adaptation of Sasamoto's original work. It's been 20 years since the previous work "ARIEL" and when he visited the dubbing studio, he found it had completely changed.

I had expected that all the voices that were previously recorded on tape would now be stored on a hard disk, but what surprised me was the dubbing work, which was done on the same day as the dubbing, and which included not only the voices but also sound effects and background music.

The A part of the main story is played with the previously recorded voices, sound effects, and background music. The director and staff, with the script in hand, keep their eyes on the screen, checking things, and giving instructions after the main story is finished.

"Bring the dialogue in cut 3 about four frames forward. Then, split the sound effect in cut 17 into two so that they can be heard separately. Start the BGM from cut 30 a little earlier."

After issuing instructions for all the cuts in part A, the director began chatting with the sound director and director in the studio. The three staff members at the control desk each began their work. Taking a quick peek at the monitor, the main animation was displayed on a small screen with several sound curves displayed below it along with frame indications, and the staff members were using the mouse to move them, add them, or erase them.

Sasamoto was astonished and asked the director.

"Are you perhaps now controlling the sound according to the instructions just now?"

This is probably common knowledge for the people in the field and those who are knowledgeable, but as an outsider who entered the recording studio for the first time in 20 years, I was surprised. I know that it's not the days of cutting and pasting tapes like in the old days, but it's so easy to change the sound nowadays.

While we were leisurely chatting, the staff in charge of dialogue, sound effects, and music finished their work and played it on the screen again for checking. This is how they add sound to anime these days.

This was the first time I was present at a voice recording session. It was for the fifth episode, "Marika Makes a Decision," which depicts the first real battle in "Bodacious Space Pirates."

As in the past, we played the main story, which was more than 80% blank[[11]](#footnote-11), and rehearsed, and then recorded. The recording was done in two parts, A and B, but because I had another event scheduled after this, I only had time for A.

Sasamoto will never forget the recording that was done to match the screen, with the screen being a direct copy of the layout, with the characters' names superimposed over their mouths for the dialogue.

After all, even though it’s a 30-minute anime to be broadcast on television, the entire A section was an explanation of the upcoming electronic warfare. And while the story follows the original, it's beautifully scripted, and the voice actors exchanging technical terms are so cool.

"So this is what will be seen in the anime." Sasamoto was immersed in the happiness that only the original author can feel. Yes, this is what I wanted to see. If you show me this, then I'll be happy with whatever you do. I'll acknowledge it. Miracles do exist.

Then, on April 28th, there was a packed party in Akasaka. Sasamoto, who had already been present for the dubbing and voice-over of about two episodes, led the toast.

"I think it's a winning piece." Director Sato's closing words at the end of the session.

"Everyone, follow me!"

All the attendees, including the voice actors and staff, gave enthusiastic applause and cheers.

(Continued in the next volume)

And so, I present to you "The Purple War Witch," the eighth volume of "Miniskirt Space Pirates," which was written while watching "Bodacious Space Pirates," which happily began airing in January 2012.

This is the last book by editor I, who has been helping Sasamoto since his debut. He knew all this before he started writing, so he should have just worked on a reasonable schedule, but how did Sasamoto end up like this!? Well, I will refrain from describing exactly what happened.

Thank you so much for all your help, Mr. I. If there is another opportunity, I would like to work with you again.

(Even though it's that kind of book, the author wrote this "afterword" at a time when it's impossible to include a date, and in the editorial department...)

Yuichi Sasamoto

**Afterword (KADOKAWA version)**

The Seventh Year Purple War Witch

This afterword is short.

No, I had to wait a bit after the initial instructions were given. I'm running out of ideas.

So I thought it would be easier to just add to the main story, so I added a little extra to the previous volume.

So, this time I need even more pages? Okay, it's quicker to write the main story than to write the afterword. So I added a little bit to the end. The number of pages is strictly decided, so I wonder if it will fit.

Just now, I was trying to get back to work, but my work computer was unable to start up after an unidentified beep sounded. Fortunately, it was able to be fixed and I am now able to write this postscript. I hope it goes well next time too.

February 21, 2019

Sasamoto Yuichi

This book is a new edition of "Miniskirt Space Pirates 8: The Purple War Witch" published by Asahi Novel in April 2012, with additional content and corrections and a new cover.



Sasamoto Yuichi

1963: Born in Tokyo.

1974: Becomes hooked on "Space Battleship Yamato" from the original broadcast.

1979: Watches "Mobile Suit Gundam" from the original broadcast.

1982: Reads "Galactic Beggars’ Army" and learns how to use airplane pilot manuals as reference books.

1984: Published "Operation Fairy"

1992: Published "Come and See the Stars Dance"

1992: Begins researching rockets from the first H-II rocket to write a space opera.

2008: "Miniskirt space pirate" battle begins!

2012: "Moretsu Space Pirates" televised.

2014: "Moretsu Space Pirates" theatrical animation was released.

2018: "Miniskirt Space Pirates" second battle begins!

Matsumoto Noriyuki

Worked for a game company for about 10 years. After that, he became a freelance illustrator, working on illustrations for light novels. Currently, his main activity is manga. His representative works include "Rin - Noriyuki Matsumoto Art Collection" (Enterbrain), "Tsubame Yodamari Shoujo Kiko" (Tokuma Shoten), and "Minami Kamakura High School Girls Bicycle Club" (Mac Garden).

A poster of a cartoon

Description automatically generated

1. TL Note: Yes, another Star Wars reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. TL note: His name can also be translated as “Silver Dragon” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. TL note: Actually, Jackie had presented a scroll to Marika and Lynn when trying to con them out of the Odette II back in book 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. TL note: Yes, エント [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. TL note: Yes, ゴブリン [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. TL note: The kanji used here, 毒味 , in addition to meaning “checking the taste”, can also mean “tasting for poison” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. TL note: Apparently, interstellar agreements are written as “To whom it may concern, the bearer of this document…” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. TL note: It’s a Japanese trope. In English, if you kill someone, they’re dead. In Japanese, to “kill” someone is to inflict what should be fatal damage. So it’s a common thing (in Japanese) to say someone wouldn’t die even if you kill them. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. TL note: These have to be some Japanese sayings, but I’m not familiar with them. They seem to be saying “there were no conveniently left behind treasures.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. TL note: In the anime, (episode 21 at 16:29) Schnitzer says “The ship isn’t made to fly in an atmosphere!” However, episode 21 was “anime only,” not based on the books, and written long before this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. TL note: The kanji here is “white”. I’m guessing that “blank” is the correct meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)