

# [Milky way arc] [3] [Flawed system] [9613]

Rev 4. 13

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Four weeks passed after the runaway civilians passed the border. They were slowly approaching Freedom colony. The colony had no problem letting them pass. In fact, it would not matter to them at all. However, there was just one problem. It was that the Nebula pirates were providing the civilian freighters escorts.

Meanwhile, the Andromeda council turned a blind eye on them. They released no public statement regarding the event and firmly denied their existence even.

"Escorts?!" Lila exclaimed. "What do you mean escorts?!"

Ashuta had just returned from a patrol. "They are the Nebula pirates. Each freighter was accompanied by ten Nebula pirates," He added. "Remnant of the pirates may be hiding elsewhere."

It was a serious issue since "escorting" the freighters gave the Nebula pirates a perfect and valid reason to approach the colony legitimately.

"They must be after merchant Maeve's vessel," Reed remarked.

It was without doubt that the pirates will ask to dock to resupply. Lila, Reed, and Ashuta had no clear resolution to this matter. They could not simply deny them docking because, on surface, they were supposed to be allies.

As the freighters entered vicinity of the colony, they immediately sent out distress signals.

"They are asking for medical attentions," Ashuta reported. "They are saying that tens of thousands are suffering."

"Thousands? That is a lot. I wonder if we will have enough medic for this..." Reed groaned. "And this will take away men power we need to tighten security."

What they did not know at this point was that "tens of thousands" were heavily underestimated.

Lila wasn't present. She had apparently went to see Aedy Freedom or so she claimed. Neither Ashuta nor Reed knew Aedy Freedom, nor had they seen him in person. It didn't bother them although they did sometimes wonder what happened to him and why he wasn't showing himself.

"I guess we will have to assist them?" Ashuta felt they had no other choice.

"It does appear we have no other choice," Reed replied with a shrug and a sign.

Freedom colony did not originally have a fleet. However, their growth allowed them to maintain a fleet of two thousand cruisers and tens of fighter squadrons at which point they felt the Nebula pirates were no longer beneficial to them.

Since Lila was unavailable, Reed was in charge for decisions. He loaded up the fleet with as many medics as possible. Ashuta stayed behind. Unfortunately, Sae was away for a mission. And Minghua, and Niak had retired. Having worked for Freedom colony as early as 8700s, they were reaching nine hundred years old and they no longer had the will and desire. Lila had no choice but to accept their retirements. She simply could not stop them after all, they devoted their entire

life for the colony. What she did ask them was to remain on the colony as just civilians. However, they had other plans and left for Andromeda union.

Loss of two class S hyper humans meant that Lila had to replace the irreplaceable. She never managed to find replacements. She did find Reed but he was nowhere the level they were at.

"That is ... a lot of freighters," Reed remarked.

The fleet confronted seven hundred thirty one mammoth-class freighters. They weren't in a formation and was slowly sailing in a line. It was the first time for such many freighters to be seen at once.

Commercial freighters always acted in small groups because having one big group meant an irresistible target for pirates even with heavy escorts. Smaller groups meant much less loss in case of pirate attacks and insurance paper works were significantly less.

"They are sending distress signals but I am receiving no response when I try to contact them," A bridge crew reported. "It looks almost as if perhaps the bridge is completely automated."

"Run a scan on a freighter. Let's see how many people are in there," Reed commanded.

"Quick scan shows ... a lot. Millions at least," Another crew reported. "Running a proper scan now..."

Few minutes later, the same crew made another report. "Sir, you may not believe this. The rough numbers are about six millions."

Reed narrowed his eyes and raised his voice, "Absurd, are you saying about six hundred million civilians are on loose like this?" He thought the whole math was a joke. "This is a joke, a sick joke at that."

"Sir, none of this is a joke," The crew responded back.

"Absurd, just absurd..," Reed said while weakly shaking his head in denial. "We have nowhere enough doctors for this, let alone medical supplies."

But they had to do what they had to do. The fleet sent out thousands of shuttles, each carrying a medic and an assistant.

He mumbled, "Perhaps, I should call Gid..."

Gid was one of the newest members to the Freedom colony administration. She was a young ESP specialized in water, which one of its core abilities was assisting metabolism of all living beings. She could heal people where it would normally take weeks, or months, to heal by treatments. However, she could not heal those with terminal illness because her ability was merely assisting and speeding up metabolisms.

"Hey, Ashuta, are you there?"

"Yes, I am here. What can I do for you?"

"Is Gid available?"

Ashuta was silent as he was looking up data. "She has returned from a mission two days ago. She hasn't checked in for work, but she has definitely returned to the colony. Do you want me to call her?"

"Yeah, do that. Tell her to come here. We may need her ability."

"Roger. I will get back to you as soon as possible."

A slender woman was enjoying her coffee on a balcony. She was in her bath robe and was enjoying her peaceful time in a beach chair. She had her eyes closed and was moving around her coffee mug slowly below her nose.

Suddenly, phone ringing shattered her moment. She frowned and refused to move from her chair. She waited until the ringing would go away, but it did not. She still refused to pick up the phone. Eventually, after a good minute or so of ringing, she violently got up from her beach chair and entered a living room, approaching and picking up the phone violently.

"Who the hell is it?!" She exclaimed.

"God, about time you pick up. Why did you turn your comm. implant off?"

"Ashuta? I was trying to enjoy a moment of peace here."

"I see. My apologies for disturbing your rest, but it is urgent unfortunately."

Sighing, Gid replied, "Fine, let's hear it."

Ashuta explained what has been happening, and Gid was shocked to hear the news.

"I will be right there."

Reed was overseeing the operation on the bridge. He was already facing problems with the operation.

"Sir, all of them are reporting that it is too overwhelming," A crew reported.

Reed sighed and didn't respond.

"Sir, it's Ashuta," Another crew reported.

"About time. On screen."

Ashuta appeared on a holographic screen. He said, "Reed, Gid is coming there. I gave her the coordinates. She will be teleporting there shortly."

"Thanks."

Speaking of the devil, Gid appeared on the bridge.

Casually saluting, she cleared her throat to make her presence known and greeted, "Hello, Mr. Reed."

She appeared in back of the bridge. Thus, Reed turned around to face her. "He explained the situation, I take. No time to explain anyway. Get on a shuttle and proceed. Bring few medic or nurses or whoever you need."

"I will just teleport."

"No," Reed shook his head. "Do not waste your powers. You are going to need it."

"I see."

Gid chose to bring two medic and an assistant. The shuttle capacity was five-man, so it became pretty full. Gid's shuttle approached its first target. After successfully docking, Gid and the others entered a freighter.

"...! Ugh!" Gid had to cover her nose, and so did the others. "What's this smell?!"

Strong odor knocked them down almost, seriously.

"Let's go back and get masks!"

Gid and others proceeded further with air purifier masks on their faces. Gid was asked not to use her powers for anything else but for healing, therefore she wore a mask as well.

While they were proceeding, they noticed no ship crew, not even a single maintenance crew.

"Ma'am, look."

A medic pointed at a ventilation on ceiling. It was releasing some mysterious fume.

"Identify the fume," Gid ordered.

The assistant approached the ventilation with a scanner. "Nothing too serious except it is detecting ammonia. The concentration is not high from this gas, but it may vary. I have no idea where the ammonia is coming from, ma'am. Let us proceed with caution."

After good five minutes of walking, they located a giant hatch.

"This hatch seems to lead to the cargo compartment...", Gid said. The hatch appears to be old and it was welded shut. "It's welded?" Gid pulled out a scanner and hovered it around the hatch. "A lot of life signatures. This is it. Take it off."

The others looked at each other, not understanding what Gid meant. "Take it off, ma'am?"

"The door."

"Ma'am, it's welded."

"Unweld it," Gid answered them firmly. She was not a mechanic and didn't know well about such. She failed to realize that it was easier to be said than done.

"We do not have the tools on hands. We will need to go back to the fleet."

"Ugh, I will do this then." She approached the hatch and touched the welded spots very gently with her fingers. Her fingers started to glow sooth in blue. As the glow came in contact with the blazed spots, the welding started to bubble as if it was being treated by extreme heat. Gid continued on with other welded spots until everything was clear.

"All done, open away."

It took two men to be able to open the hatch, and as it was open, stronger odor struck them. What they saw in front of them was a gigantic cargo space, floored poorly by simple construction materials. People were lying on each floors as if they were some sort of livestock. When the hatch was opening, it made very high pitched sound Therefore they must have known that the hatch was open. However, no one bothered to even run out. They were staying, or lying, still.

It turned out that ventilation of the freighters weren't working well and amount of people exceeded amount of washrooms and other hygiene systems too greatly. As a result, some were forced to take care of their business elsewhere -outside-. Urine and feces were the cause of the odor.

"Ma'am, presence of ammonia is very intense in here. I am certain that majority of them is experiencing ammonia poisoning."

"Alright, let's do our job." Saying so, Gid stepped forward and only she did so. She turned around, wondering what was up. "What are you waiting for?"

"Ma'am, we cannot possibly treat all of them, and even if we do treat them, they will get ill again shortly."

They made sense.

"I suppose ventilation has to be repaired before we could begin treating them?" Gid remarked.

"Yes, we should go back to the shuttle and contact Mr. Reed."

Gid looked around the cargo storage. Mammoth class vessel was phased out a long time ago due to its excessive size and high maintenance cost. As its name said, the freighter was huge. Its length was 24.000km measured from its front to its rear. Its height was relatively small compared to its length, measuring only

3.300km. Mammoth class freighter was mostly used during Andromeda colonization era under President Gawain's regime. It was long before Andromeda republic was formed. In other words, the design of Mammoth class freighter was easily over few thousand years old.

It was unknown how many mammoth class freighters were ever produced.

Its design was simple. It was basically a gigantic cargo vessel with a tiny control room on its front. The cargo compartment which was 99% mass of the ship was attached to a metal bar which was as long as the cargo compartment, and on front of the bar, there would be a control center or a bridge. Docking hatch for shuttles were located along the bar. It was a simple design and simple construction. Therefore, it was cheap.

Its high maintenance cost came from its simple and fragile design however. Due to its sheer size and lack of proper structural reinforcements, any sort of gravitational field had an effect on its structural integrity. Longer it was exposed to gravity, the more "fixing" was needed. Even 0.01 gravity had an effect.

The storage compartment was poorly modified to contain livestock. Gid could see poorly engineered ventilation vents here and there. Those vents were releasing fumes, presumably the same fume they encountered when they entered the freighter.

The place was floored by a reinforced drywall supported by simple iron bars. There were thousands of iron bars supporting the floors, and she could see hundreds of floors. Although humans were in here, they were being treated as if they were livestock. However, no one seems to be complaining or trying to get out.

"Alright, let's go back," Gid said. "But I want to talk to one of them before we go. Go ahead."

The others left the storage compartment while Gid approached someone she could spot the closest. The person appeared to be a male who was lying on the first floor, facing down.

"Hello?" Gid tried to talk to him. "Hello? Are you awake?"

The man slowly turned his face to Gid's direction. "What do you want?" He said.

"Are you alright?"

The man snickered weakly. "Do you think we are alright? Just leave us alone."

"The hatch's open. You can get out of here."

"We are not getting out of here, not until we reach our home."

'Our home?' Gid sensed a strong determination from those two words. "What do you mean by 'our home'?"

"Our home...," The man murmured. "It's our home..." He spoke no more and faced down again. Gid tried to talk to him, but he responded no more.

She eventually returned to the shuttle. Upon closing the door, she took off her mask.

"Phew..., it was bad in there." She smelled her mask and whined, "It's smelly, God. I am going to need a hot bath when I get back home..."

"Mr. Reed is on the line, ma'am."

"Alright." Gid approached cockpit. "Mr. Reed, I am here."

It was voice only as the shuttle did not possess equipment for video communications.

"Situation report."

Gid told him what she saw including her short conversation with the man.

"I see," Reed responded indifferently. "Return to the fleet. We need to change our plan."

Meanwhile, Ashuta was monitoring activities of the Nebula pirates who were "escorting" the freighters. The freighter fleet had not yet entered visual range of the colony. Therefore, there had been no troubles so far from the pirates.

"How is it going?"

It was Lila's voice. She had just entered the command center.

"You are back."

He explained what had been going on since her absence.

"Damn it," She uttered. "I wish Sae were here."

*Speak of the devil.*

"Yo~, Heya ~"

Sae's high-pitched and cheerful voice resounded in the command center. Lila, Ashuta, and all other crew looked at Sae who had just entered the center at once.

"Eh?" Sae pointed at herself and looked confused momentarily before she became defensive. "Whatever it is, it wasn't me!" She exclaimed in her defense. "I didn't do it. I swear!"

"Sir, Lila is on the line." A crew informed Reed who was busy coming up with aid plans for the runaway civilians.

"Hello, glad that you are back." Reed turned to main screen.

"I see that you are taking care of things," Lila beamed a grin, but it was a dark grin. "But we need to change our plan."

Reed narrowed his eyes as he sensed her dark grin. "Is the fleet to withdraw?" He spoke of what he feared. Approximately seven hundred fifty mammoth class freighters, only a nation could support them. Even a nation would struggle to support refugee of **six hundred millions (600.000.000)** of people.

He laughed at himself. He recalled how the public criticized the Crimson wizard for not looking after people who were not in his domain. He was also one of those who criticized him, and now he was in the same position and executing the very same thing, abandoning those who needed help.

"Why are you laughing?" She asked Reed.

He told her his thoughts.

Lila looked down. "... I see where you are coming from. But let us be honest. Even if you do aid them, even if you do repair their ships, what good will that do?"

"Pardon?" Reed was confused.

"They are heading to Sol system. They want to go to Earth. How do you think United Sol will react to six hundred million refugees?"

"Refuse them?"

Lila smiled bitterly. "What if they keep going like they are doing right now?"

"Don't tell me that they will be shot down?" Reed's voice was shaking slightly. "I mean they aren't even armed and armored."

"Honestly," Lila took a deep breath and spoke. "If I were the president of United Sol, that would be my order. I'd shoot them down."

"But..." Reed's voice was interrupted by Lila.

"If United Sol accepts them, their economy will collapse. If then, billions more will suffer. As a president, as a leader of your people, what would you choose? Well-being of your own people or looking after those who you don't even know?"

It wasn't even about politics. It was about a more ... basic element.

"What do you think Cecil would do in this situation?"

It was Sae's joyful voice from main screen where an image of Lila was displaying. Focus of the screen moved to Sae who was eating a corned ice cream.

"What?" Both Lila and Reed spoke at the same time to Sae's unexpected statement.

Sae raised her index finger and swirled it around in air. "When you are confronted with overwhelming odds," She was trying to mimic Cecil's voice, and she was mimicking well. "Sometimes, doing the unexpected is expected." She then threw away her ice cream backwards which was shattered to atomic level by her powers soon after in air. "Reed, what do you want to do right now?"

"Sae, wait..." Lila tried to stop her, but she was frozen by Sae's fierce and icy glare directed at her momentarily.

"Reed, what do you want to do?" Sae asked again.

"I... I want to help them..." Reed replied vacantly.

"How come?" Sae asked so innocently that she sounded as if she had no idea what was going on.

"Because... I want to help them ..." It came out naturally from Reed. "They need ... help, do they not...?"

"They surely do ~." Then Sae looked at Lila. "And you?"

She took a moment to answer. She did not like where the whole conversation was going and she was rather shocked that Sae was taking control of the whole situation. "Yes, they do need help."

"Then what are you waiting for? Help them."

Lila narrowed her eyes and gazed into air. "That is by the wizard's logic?"

"Likely so," Sae answered casually.

"The one who is called a reckless murderer?" Lila was skeptical and rightfully so.

Sae shrugged. "The person's weird."

Eventually, Lila agreed to send aids to the refugees while they were within the colony's domain. The first thing they needed to execute was repairs on the freighters. Majority of them needed their ventilation system checked and repaired properly before the refugees were treated.

Fortunately, it turned out that only air filters were needed to be replaced most of time. Few select freighters needed replacements of ventilation motors however. Overall, repairs went well, and air condition became much better, good enough not to use masks anymore. Gid and medic teams rushed into cleared freighters to check on refugees.

Reed, Ashuta and Gid were all occupied with the aid while Lila had to come up with a solution to repel the nebula pirates. They were estimated to come in visual range in mere five hours.

"You know." Sae initiated a conversation. "What are they coming here for?"

Confused by her sudden question, Lila frowned. "Excuse me?"

"The pirates, why are they coming here?"

Apparently, no one told Sae what was going on. She was just going along with the flow.

"You know the disk? That's what they are coming here for!" Lila exclaimed. "You could have guessed!"

"Oh, I see. Let's go see Maeve then."

Lila assumed that she meant Maeve's vessel. "Alright, I will show you," She responded casually. "Follow me."

Surprised, Sae had to ask, "You know where she is?"

Lila paused, finally understanding what Sae meant originally. "You know where she is?"

"Eh?" Sae twisted her head in confusion. "Are we on the same page?"

They both became silent until Lila spoke up. "Do you know where Maeve is?"

Sea nodded. "Of course, it is fairly obvious where she went."

"And where would that be?"

Sae pointed downward. "Here."

Apparently, Sae believed that the Gypsies were providing protection which seemed to be feasible. However, the Gypsies wasn't on a friendly term with the colony as Lila attempted to repel them passively because they were score sights in the civilizations.

"Don't worry," Sae assured. "I am good with them. You just follow me and say nothing unless I tell you so."

Sae and Lila went to downtown. Sae walked toward a large restaurant where there were few homeless people by an alley next to it. They were apparently waiting for the restaurant to throw away left over meals.

"Money."

Sae spoke to one of them. They looked up and down at Sae, and one of them told her after identifying the woman behind Sae.

"Money is in wrong hands."

Immediately realizing what he meant, Sae looked behind.

"What have you done to them?" She whispered to her.

"Nothing except we've been suppressing them," Lila replied indifferently.

"Are you willing to negotiate?"

"Absolutely not."

"Fine."

Sae turned back to them. "We are here to negotiate."

"Hey-" Lila reached out Sae's shoulder. "That is not what I ..."

"Shhhhh!"

One of the slowly walked into the alley and soon disappeared into darkness. The other homeless was in a still position by a garbage can.

Lila crossed her arms, slightly pissed. "What was that about? I am not going to negotiate."

"I don't care as long as we can get past by their security checks." Sae shrugged.

"How do you know them so well? You even knew their password."

Sae chuckled. "I know their leader well."

The current leader of the Gypsies was Sslien, and Sae had come across her few times. They were on friendly terms although they weren't exactly friends.

Lila had known that Sae had a lot of secrets she didn't know about, but she didn't know Sae's connection would go this far. On her second thought, it was no wonder how Sae was very well informed about gossips and political rumors since the Gypsies could have provided her with bits of info.

While they were waiting, an employee from the restaurant came from a back door, holding a large black bag. He ignored the homeless person by the garbage can and placed the bag by him. He turned back and went back inside. The homeless man opened the bag at once and started to eat anything he could.

Surprisingly, Sae joined him, grabbing any pieces of food, and ate together.

"What the... hell are you doing?" Lila demanded while looking down at Sae with crossed arms.

She was clearly disgusted by Sae's actions. Sae had a piece of raw fish head in her left hand, and her right hand was in the bag seeking possible food. She ate the raw fish without hesitation. She was clearly used to this.

"I am eating. Can't you tell that?" Sae talked back.

The homeless found his share of food and slowly crawled back to dark alley. Sae remained where she was and finished her raw fish head. She cleaned her hands by using her powers.

"I guess you are done?"

Sae beamed a bright smile. "I sure am." She looked satisfied.

"How could you have eaten that? It was a rotting raw fish head."

Lila was from a clan. She was raised as a noble lady. Therefore, she was always disgusted by such actions. Sae knew this. She even knew Lila's true name.

"All gypsies eat like this every day. Granted, these do not taste as good as food you eat, but that is not the point. This is how they live. You may disagree with their way of living, but you should not disrespect them."

Sae sounded sincere, and Lila noticed her change of tone.

"I know-" Lila sighed deeply. "I am sorry. It's just that I am not used to that sort of things..."

"It's alright. I understand."

After a while, a beggar approached them from the dark alley by the restaurant.

"Welcome, you are here to see Sslien?" He spoke to Sae. He was wearing a hooded ragged robe, so his face could not be seen easily.

"Yes, I am. Is Ed here also?"

He seemed surprised when Sae mentioned Ed. After a moment of silence, he seemed to have reached his own conclusion. "I see. Follow me please."

Ed used to be a deputy leader for the Gypsies until Ssilen came along. He never considered himself to be fit to be a leader and was looking for someone else.

Needless to say, he was quick to promote Ssilen to be the next leader of the Gypsies.

As the beggar led Sae and Lila deeper into the dark alley, Lila noticed sudden change of air density. It was almost as if she had entered a completely different place.

"We are not in Freedom colony now," Sae informed Lila who was trying to figure out what was going on.

"We are not?"

"This is Sslien's place."

"Care to explain more?"

Sae explained that Ssl created this "sphere" of place in sub space. Since it was Sslien's place, it would be her who'd create rules of this space. In other words, Sslien would be a God as long as she remained in this confined seal of space.

"You, too, should be able to do this," Sae said. "Since your specialization is transmutation."

Despite of Lila's class S rank abilities, she wasn't properly educated as an ESP. It was partially due to a fact that she eloped and eventually ran away from her clan at an early age. She knew how to use her specialization, it was just that she could not utilize her powers to its full potential.

The area wasn't very much populated, but there were few beggars occasionally as they walked through a dark, gloomy, narrow alley.

They eventually reached an open area. It seemed to be acting as a hub. Gypsies were coming in and out of numerous alleys from the place. The place was filled with garbage, but it was mostly paper garbage consisted of newspapers, magazines, and such.

As Lila looked around, she noticed that pieces of papers were on walls. Those pieces of papers were mostly parts of articles regarding political issues. Few were regarding celebrities. Overall, it seemed to be an information hub.

And there she was.

Sslien was in her chair, which was made out of cardboard boxes, crossing her legs. Unlike other gypsies, she was wearing fine clothes. There was another elder male next to her.

"Ssilen!" Sae exclaimed. "Long time no see!"

"Indeed," Sslien made her reply gravely. She glanced over Sae and noticed Lila. "I was told that you were here to negotiate, but I assume that is not the case."

Sae giggled and answered joyfully, "Nope."

"What is your business then?"

Sae stepped aside and said to Lila. "It is your turn now. I've done my part."

"Very well." She cleared her throat and walked past Sae. "Greetings, Sslien."

"... Greetings." Ssilen was clearly reluctant to greet back.

Regardless, Lila spoke as politely as possible. It was for the sake of the colony after all. Personal issues and feelings were moot to her at this point. "I've come to ask an audience for Maeve."

"Maeve? Who is she?"

Lila immediately assumed that Sslien was playing around. "She has a disk that is crucial to us."

"I don't know who you are talking about." Sslien held firm, and Lila looked at Sae for a help. However, Sae shrugged, shaking her head. Lila was on her own.

"You must know her," Lila claimed. "You have to."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because Sae here claimed that you'd know her, and that she'd hiding here."

Sslien looked at Sae with narrowed eyes. "Is that true?"

Sae shrugged again and answered less joyfully this time. "Yes, it is true."

"Why did you tell her?"

"Why not?"

"Sae!" Sslien exclaimed as if a mother was scolding her daughter. However, Sae talked back fiercely.

"Ssilen!" Sae bellowed. "Get a hold of yourself!" She started to initiate her aura, and wind started to swirl around her small figure. It was almost as if Sae and Sslien were about to engage in a battle.

"Now, now." The elder man who was standing next to Sslien spoke. "Both of you, please calm down." It was Ed. He stood between Sslien and Sae. "Yes, we know Maeve's whereabouts."

"Ed!"

Ed spoke to Ssilen gently, "Ma'am, they are not our enemies for now, and they don't mean her harm."

Sslien growled silently. "Fine, yes, we were providing Maeve protections. You want the disk?"

Lila nodded.

"She entrusted the disk to me because I reside usually in this sphere of seal. Maeve herself is returning to Venus." She pulled out a disk slowly from an inner pocket of her dark green wool jacket. "This is what you are after, is it not?"

"Yes," Lila answered her firmly. Meanwhile, Sae had disengaged her initiative.

"You are not expecting it for free, are you?"

Lila signed and narrowed her eyes. "Is it because of the suppression?"

Sslien responded with a sarcastic grin. "So, you are aware."

"I did not do anything wrong."

"True, I agree that you did not do anything wrong. You have a colony to administrate, and the gypsies are sore sights to any civilizations. However, you've come here to negotiate, have you not?"

Sslien and Lila both knew that they were not there to negotiate. What they were trying to do was, perhaps, a simple exchange.

"I give you the disk, and you leave us alone," Sslien demanded.

Lila looked obviously displeased with the demand, but after realizing there wasn't much of a choice for her and that she was running out of time, she accepted the demand.

Sslien handed the disk over to Ed who handed the disk over to Lila.

"I examined the disk," Sslien added. "The content of the disk wouldn't be very useful for others. Though I suppose it should be useful for you."

Lila turned away from Sslien and walked away at once. Sae followed her shortly after. As soon as they just left Sslien's sphere, Lila's comm. bracelet started to vibrate.

"What is it?"

It was Ashuta. "Ma'am, I've been trying to contact you for minutes. The nebula pirates had been asking for a docking permission."

"I see."

"And I had to grant them the permission."

"What?!"

"Ma'am, I did not have a reason to refuse their entry."

"Damn it!" Lila muttered. "Stop them! Stop further entries!"

"With what excuse, ma'am?"

"Treason!"

Lila needed time to analyze the disk. She needed time which there wasn't any at the moment. Sae was ordered to look after the docking bays to stop any incoming pirates. Meanwhile, Ashuta was barely holding on from the command center. He was receiving constant calls from the pirates, demanding an explanation.

At last, Lila entered the command center.

"How are you holding?"

Ashuta didn't respond. No, he could not. He was talking to five people at once on comm. Lila approached the comm. and cut all signals.

"Ma'am?!"

And then she opened a new frequency. Clearing her throat, she began the final strike.

"I am Lila Natvil of the Freedom colony. I hereby declare that all Nebula pirates are enemies of the colony. You are to withdraw from here in 12 hours. We will fire upon any pirates who do not leave this colony in that time frame."

All incoming calls were silenced after Lila made her announcement. It was surreally silent in the command center. Then, a call came in.

"Ma'am, a pirate who is calming to be the squadron leader of the pirates in this area is requesting a talk with you."

"Very well, put him through."

The command center resembled a bridge of a ship except that it didn't have the captain's chair in middle. Instead, seats were lined up along with consoles where crew would work.

A man appeared on main screen. He didn't appear to be a mere thug on the first impression.

"I am Kleen, a captain of 3Ra Syndicate," He declared. "I see that you've made a very bold statement. I hope that you have a proof to back up."

Lila pulled out the disk from her pocket, forwarding to Kleen.

"Does this tell you anything?" Lila asked with a grim voice.

Kleen's face startled momentarily as he saw the disk. It clearly bore the emblem of 3Ra syndicate.

"Where did you acquire it?"

"That is...," She beamed a sarcastic grin. "Not important, isn't it?"

Kleen tried to say something, but he was silent.

"Must I need to expose what is inside of this disk to convince you? I know why you are here."

Kleen seemed as if he bit a bullet in his mouth. "Very... well, we will withdraw."

"A wise decision."

The Nebula pirates started to withdraw. They were escorting the freighters, but they were abandoning that task as well.

"Phew," Ashuta let out of a relived exhale. "That was a close call, ma'am."

"Indeed," Lila replied.

Later, Sae reported that she killed few pirates who were trying to sneak in.

Meanwhile, Gid's shuttle had just docked on their 14th freighter. Its ventilation was repaired, and Gid was given a green sign to dock. She and her crew had been working for straight nine hours.

It had been excruciating nine hours for them, and one of her crew was already knocked down.

"I am sorry." The assistant was on a sofa in back of the shuttle. She collapsed during their last run.

"Don't worry. Just hold on. We are going home after this run." A medic comforted her.

Gid and her team were simply giving the refugees antibiotics. They knew it wasn't the solution, but they were simply overwhelmed to look after millions of people with mere a hundred crew overall. However, Gid was healing the refugees with her powers which was a lot more effective than antibiotics. However, she, too, was running out of juice.

A medic noticed that Gid was becoming pale which was a visual sign that an ESP was running low on fuel. "Ma'am, we need to go back. This is as far as we can do."

Gid and her team knew that this would be their last run for the refugees because the freighters had already passed the colony and was leaving the area. By the time they get back a sleep and a rest, the freighters would be well out of their range.

Therefore, she wanted to continue, but her head and body were telling her the opposite. She felt extremely tired and she was having a severe headache.

"Yeah..., let's go back," Gid said weakly. She stood up and massaged her shoulders. While at it, she noticed a young man in a corner. There were three others around him, but they appeared to be ... dead.

She approached him. The young man in a corner looked up at her.

"What do you want?" He said to her aggressively.

"These people are dead," Gid informed him, thinking that the young man was not realizing that they were dead.

"Yes, they are. And they were my friends, close friends."

Gid looked at the dead bodies. They were wearing rags, and it was clear that they weren't well fed while they were alive. The young man didn't appear to be in a good condition, either. His thin arms and legs indicated that he wasn't well fed, either.

"Why are you doing this?" Gid asked the same question she had been asking other refugees. She was never given a proper answer however.

"Why are we doing this?" He scoffed. "Let me ask you this then. What are you doing this?"

Gid didn't understand. "What do you mean? What are we doing what?"

"This, helping us out."

"It's because we had to, and besides the freighters were sending distress signals."

"You had no obligation to help us, but you still chose to. Isn't that right?"

It took Gid sometime to answer. "Yes, that's right."

"It is exactly the same reason we are doing this. We did not have to do this, but we chose to do this."

"Even when they are dying?"

"We chose to do this."

"To see Earth?"

"We chose to do this," He repeated.

"Earth is ... not as great as you are imagining." Gid sighed. She had never been to Earth and didn't have great attachment to Earth, either. Therefore, it was very hard for her to understand his desire to go to Earth.

"Stop. Do not poison us with your version of Earth."

Perhaps her words offended him. Perhaps, it was something else. Either way, he glared harder at Gid.

"Do you have any idea what we've gone through?" He was raising his voice. He was biting his lips at the same time. "You have no idea what we have gone through. You have no idea what we have felt!" His lips were bleeding. "You don't have a fucking idea why we are doing this." His glare contained hatred. It wasn't just ordinary hatred. It was as if his anger was exploding through his words. "Bug off!" He shouted. "Just leave us alone!"

Lila and Sae were watching the freighters disappear from their visual range from a viewing plaza.

"There they go." Sae said casually.

Lila was watching them with her arms crossed. "Do you think United Sol will accept them?"

Sae chuckled and exclaimed, "Hell, no!" Her reaction didn't surprise Lila, for she was thinking the same.

She asked anyway again even though she knew the answer. "What will become of them then?"

"It is obvious, isn't it?"

Lila shook her head in disgust. "God..., this is going to be really messy. I wonder why they are doing this."

Giggling, Sae said, "I'd rather wonder what has pushed them to do this."

"... Either way, we have done what we could." Lila gazed through the window.

The Nebula pirates and the Freedom colony had an official pact. It was a peace pact which was signed by both parties back in year 8654. The Nebula pirates wanted a safe haven out in open space, and Freedom colony wanted a friendly relationship with them since they were in middle of nowhere in neutral space. Lila wasn't there when the pact was signed. Only Aedy Freedom was present in that meeting because he was alone at that time.

However, situation changed over the years. As Freedom colony expanded and grew, the colony developed its own defense forces which were adequate enough. Furthermore, the colony had stable relationships with both United Sol and Andromeda union. The colony no longer needed the Nebula pirates for protection. However, Freedom colony was not about to break the pact because it needed to stay neutral. Breaking the pact would mean the pirates would be their enemies, and it was the last thing they wanted. The only way to break the pact was either the pirates break the pact first or to find a valid reason for the colony to break the pact with little consequences.

The disk was their perfect excuse to break the pact without turning the Nebula pirates into absolute enemies. The disk contained a series of discussion regarding "acquisition of Freedom colony". The disk went to the Freedom colony eventually in the end, and it effectively neutralized the pact.

Reed's fleet had just seen the last freighter pass their domain. The fleet was waiting for the shuttles to come back. While at it, Reed received the report regarding the Nebula pirates.

"Good that it has been resolved," He remarked.

The fleet sent out a hundred shuttles carrying medics and assistants. In few hours, most of shuttles had returned. Gid's shuttle was one of the last shuttles to return. Everyone was exhausted and some passed out from the workload.

Reed was in his captain's quarter when Gid entered to report. He was looking after reports which were submitted by the medical teams.

"I have returned, sir," Gid declared, casually saluting. She was never trained as a military personnel and her salute was as casual as it could get.

Glancing at her once, Reed was skimming over the reports. "How was it?"

"Absolutely horrible, sir."

"These reports are saying the same thing."

"How many did we manage to treat?"

"We've treated about 3% of the whole. This figure also includes how many ships we managed to repair," Reed said.

"People were dying inside, sir, due to either lack of food or lack of treatment."

"Or both," Reed added.

"Likely, sir."

"We did what we could. They are outside of our domain now."

Gid sighed. "I realize that, sir."

Reed had come to his own terms about the situation. He consoled himself that he did something at least however minor it may have been.

"Take a shower and get a sleep. You are dismissed."

"If you say so, sir." Gid turned around and left the captain's quarter at once. Both of them didn't feel satisfied with the outcome at all but they also knew that there were very little they could have done.

Meanwhile, Ehka had been held captive by Wemer and Sevn. She had been questioned by Sevn but she had kept her mouth shut. However, after being held for questioning for more than four weeks, her will was starting to crack.

Sevn was questioning her again as usual. He had been questioning for only half an hour every day and left her alone in a jail. She was being treated fairly and was fed well.

"I came here today to tell you that I have only 3 days left," Sevn said while quietly walking around behind Ehka who was sitting on a chair. It was a small room where there were only a chair and four LED light sources in each corner of the room.

He continued, "We will be forced to hand you over to Andromeda navy after 3 days."

Ehka, as usual, kept her mouth shut.

"You were an agent before, so I am sure you know what you are going to face. And you do know how you can avoid that."

Still, she kept her mouth shut although she looked visibly troubled at this point.

Sighing in silence so that Ehka wouldn't notice, Sevn tapped her shoulder. "You know I am not asking much. Simply tell us his name and how you came to know the man. If you tell me that, we can agree on a deal."

She still kept her mouth shut. Sevn pulled a necklace out of his pocket. It had a thumb-size green gemstone.

“We found a lot of these from the hall. I am sure it had something to do with the cult,” Sevn said. “Just tell me. For your own sake. Juron can’t meddle in while we keep you with us. But if you are handed over to the navy, you will fall into Juron’s hands. Do you really want that?”

She startled when Juron’s name was mentioned. Silently growling, she finally opened her mouth. “I don’t know much. That is the problem,” She said. “I don’t think I know enough to buy my way out.”

That was her fear. She didn’t have any juicy details to exchange for her safety.

“What do you know?” Sevn demanded weakly. “Work with me so that I can help you out. I know your life has been ruined by Juron. The last thing you want is to make him end your life.”

“What can you do for me?” She asked. She was genuinely curious.

“I can either send to Freedom colony or...”

“No, that’s too dangerous. He could easily find me and get me,” Ehka uttered in fear.

“Or I can send you in an unregistered shuttle and set you free in the asteroid sea.”

Andromeda cluster had vast sea of asteroids not too far from Heaven of Order. The asteroid sea expanded into the nebula and many private mining companies as well as 3<sup>rd</sup> party shipyards constructed outposts. There were also known to be some pirate bases and it was a good place for wanted criminals to lose their traces.

Ehka gritted. She lamented how her fine career came to an end like this. Tears gathered in her eyes as she bemoaned in silence. Sevn could imagine what was going through her head and comforted her.

“I apologize for...”

But she bellowed to interrupt Sevn. “What would you know?! You have no fucking idea how hard it was for me to become an agent!”

Instead of keeping his mouth shut, Sevn talked back. “Is that why you wanted to get on the freighter? To die?”

Ehka started to sob but soon calmed down. “The cult gave the necklaces out for free to its members. I don’t know his name. I don’t know where he came from. What I do know is that we believed in his vision.”

“What is this vision?”

“He told us to die in grace instead of dying unknown.”

Sevn narrowed his eyes. “He told all of his followers to die and they accepted that? I find that hard to believe.”

Ehka let out of a weak sorrowful laugh and responded, “That’s because you have absolutely no idea how their living was.” Sighing, she quickly added, “Perpetual hellhole.”

“Fine, I admit I don’t know how bad their lives were, but why did you join them? Your life was far better than theirs unless you became too pessimistic to think otherwise.”

“The system is wrong,” Ehka responded fiercely. “Social and political connections outweigh hard work. I worked hard. I came from a poor family and I worked my ass off to climb the ladder. And see where I am all just because I happened to work with an asshole.”

Ehka really did nothing wrong but she had to take responsibility for Juron's actions because General Wong needed to protect Juron. Wong asked Ehka to take the responsibility and promised her a promotion. Alas, the promised promotion never came and she ended up being permanently stationed at Freebie station.

Sevn actually couldn't talk back. He had some connections and such connections made his life a lot easier. He could see and even sympathize those who had no connections at all.

After consulting Wemer whose background was similar to Ehka, he agreed to set Ehka free in a shuttle. Wemer even included a cash card of 10.000 credits.

Wemer borrowed a royal navy cruiser and stopped on edge of the asteroid sea. He gave a shuttle access to Ehka as well as the cash card. While she wasn't pleased with the outcome, she did thank Wemer and Sevn and set her shuttle to the asteroid sea.

"Any news from Juun?" Wemer asked while they were watching Ehka's shuttle disappear into the asteroid sea.

"Yes, he contacted me that he had to stay far from the freighters due to intervention from the Nebula pirates," Sevn answered. "He couldn't even dock at Freedom colony due to chaos they created later."

"So, basically, he is wasting time."

Sevn smiled. "If you put it that way, yes."

"Tell him, no, order him to come back. We need to deal with Juron and we need him."

"Yes, sir."

Fin