A cartoon of two women

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Illustration Noriyuki Matsumoto

Design by Shindosha

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The stars flickered.

The space-time structure of the universe, in which only a few hydrogen atoms were floating, was shaken and forcefully distorted by the intense energy that struck from far away.

The energy, concentrated to the point of distorting space, converges without diffusing and rips through space, emitting a beam of light.

Emitting all kinds of energy from radiation to ultraviolet rays, the torn space expands further, shaking the stars in the background and increasing its scale like a spindle.

Photon radiation filled the dark space with a dazzling brilliance, and the original space-time structure was restored. A training sailboat with nine masts folded down emerged from the higher space into the three-dimensional space where it should have been, together with a short and thick FTL booster that did not match its slender hull. A few hydrogen atoms pushed to the outside of the hull interfered with the superimposed energy field, converting the entire mass into energy and releasing a flash that seemed to cling to the tip of the ship.

"Odette II returning to normal space!"

“You can tell just by looking outside!”

Katou Ririka shouted at Marii, who was sitting in the navigator's seat.

“Check your current location! We're on a combat voyage, so as soon as you jump out, check your current location and surrounding situation! Enemies shoot at you from places you aren't looking!”

“But we've just returned to normal space, so it'll take some time for the surrounding space to stabilize.”

“Do you want to die!?” Ririka raised her voice sharply.

“Even if the surroundings are rough and you can't see from here, you can clearly understand the situation here, which shook the space and radiated various things in a grand manner before returning to this world. What do you think the correction program is for? Confirm your current location and surrounding situation as soon as possible! Beams and missiles won't wait for your convenience!”

Ririka read the situation in the surrounding space on the consoles around the captain's seat, shouting in the same voice as a demon air traffic controller trained to deal with spaceships passing through the Tau system.

"...That's why I said I didn't need an unnecessarily high-power FTL booster. Even if it's a special option, where did they keep it?"

　To make the Odette II, whose mass is small compared to the hull volume, jump into FTL space, an FTL booster with such high output is not necessary. However, what was prepared for the Odette II, a Category II sub-light spaceship which would not normally go FTL, was a powerful FTL booster that, although old, could throw even a large ship, whose mass alone is an order of magnitude higher, into hyperspace.

　Since there was not enough time before departure, Ririka did not confirm the details of the FTL booster, which could be connected to the Odette II, an old training sailing ship, without any modification. Hyakume found it from somewhere, connected the clunky FTL booster that had been brought by the Bentenmaru to the Odette II, and conducted a minimal test run that also served as familiarization training. Ririka, completely stuck on the bridge, didn't even see the actual thing with her own eyes.

The thick FTL booster, which has a cross-sectional area several times that of the slender Odette II's hull, was connected to the engine section of the old training sailboat without any additional modifications. Although the stock engine was added without any proper adjustments, it had ample power and was able to swing the light hull around, so there were no major problems during the test run, and Odette II was able to complete the jump to Garnet A somewhat ahead the rushed schedule.

The engine output required to propel a spacecraft through higher-dimensional space at FTL speeds varies depending on factors such as the mass of the craft and the distance it jumps. If the power is insufficient, the jump distance will not be achieved, and if the accuracy is insufficient, the direction will be lost, so FTL jumps are usually performed with a large amount of power, and the excess energy is released immediately after the jump.

The control of a FTL engine depends on the power output and the habits of the machine. If the power output is too high for a short jump, the spacecraft will overrun the target point and go too far, and even if it successfully returns near the target point, if the energy released is too great, it will distort space itself and be caught up in another jump. The power output must be carefully and precisely controlled.

Energy in excess of what is needed is released at the point of return. The energy emitted as a pre-drive phenomenon is a loud advertisement of one's position for a warship, and a proof of uneconomical operation for a civilian ship. The principle of the FTL jump makes it impossible to avoid energy emission at the return point, but it is possible to keep it low by making adjustments during the jump.

However, the FTL booster prepared for Odette II was unnecessarily high-powered, and the crew lacked the skills and operational data to make subtle output adjustments. Thanks to this, the excess energy released in large quantities at the return point spread while shaking the surrounding space, reducing the accuracy of Odette II's observations.

“Current position, Garnet A outer planet orbit, 8 point 25 from Tau!”

Although the numbers could not be trusted because the space to be observed fluctuated, Marii, the navigation officer, exclaimed as she read a reliable number from the results, which still had a large error margin after making corrections.

“Deviation from the pre-jump flight plan outward by point 02!”

“Bentenmaru’s and Barbaroosa's current position confirmed”

Lynn Lambretta, the second-in-command, reported from the electronic warfare seat, leaving the numerical report to the figures transferred directly to the captain's seat.

“Transponders confirmed. It's definitely the consort ship.”

After taking a breath, Lynn added “Do you want to open a communication line?”

“Wait for the other side to call.”

Ririka shook her head, smiling at Lynn as she tried to take the initiative.

“Don't forget to listen to the others. This is a battlefield and we are newcomers. Don't be so dumb as to raise your voice when we're already causing trouble for the advance team by making a spectacular appearance!”

“The Bentenmaru is calling.”

A slow, quiet voice echoed across the bridge.

“Bentenmaru to Captain Ririka of the Odette II. Would you like to connect?”

Ririka smiled and nodded at Gruier, whose voice was enough to calm the atmosphere on the bridge.

"I'm sure you're using a proper encryption circuit. It's fine if it's open, just connect it."

“*How's space after a long absence, Captain Ririka?*”

The person who appeared on the communication monitor with a beaming smile was the Bentenmaru's ship's doctor, Misa Grandwood.

“*Looks like you're flying better than I thought you would.*”

"It's a makeshift FTLbooster for a ship older than the Bentenmaru. If it's just the youth of the crew, we can easily win, so just shut up and watch!"

Looking at the bust shot of Misa in her lab coat, the ship's doctor's uniform, Ririka glanced at her former colleague and wondered how she looked in her captain's uniform after a long absence.

“If you suddenly start with idle talk, at least it doesn't seem like things will start going crazy right away.”

Ririka looked around at the bridge personnel, who were made up of Hakuoh Women's Academy yacht club members, some of whom were middle schoolers, and turned her attention back to the communications monitor.

“It's a shame, but my little pirates are only half-grown, but they're very motivated. Could you please let me know the latest situation so that I don't have an outburst?”

Nodding in a bored manner, Misa, who was monitoring the communication monitor, ran her fingers along the console at hand.

“*I'll send you the observation data. We are already on our second round of scanning the entire system in cooperation with the advance ships of the star system forces, but as you can see, we haven't found any fleets or forts in orbit or on orbiting bodies that are in dire need of immediate action. Captain Kenjou of Barbaroosa is very frustrated because he can't find the device even though the other side has specified the location.*”

“This is the Barbaroosa's second time in this airspace, right?” Ririka said, recalling the Barbaroosa's report from the preliminary materials.

“Have you checked for changes against the previous data?”

“*The data from the previous survey was just passive observation, pretending to be a mere passerby so that the enemy would not notice us. Even the data collection after the disappearance of the Black Swan's ghost ship in front of them was not a precise one. In addition, the data from the Garnet A stationary observation base has been rewritten and is unreliable, so what’s the standard?*”

“In other words, you still don't have a clue.”

After succinctly summarizing the situation, Ririka let out a sigh.

“*That's why it's better to do as much research as possible. Putting aside the oldest pirate ship disguised as a sailing ship, we brought the latest reconnaissance aircraft that surpasses the Bentenmaru in terms of reconnaissance capabilities. Even the best observation isn’t enough, so please start quickly.*”

“We haven't even gotten around to the maintenance and adjustment of the reconnaissance aircraft yet.”

Ririka thought of the silhouette of the state-of-the-art electronic reconnaissance aircraft in the hangar, which she had only seen the day she first boarded Odette II. The Silent Whisper, which had just begun to be tested and adopted centrally in the Imperial Fleet, let alone in the star system forces, was being left alone to prepare for Odette II's departure and for crew training.

“Do you have any extra personnel who can use electronic reconnaissance aircraft?”

Neither Bentenmaru nor Barbaroosa has spare crew. At least when Ririka was there, the Bentenmaru only had a limited number of crew members on board, and it was common for one person to be assigned multiple roles.

Misa looked sideways in the monitor and turned her attention back to Ririka.

“*I'll get the captain.*”

The communication monitor switched to the Bentenmaru's captain's seat. Ririka almost burst out laughing at the sight of her daughter in a captain's uniform, but her face tightened as she remembered that she too was wearing a similar captain's uniform, albeit of a different design.

“*This is Katou Marika, captain of the Bentenmaru*.” Marika gave her usual introduction.

“*The Silent Whisper will be operated our Hyakume and Nora, the vice captain from the Barbaroosa. We are now sending the Bentenmaru around to pick them up.*”

“Nora?” Ririka repeated the name nostalgically.

“I heard the captain has been replaced, but Nora is still the XO of the Barbaroosa. She won’t be promoted.”

“*I am the only pirate on this mission who has participated in the final battle at Garnet A.*”

“Well, she is one of the few active vessels that have been in service since the privateer's license was first issued. You are still in good health, Methuselah!”

“*I know you are familiar with me from the past.*”

Marika glared briefly at her mother from the communications monitor.

“*You’re not on a pirate ship now, Ririka, so please don't be rude.*”

Marika's line caused a stir not only on the Odette II’s bridge, but also on the ship where the communication was being broadcast.

Frowning slightly, Ririka looked back at the pirate captain on the monitor.

"Marika, weren't you the one who trained the Hakuoh Academy’s yacht club to be pirates?"

“*There's no way I could have planted the idea. We have a lot of talented people in our yacht club.*”

Marika, who hadn't fully explained the details of the last time the yacht club sailed on the Bentenmaru, continued while glancing at the expressions of the crew members on the bridge.

“*We have talented people, right?*”

Ririka looked around the bridge, which was enveloped in a strange silence, as if trying to stifle a laugh.

“Oh, absolutely. I set up a training schedule as hard as the Marines' in order to be at least as useful as possible, but there are many talented people who take advantage of my opportunities to escape, plan banquets, and pull pranks.”

“*Looks like you're getting along well with the Odette II's crew.*” Marika smiled so that Odette II's crew around the captain's seat could also see it. “*We have an excellent crew, don't we?*”

“...I'll do the scoring after the mission is over.”

Ririka smiled with an amazing elegance that was incomparable to her daughter.

“If we survive, that is.”

“FTL booster conversion reactor, idle and stable.”

“The wired control system, both main and subsystems, are ready to be disconnected.”

“Is there anything left unfinished?” Ririka looked around the Odette II's bridge.

“We can get data wirelessly, but in the current situation we don't have time to take care of it until it we come back. Make sure to clean up the high-power FTL booster so it can be left alone for a while.”

In orbit around an outer planet with Garnet A in the distance, the Odette II had begun dismounting its bulky FTL booster. Although equipped with a propulsion system that allows it to navigate in normal space on its own, if it remains docked to the Odette II, its maneuverability will be reduced and its sensor system will be full of blind spots, making it difficult to use. Above all, the Odette II's solar sail, which only generates weak thrust, makes it impossible to operate as a sailing ship even with an inertial control system.

In the end, after arriving at Garnet A, the Odette II disconnected her FTL booster and operated as usual.

Once the mission is complete, it must dock with the FTL booster again and return to the Tau system. The engine system will not be shut down, but will remain idling and locked, waiting for the mothership to return.

Because operational data has been missing for a long time, the true identity and operating history of the FTL booster connected to the Odette II is not completely known. Although it seems to be well maintained, it takes some preparation and effort to keep the superluminal engine, which seems to have no good operating history, in an idling state for long periods of time.

“We did the best we could.” Yayoi, in charge of the engine, answered. “As for what we haven't been able to do, it's an unexpected situation, so there's nothing we can do about it.”

“That’s encouraging.” Ririka nodded. “Well then, let's start detaching the superluminal booster!”

“Communication from the Bentenmaru.” Gruier reported as soon as the superluminal boosters were detached from the Odette II and began to distance themselves.

“Connect.” Ririka, in the captain's seat, instructed Yayoi, in the engineer's seat, to check the superluminal booster via the data line.

“Be careful not to be overheard.”

“Roger. This is the Odette II, I'll connect you to Captain Ririka.”

“*Hello, this is the Bentenmaru.*”

Odette II's bridge erupted in cheers as a familiar face appeared on the open line's communication monitor. Kane gives an informal salute from the Bentenmaru's helmsman's seat.

“Mr. Kane!” “Wow, he was really on the Bentenmaru.”

“*This is Kane, the helmsman, as you know. Currently approaching the Odette II.*”

“Odette II, Ririka here.”

Ririka returned the salute to Kane, who had not yet boarded the Bentenmaru during her active years. She looks around at the bridge, which is covered in yellow cheers.

“You're very popular, aren't you?”

“*I'm sure you know that Captain Marika and I are indebted to the yacht club in many ways.*”

“It's no wonder I'm indebted to you, Mr. Kane teaches physical education at Hakuoh Girls' Junior High School, and also serves as an advisor for the sailing club.”

“Sounds like you've been busy.”

After hearing Gruier's explanation, Ririka cast a sympathetic glance at Kane over the communications monitor. Kane rushed to wave one hand, which he had released from the helm.

“*No, no, not at all. Unlike Captain Ririka's Spartan education, this one is done on a laissez-faire basis, so I cut corners.*”

Pretending not to hear the protests that rose from all sides of the bridge, Kane continued.

“*Unfortunately, I don't have much time, so I can’t slowly dock with you. I'm going to throw out Hyakume, who is in charge of the patrol, so please catch him.*”

Ririka looked again at Kane's face and understood the rendezvous procedure.

“Hyakume in a space suit flying in by himself? You're in a hurry. What if it needs maintenance?”

“*I can't do much maintenance in the hangar of the Odette II anyway. I have the latest data from the link, so, if necessary, I can borrow Barbaroosa's deck for resupply and adjustments.*”

Kane looked around deliberately and kept his voice low to avoid being overheard.

“*We don't have many resources on our side, and we would like to return the Bentenmaru to the patrol network right away. We would like to keep Hyakume at home for data analysis if possible, but as long as we have a connection, we can work anywhere, and we need more pawns. I've agreed on a policy not only with Coorie and Hyakume, but also with Barbaroosa.*”

“We have to do a lot of work while we are short of staff, just as we have been doing since the beginning, huh?” Ririka smiled bitterly and shook her head. “Roger. Should I just stay still?”

Ririka looked at the display showing the orbital correlation chart with the approaching Bentenmaru. The Bentenmaru, which was traveling at interplanetary speed, was rapidly decelerating, simultaneously decreasing its relative distance and relative speed to the Odette II, which was in a state of inertial navigation. The predicted orbit would intersect with that of the Bentenmaru, so if Hyakume was to fly from the Bentenmaru, it would be at that time.

“*Hey, I've got the exact vector after the superluminal booster separation, so please just fly straight. We will rendezvous on our own. After throwing out Hyakume, we will reverse and return, so don't worry about it.*”

“It's okay to approach, but don't get too carried away and hit me.”

Ririka confirmed the current position of the Bentenmaru, approaching from the home planet side to the Odette II, which is orbiting an outer planet around Garnet A.

“Unlike you, which was originally a warship, this one is made more delicately.”

“*Hey, don't worry.*”

“It was like he was running away from us.”

Ririka murmured as she watched the Bentenmaru’s back, which was heading back to Garnet A with a rapid reversal as if in combat maneuvers. Gruier, who answered the ship's communication, told Ririka. “Communication from port airlock. Hyakume's knocking.”

“Open it for him.”

Odette II's exterior hatches and airlock doors are, at a bare minimum, kept locked to prevent inadvertent intrusion by outsiders. The airlock was unlocked by a member of staff who had been dispatched from the engine room, and the news that Hyakume had boarded the ship was soon received.

“*Well, I'll be gone soon, but for now, I'd like your permission to come aboard.*”

Ririka nodded to Hyakume, who appeared on the ship's communications monitor in a light space suit for work.

“You've gotten that far, and you didn't even have permission to board the ship. What are you going to do, take my reconnaissance plane right away?”

“*I would like to do that if possible, but I was able to board a spaceship commanded by Captain Ririka for the first time in 20 years. I'll come to the bridge to say hello.*”

Hyakume, in the monitor, pulled out a small communication capsule from the fingertip of his glove.

“*I also brought some souvenirs.*”

“Hmmm…”

Hyakume looked around at the yacht club members who were listening to his conversation with Captain Ririka on the bridge.

“How far can we go with this crew?”

“You can talk about it.” Ririka waved her hand in annoyance from the captain's seat.

“If you keep quiet about it, you never know how far it will go out of control. Let's hope that if we share reliable information with them, they will still be able to make decisions that will allow them to take responsibility for themselves.”

Hyakume looked around at the faces of the bridge personnel once again.

“It's quite a crew to make Captain Ririka so determined.”

“I just can't control the reins.”

“I got it. Well, there's nothing to hide.”

Hyakume handed the small communication capsule he had taken out over the console to Ririka in the captain's seat.

“Detailed information on the deployment status and the investigation since our arrival is included there. As expected, the star forces are cooperating with the Imperial fleet to search for enemies in a wider area, but so far no significant results have been achieved.”

“Not only the star system forces, but also the imperial fleet?”

Ririka did not miss Hyakume's seemingly innocuous words. A faint stirring spread across the bridge.

“Has this matter become that important?”

“If we allowed a large-scale terrorist attack such as the Stellar Slayer in Imperial territory, it would be a complete loss of face for the Imperial Fleet.”

Hyakume continued, looking around at the faces of the crew members who were listening, not Ririka.

“The Empire equally eliminates threats to the stars in its territory. Regardless of the source, when you annex an independent star system in the name of a galactic empire, it is the empire's duty to guarantee its security. And the day a supernova bomb is used as an annihilation weapon, the inhabitable planets in the vicinity will be blown up over time. Considering the various troublesome costs in such a case, it’s much cheaper to move a conventional fleet to do the job.”

“Are you saying that you have to count money when you go to war? It's a cruel world.”

“We live in a world where you need a financial account even to pirate. However, since the enemy's main body has not yet been seen, it would be more convenient for the enemy to not know that the Imperial fleet is actually moving.”

“I wonder if the enemy would think so conveniently?”

Tilting her head a little, Ririka looked at Hyakume.

“When he disguised himself as a tax official from the Tau system and tried to steal the Odette II, he went out of his way to tell the crew his name honestly. Is the red-headed fool so good-natured that he would think that the star system military and the Imperial fleet would not be involved from that point on?”

“At the very least, the official opinion is that unless they show movement other than the pirate ships gathered at Garnet A, they shouldn't move in response. All of us pirates agree that we don't know how reliable the Imperial Fleet is, let alone the star system's military, which has had no experience in operations outside the system except for joint exercises.”

Hyakume continued, explaining not only the official position of the pirates, but also the intentions of the star system forces and the imperial fleet.

“When they brought out such a forbidden superweapon as the Stellar Slayer, the enemy must be prepared to fight not only local autonomous star systems and the pirates who nest there, but also the main body of the empire. The fact that we are the only ones standing out in the open is not only to prevent the enemy from being aware of the existence of a separate task force, but also to mislead them about our scale of operations. If they think we're going to take them on with a fleet of pirates and a training sailing ship from a yacht club that's not even a force to be reckoned with, that's good, and if they think they can take us on, that will give us more room to take advantage of them.”

“It would be nice if you could think of it that way.” Ririka sighed and shook her head.

“Even though he does a lot of stupid impersonations, if you listen to what he did last time when he tried to hijack this spaceship, you'll notice that Jackie is a crazy man, and he's quite talented. Don't I have to worry about him trying all kinds of tricks?”

“Yes, of course inferiority is ingrained here, so I have many concerns.”

Hyakume looked around the bridge.

“May I borrow this for a moment?”

Ririka pointed from the captain's seat to the empty observer seat. “Is that okay?”

“It’s good enough.”

Hyakume, who had taken to the observer's seat with a body language accustomed to weightlessness, looked around at the antiquated console.

“Well, this is nostalgic. I didn't know there were still spaceships in service that still use mechanical switches like this.”

Hyakume ran his fingers over the control panel. The main screen, the largest on the bridge, displayed a schematic diagram of the outer planetary system centered on Garnet A.

“As you know, the size of the red-giant Garnet A has already exceeded the orbital radius of the Sea of the Morningstar in terms of equatorial radius. Currently, Garnet A is orbited by three gas giant planets with the rest disappearing to the outer edge, leaving behind a cometary cloud. The surrounding sky has been cleaned up by the gas giants over the years, so there is only a modest asteroid belt.”

Large planets with enormous gravity attract, capture, and suck in comets and meteorites from the surrounding airspace as they orbit. As a result, the airspace around Garnet A is clearer than the average star system, with fewer planetesimals and asteroids. The few remaining asteroid belts are concentrated in one place, and the intervals between them are sparse.

“There are no suitable planets to live on, nor is it a major transportation hub, so there hasn’t been and still is not a single relay station in this area. Since it is a red giant star that is expected to continue burning for tens of millions of years, there are unmanned observation stations on the outer edge of the star, but it seems that it has been hijacked and the latest observation data cannot be trusted.”

“What about the data from the War of Independence?” Ririka reclined the captain's seat so that the star map centered on the red giant star, which was to be the battlefield, was in front of her.

“If they really wanted to detonate a supernova bomb, they would have made various preparations within the red giant itself, right? If we compare the current situation with the previous operation procedures and observation data, we can at least know what the enemy is planning and how far they have progressed, can't we?”

“The data from back then is a bit…” Hyakume shook his head with a sour face.

“The Stellar Alliance should have been checked not only by the star system's army, which is ostensibly of the same rank, but also by the imperial fleet, which is supposed to be located far above, but in addition to the confusion of the War of Independence and the intervention of the imperial fleet, the regular army was sent in. It was treated as an experimental weapon that could not be used, it was a bad annihilation weapon, the plan was kept secret from the beginning, and once it was decided that the team would lose, all related materials were quickly destroyed both at the top and in the field. This is the testimony from the time, and it seems that no active efforts were made to salvage the building since it was just an item...”

“Does that mean there isn't much data from that time?”

Ririka briefly summarized the situation in place of the speechless Hyakume.

“I don't expect anything from long ago with the participants long gone, but I guess that's business as usual.”

“May I have a moment?” Gruier, who was in the observer seat, raised one hand as if asking a question Ririka glanced at her briefly and nodded.

“What is it?”

“How would the enemy, including Jackie Fahrenheit, restart the supernova bomb if the data from that time was lost?”

Ririka looked at Hyakume as if asking for an answer.

“I'm a beginner who just learned about the existence of a supernova bomb only yesterday and today, and I'm rushing around on a research ship, but the enemy learned of its existence much earlier and has been preparing for it over the years. He is, so to speak, an expert. The enemy may have erased our data during their investigation, and we don't know how much work data and equipment were taken away to the frontier before the empire swallowed them up. The enemy may, at least, know what to do to turn your star into a supernova, but we don't even know how much preparation they have for that.”

"As far as information goes, we're at an overwhelming disadvantage." Lynn, in the electronic warfare seat, commented leisurely.

“Can I ask you a question too?“

Hyakume raised his hands to the current head of the yacht club at Hakuoh Academy. “If the question can be answered, I'll accept it.”

“How can we win?” Lynn turned to Hyakume. “What are the conditions for victory that you set?”

Hyakume looked at Captain Ririka with a slightly surprised look, who nodded knowingly.

“I told you, I can't control the reins. I didn't say anything. The manager there consulted with the princess there and suggested it.”

“No, my captain asked me the same thing. Not only Captain Kurihara of Barbaroosa, but also the commander of the Imperial Fleet detachment, as well as the star system forces, were present at the pre-battle meeting, and we asked the distinguished guests how far we had to go to be considered victorious.”

“Marika?” Ririka's eyes widened and she smiled proudly.

“You are indeed a good educator. There's something about the spaceship we were on.”

“Thanks, I feel like it's not just Bentenmaru that's having an impact, but other environments as well.”

Hyakume looked over the faces of the yacht club members on the bridge.

“So, who answered what?”

“Well, the pirates, the star forces, and the imperial fleet all have their own positions. As a pirate, it would be fine as long as the pirate ship and training ship standing in front remained intact and the fake Black Swan and Jackie were suppressed, and there was no need to worry about Garnet A turning into a supernova, but at the Imperial Fleet level, that is not the case.”

“I'd be more surprised if the victory conditions for the pirates and the imperial fleet were the same.”

“Well, as you may have noticed, Jackie is probably just an agent who is out in the open on this matter, and there is definitely a mastermind who commissioned him to do a series of jobs, including the hit-and-run on the Swan. According to intelligence analysis, the mastermind is the force that stands to gain the most from a supernova explosion within Imperial territory: the rebel army.”

“What Intelligence Division?” Ririka tilted her head slightly, her eyes suddenly becoming grim. “Not the star system forces, but the Imperial Intelligence Service?”

The bridge crew groaned slightly.

“Who knows?” Hyakume answered as if it were obvious.

“The Imperial fleet is on the move. What's more, if it involves a forbidden strategic weapon, the Stellar Slayer, of course the intelligence department will be involved, not just the fleet.”

“The redhead said this was a high-level political matter involving the diplomacy of the Galactic Empire.”

I heard Lynn's restrained voice as she looked up at the star map centered on Garnet A.

“At the very least, it was true that this was a highly political case involving the intelligence services.”

“I don't think it will be a political discussion, though, since it is a military matter. It is a matter of how the higher ups handle it, and it is not something that we can do anything about, at least not at our level. However, both the star system army and the imperial fleet are politically motivated, so the victory conditions become a bit complicated.”

“I’m sure it is. Does anyone know the victory conditions set by the Imperial Fleet?”

Ririka looked around the bridge. Gruier exchanged glances with Lynn, and seeing that no one else moved, she slowly raised her hand.

“I feel like your answer doesn't really educate the rest of the crew, but yes, Gruier.” Ririka pointed to Gruier.

“The foremost enemy we are considering is the force that is trying to turn Garnet A into a supernova bomb. We believe that our immediate objective is to defeat or secure it, but we must think beyond that for the star system forces and even beyond that for the imperial fleet.”

“That much is clear. Go on.”

“The fact that not only the fleet but also the intelligence department is moving means that the Empire is aware of a large-scale rebel movement in its territory and is taking this opportunity to strike it. In other words, isn't the Imperial Fleet's victory condition not only to defeat the frontal enemy forces, but also to unravel the main body connected to its chain of command and, if possible, to destroy it?”

Hyakume let out a sigh. He looks at Ririka and says, “When you see stories like this in front of your eyes, don't you feel like you don't want to make enemies of the royal family?”

“If you're in a privileged position where you can choose your enemy. In other words, don't worry, it won't be that easy for pirates to go around fighting against the interstellar royal family.”

After looking at Gruier, Ririka turned her attention back to Hyakume. “Is that correct?”

“It is.” Hyakume nodded.

A group of cartoon characters

Description automatically generated

“The pirate ships and training ship currently at this star area are at an overwhelming disadvantage against the predicted enemy forces, but that's why neither the star system nor the imperial fleet has appeared. If we keep the amount of force we can deploy a secret, the enemy may try to take advantage of us and be generous with their forces, or they may become suspicious and deploy a large force, which would make for a bigger catch.”

“The Imperial Fleet's battle policy has always been to deploy overwhelming force in mass operations.” Ririka shook her head in disgust.

“Didn't anyone think that the enemy was not going to engage in a frontal battle with a large force against a hypothetical imperial fleet from the very beginning?”

“That is exactly the rebel army's fighting policy. If there is little chance of winning even if you fight head-on, the best strategy is not to fight. Thanks to this, the Imperial fleet in the territory, even in the frontier districts, has been shut out and is having a hard time finding the enemy, but now they have unleashed such a huge bomb. The Imperial fleet is also very motivated to take advantage of this opportunity to achieve results.”

“Will it be okay?” Ririka mumbled with an unenthusiastic look.

“When people who aren't used to doing this kind of thing get excited, it usually doesn't end well.”

“So, the conditions for victory at the pirate, star system, and imperial fleet levels are slightly different, to the point that the pirates are not interested in joining the fleet, but we agreed that we can cooperate at least until the beginning of the war.”

“Thank you for your hard work.”

Ririka nodded to Hyakume, thinking of the hardships that her daughter, who was supposed to be at the forefront of negotiations, would have to endure.

“Therefore, once the policy is decided, the roles to be assigned will also be decided.”

Hyakume displayed the current positions of Bentenmaru and Barbaroosa superimposed on the star map.

“These two pirate ships are currently actively investigating the airspace surrounding Garnet A, and a reconnaissance plane and a training sailing ship are expected to join them later today.”

“Let's do the work that needs to be done!”

“And, as you may have understood from the story up to this point, our job is to investigate in a conspicuous place to figure out the identity of the enemy, and if possible, pull the enemy out to a place where we can defeat him.”

“So your job is to pull them out?”

“It would be an easy job, though, if that's all it took.” Hyakume shrugged.

“In other words, what the Imperial Fleet expects from us pirate ships is to be a decoy to lure out the enemy's main force, which is sure to be present. Above all, it was the White Swan, the current Odette II, that the enemy wanted by name.”

Hyakume superimposed Odette II's current location on the star map.

“It is expected that the enemy will concentrate their efforts on these ships. If so, our policy will be the same as that of the Imperial Fleet.”

“So, just as the Imperial fleet uses the pirate fleet as bait, you use this Odette II as bait.” Ririka gave a deliberate sigh. “That's disgustingly consistent.”

“We don't know which way things will turn out, so let's at least make the first step a solid one.” Hyakume nodded with a reasonable look on his face.

“Here's a brief explanation of the current situation and future policy. If you have any questions that can't be covered in the communication, please feel free to ask them now.” Hyakume looked around the bridge and back to Ririka, who raised a hand.

“Do you have any idea how much force each of the star system armies and the imperial fleet are committing?”

“The star system military has four patrol vessels and two escort vessels that have come all the way from the Tau system. That's a lot of ships for a Tau star system escort fleet that has only a modest force.”

“And the Imperial Fleet?”

“From the 6th Fleet, which is in charge of this area, there is one mobile strike fleet in anti-ship warfare formation.”

“Huh?” Ririka raised her voice.

“It's not a big deal for the empire. What is the organization?”

“It's quite a formation with four mobile battleships, eight high-speed cruisers, and one aircraft carrier with an electronic battleship as its flagship. Two more fleets can be mobilized if needed.”

Ririka let out an obvious sigh and made a sour face. “So, where is that large fleet waiting now?”

Hyakume grinned and operated the console. The main screen, which had previously displayed a star system map centered on Garnet A, has expanded to a star map that shows a radius of several dozen light years.

“The current location of the 507th Mobile Strike Fleet, the 6th Fleet in charge of frontal combat, is patrolling on regular missions around the supply base in the Desugo system.”

“... Just to be sure, what about the other two fleets?”

“The 610th Fighter Cruiser Group is here, at Norrock, and the 458th Task Force is scattered from Foss to Belmont.”

Hyakume revealed the current positions of each fleet in the airspace far away from Garnet A, like scattered sand.

“Even though I understand that 507th, which is directly in charge, is still on patrol duty in the neighborhood, the other fleets are also on combat voyages or conducting operations for other matters. With all this, can we really rely on them when the time comes?”

“I told you. The pirates are in agreement that neither the star system forces nor the imperial fleet can be relied upon.” Hyakume repeated in a light tone, as if he were making small talk.

“The Empire would probably like to concentrate a large force in this area, but if they do, their precious prey, which they have lured with a few pirate ships as bait, will run away like spiders. Therefore, the fleet is ostensibly prepared to make a long-distance leap with a single call, while waiting for its cue under the guise of a normal mission.”

Hyakume nodded with a theatrical gesture.

“When the time comes, we cannot rely on whether we can contact reinforcements that are light years away, whether they can rush to the site while we are in the middle of an electronic war, whether they can follow our instructions when they arrive, or whether we can provide accurate instructions and battle information even if a large force rushes to the site. Even if a major force arrived, we would not be able to rely on them to provide us with accurate instructions or battle information. But if we call in a large force early and it rushes in quickly, there is a possibility that the enemy force, which has been motivated to fight, will flee together.”

“Fleet battles are difficult because you have to consider the situation on both sides.”

Ririka, who had experienced many fleet battles during her own active service, looked around at the Imperial fleet scattered across over a hundred light-years of space. Although it was a long distance, it was within the range of a single leap to rush to Garnet A, but whether or not they could jump into combat airspace at the right time was another matter.

“So, the most convenient development for us is to not rely on anything other than the ships that are on the front lines, and if possible, dealing with the just the pirate ships alone. But I don’t know if it will work out that way.”

“I understand the situation.” Gruier's clear voice came through the bridge as she raised one hand and asked to speak. “So, our role is to set the stage and conditions for the pirate ships alone to take out the enemy.”

Ririka and Hyakume looked at each other as they heard the crew's exclamations. Ririka secretly mumbled something that only Hyakume could hear. “This charisma is probably the scariest thing about the princess.”

“I'm glad there are no men on this spaceship.”

Hyakume's upper body trembled.

“There are going to be a lot of space crew members who will be willing to go along with any crazy war situation. Do you have any other questions or confirmations?　If not, I'd like to receive a new electronic reconnaissance aircraft soon to add to our forces.”

"Silent Whisper launched by the Odette II." Coorie informed us in the midst of processing a mountain of observation data.

“Oh? Does it seem useful?"

Coorie answers Marika's question calmly as usual.

“The settings seem to be for anti-ship combat, so it would be difficult to reconfigure it for wide-area astronomical observation. People are complaining that the update data released by the manufacturer is full of bugs and can't be used."

“I thought it was strange that they added an observation mode to a new model that should have been sold to universities, even though there are not enough of them out there.” Schnitzer, in the combat commander's seat, said in a low voice. “I think they just put the mode for observation vessels in the catalog without testing it, as an excuse for introducing it.”

“We'll change as many settings as we can on the way to Barbaroosa, but if necessary, we can borrow the ship's deck and mainframe over there and reconfigure them.”

“How long will it take to reconfigure the entire electronic reconnaissance aircraft?”

Marika shook her head in horror, remembering the time she helped president Lynn maintain the simulator's main computer.

“Will you be able to make it in time for this operation?”

“I think it's okay because Hyakume is good at putting together things that can't be used and making them into something useful.”

Coorie's right hand never rests while her left hand reaches for the supplements piled up on the seat side.

“It took a long time from boarding the Odette II to departing, so I think they were able to check it on board as well, and I don't think they would leave if they decided it couldn't be used.”

“Well, he tries to use everything, but sometimes he tries to use it in ways that are unimaginable.”

Even though they are in the midst of operational activities, the bridge of Bentenmaru, where most of the machinery is on standby for anti-aircraft observation, is filled with laughter.

“Your concern isn't whether the reconnaissance plane you brought can be used, right?”

Misa, who is on the bridge as an observer, called out to Marika in the captain's seat.

“Are you worried about your classmates, whom you left in Ririka's charge?”

“I'm not really worried about that.” Marika shook her head. “Ririka is in command of the spaceship with my club members on board, so I think they are more worried about us.”

“Maybe. Then why do you look so sad?”

Marika looked around the bridge, which on standing by waiting for the captain's word.

“I don't know the enemy's victory conditions.” Marika chose her words carefully.

“The enemy?”

Kane rotated the helmsman's seat back to the captain's seat.

“Detonating a supernova bomb......”

Considering the situation that would unfold as a result and the gains and losses for the rebels in that case, Kane added “Well then, no.”

“Even if the rebels were to successfully detonate a supernova bomb within Imperial territory, it would be no more effective than terrorism. The supernova bomb is an indiscriminate strategic weapon, so destroying not only unrelated civilians but also numerous habitable planets teeming with precious life doesn't really benefit the rebels. On the contrary, there is a fear that it could give the Imperial Army an excuse to launch indiscriminate attacks.”

“In the end, the supernova bomb was never used as a weapon. The people in the intelligence department didn't give me a clear answer, but even if all the settings worked as planned, the probability that Garnet A would become a supernova was not 100%.”

“In all accessible historical documents, there is no record of a practical use of a weapon that could turn a star into a supernova. However, in a galactic universe where not only terraforming but also stellarforming is taking place, it is not an unfeasible technology.” Kane continued.

“Are the rebels planning to confirm that the supernova bomb works?”

“If that's the case, wouldn't it be a good idea to conduct the experiment in a remote area where no one is around, instead of going out of the way to do so within the Empire's territory? A red giant star that failed to become a supernova isn't that rare, and if there's no one around, there's no need to worry about it being disturbed. But why did the rebel army go so far into imperial territory?”

“There's a reason it has to be here.”

Schnitzer, who was pushing his huge body into the combat commander's seat, joined the conversation.

“Do you mean that?”

“I think so.”

Marika nodded, trying to collect her thoughts.

“Are the conditions perfect for turning a red giant into a supernova unique to this place, or is the cost performance of turning a red giant into a supernova particularly good, or is there some other reason that we don't yet know about? I think both the redhead and the mastermind have their own reasons why it has to be here. If we understand that, I think we can understand their victory conditions and how we can win, but I don't understand it at all...”

“What is it the enemy's victory condition...?”

Kane reclined the helmsman's seat and clasped his hands behind his head.

“Our captain is starting to see the big picture.”

“Thanks to that, my stomach hurts.”

Marika's expression in the captain's seat is gloomy.

“There are so many things to think about, and before you know if it's the right answer, the next problem comes up.”

“In such cases, it's a good idea to put yourself in the other person's shoes.”

Coorie does not rest her hands. “Put yourself in the other person's shoes?”

“Yes. Are they advancing this far because they have the means to win even if several mobile fleets attack at once, or will they be able to achieve sufficient results even if the entire fleet is annihilated if the strategy is successful? Just like we came here with the intention of winning, they must have prepared here with the intention of winning and had a reason to think they could win.”

With a difficult look on her face, Marika pondered.

“...How much leeway does the rebel army have?”

At the captain's question, the bridge personnel looked at each other. Marika asked more questions.

“Do the rebel forces that oppose the Empire have a lot of leeway in terms of budget, equipment, and personnel? Since they have been able to hold out against such a powerful Imperial fleet, should we think that they have the strength to rival the Empire? Or should I think that they are just holding their own against the Empire, which is pushing them with massed forces, and that they don't have any leeway?”

“That's a tough question.” It was Schnitzer who answered.

“Although they are collectively referred to as the Rebel Army, they are actually a coalition of remote star systems, interstellar nations, corporations, and communities. Although they are united by the idea of being anti-empire, in reality they are just a group of people with various circumstances and reasons. There is a difference in temperament and perception between a planet that is close to the Empire's airspace and is about to be invaded, and a star that is on the outer edge and does not have to worry about direct invasion for a while.”

“Well…” Marika opened her mouth, thinking about an appropriate follow-up to her question.

“Among the rebel forces within a short distance of Garnet A, who is the richest?”

“The answer changes depending on the interpretation of the question. The Trade Federation of the rebels may be blessed with surplus funds, but they are not actively investing in military equipment. The ones with the most military equipment are probably the military companies that deal with the rebel forces, but since they operate in military business, the chain of command changes depending on the sponsor at the time. What answer does the captain want to hear?”

“You see, if the enemy is carrying out a strategy that has already factored in the possibility of pushing the Imperial fleet through physical operations, I think there are only two possible developments. Do you have enough military power to overcome the massed forces, or are you able to obtain enough results even if you are overwhelmed by the massed forces? I don't know what kind of chips my opponent has on the table, but those chips are definitely not cheap when dealing with the Imperial fleet. If that's the case, I thought that the enemy who could accumulate that many chips would be a force that had the resources and luxury to do so.”

After a moment of silence, Schnitzer began to speak slowly. “It's not a bad point to focus on. Unfortunately, however, that alone is not enough material to guess the enemy's true identity. First, it has not yet been determined that the enemy is a single faction within the rebel army. There have been many cases in the past where the executive team and its backing were formed from different bases.”

“I see.” It took a while for Marika to understand the explanation Schnitzer had given her.

“Wouldn't it be even more difficult if the enemy were a coalition of multiple people? That means we have to assume every possible situation...”

Marika frowned even more. “...My stomach hurts”

“Huh?”

Misa, leaning over the captain's seat, reached out from behind the console and lightly pulled up Marika's chin with her fingers and looked at her complexion. Marika gave the ship's doctor an awkward forced smile.

“I think you’re a little sleep deprived. Are you eating well and sleeping in bed?”

“I’m trying.”

Misa put her hand on the captain's forehead to check her temperature.

“If you can't sleep, I'll give you some medicine before bed. I think a weak sleep-inducing drug that you won't get addicted to will work just fine.”

“Can I wake up when the time comes?”

“Even if you use a weak one, if you force yourself to wake up after falling asleep, you will still feel sleepy for a while.”

Misa deliberately kept her voice low. “Don't worry, there are medicines to wake you up for such a situation.”

“Are there any side effects?” Marika asked, remembering the two names of the Bentenmaru's ship's doctor. Misa smiles.

“Of course, it's a weak drug so there's nothing to worry about.”

“...Please save it until it’s needed.”

Marika, who does not take many supplements, let alone drugs, in her daily life, mainly because of her parents' educational policy, shook her head weakly.

“Or better yet, if you had some stomach medicine...”

“Stomach medicine. Many of us have strong digestive systems, so I wonder if there were any medicines for the captain. We haven't had any in stock lately, but I'll check the inventory later.”

“I'll wait and not get my hopes up.”

A clear ringing tone echoed on the bridge.

“Oho!”

Kane, who had spun his seat back to the console in place of the absent Hyakume, tapped on the communication panel. The ringing stops.

“It's a call from the Black Swan.”

As expected, the tone didn't change, but the tension in the bridge suddenly increased.

“The names are Bentenmaru, Barbaroosa, and White Swan... He's very careful when he calls them by their old names.”

“Identification signal, none.”

The speed at which Coorie's hands and eyes moved suddenly increased.

“Of course, no current identification signal, and none from the time of the Revolutionary War.”

Marika, who was sitting in the captain's seat, scanned the communication data displayed on the monitor. Faster-than-light communication. Since there is no encryption, any spacecraft in this airspace can receive it.

“...Calling the three ships here now?”

“That means it doesn't matter who's out there.”

Kane looked at the communications monitor. Neither the Barbaroosa nor the Odette II had responded yet.

“Do you want to leave it to Captain Blackbeard?”

Not only Marika, but also Ririka, the captain of Odette II, has been away from active duty for a long time. When it comes to Captain Kenjou Kurihara of Barbaroosa, there is no doubt that he has a strong background, track record, and drive.

“I think that's a good idea.”

While glancing sideways at the progress of Coorie's work trying to trace the location of the transmission, Marika was thinking about what would happen next. When it comes to the Black Swan, where the opponent appears over and over again and then disappears before our eyes, there is a high possibility that even if we figure out their current location and rush to them, it will be in vain.

“Well, let's increase the output of the main engine. They might be able to escape anyway, but once I know the current location of the Black Swan, I'll rush over.”

“*Hey, hey. Hey, hey?*”

After another ring, a carefree voice that I'll never forget came over the bridge.

“*It's cold, isn't it, when a former crew member calls out to his friends for the first time in a long while, and not a single one of them responds. Have pirates become so heartless these days?*”

“Jackie!?” Marika exclaimed at the smirking redhead who appeared on the communication monitor.

“Change of command. Prepare to fire the main gun!　It doesn't matter. If you can find out where he is, fire at him!”

“It probably won't reach him.” Schnitzer growled. “If he had the courage to call us by name, he would have known in advance our armament and effective range. He's not stupid enough to come into our range.”

“I know, I just had to say it.” Marika glared at the redhead on the communication monitor.

“*It's a shame that I couldn't talk to anyone even though I waited until I had enough people to welcome them. Hey, can someone hear me? If you don't reply, I'll do it on my own, okay?*”

Unable to bear the look on Jackie's face as she called out to him with a handkerchief next to her mouth, Marika flicked on the communication panel.

“Ah, Bentenmaru is on the line.” Kane did his best to report in a businesslike manner.

“All ships will be able to hear the conversation.”

Marika stretched her back in the captain's seat and seemed to take a deep breath.

“This is Katou Marika, captain of Bentenmaru.”

Hearing the same voice as usual, Schnitzer turned to the console feeling relieved.

“*Ah, well, well, it is a great honor to have a direct response from Captain Marika of Bentenmaru!*”

“Jackie from the Black Swan, communications are good. ...... The Black Swan?　Are you kidding?”

Marika lashed out at Jackie who lowered his head on purpose on the monitor.

“The background is the same as when I met you in the Tau system. Wasn’t the ship's name the Lunar Lion?”

“*Ah….*”

Jackie looked around the area that seemed to be the cockpit, looking deeply saddened. The dirt on the camera lens, the background interior that I have no idea what it will be used for, nothing has changed from when we talked in the Tau system.

“*Well, it's not a lie that we are communicating from the Black Swan, but we have our own circumstances, our own convenience, uh, communication facilities are indeed Lunar Lions, but it's not a lie that our current location is on the Black Swan.*”

Marika glanced over at Coorie. who shook her head briefly, as if unable to find his current location. Marika coldly looked at Jackie's face in the communication monitor.

“You know better than me how persuasive your words are. What exactly are you planning to say under the name of the Black Swan?”

“*It's tough to be recognized as a fraud from the very beginning.*”

Jackie closed his eyes and shook his head, a smirk still on his lips.

“*Well, it looks like the actors are all set and ready, so let's start speaking as instructed. To all the pirates with whom this communication is connected, I would like to thank you for gathering at this venerable old star that is nearing the end of its lifespan.*”

Jackie's mouth suddenly tightened.

“The Odette II is not a pirate ship.” Marika muttered secretly as she ran her eyes over the communication monitor. Communications are maintained with the Barbaroosa and the Odette II on separate lines, but both are just listening silently and there is no sign of them joining.

“*Let's take a look at the fleet assembled to entertain pirates with splendid achievements and tremendous ability. I recommend reducing the sensitivity of radar and sensors.*”

“Don't worry about it.” Coorie's voice reached Marika. “I can handle whatever happens.”

“I'll be waiting with my eyes wide open.” Marika glared at Jackie in the communications monitor. “It's quite generous of you to suddenly show me your fleet.”

“*We both want to eliminate as much waste as possible. I hope that intelligent pirates will be able to avoid unnecessary battles by understanding the enemy's strength.*” Jackie gave Marika a flashy wink.

“*I think it's about time you can see us in your search range.*”

“Confirming the current location of what appears to be the Black Swan.” There is doubt in Coorie's voice.

“It’s probably a decoy. If Jackie is who we've heard he is, I don't think we could locate the source in such a straightforward manner.”

“Is this it?” Schnitzer plotted the reaction of the Black Swan discovered by Coorie on a three-dimensional display centered on Garnet A. The Bentenmaru and the Odette II are keeping their distance while occupying the ecliptic plane of Garnet A, and the Barbaroosa is occupying the airspace on the opposite side of the red giant star, but the current position of the Black Swan, determined from the communication, is above the pole, equally distant from any spacecraft.

“*I don't trust it.*” Captain Blackbeard of Barbaroosa appeared on the sub-monitor. “*It's the position where I lost track of them when I first chased the Black Swan. Are you mocking me or is there some other reason?*”

“It's not just the Black Swan.” Courier suddenly said.

“Large ships, so many reactions... It's strange, no matter how much they say it's under electronic interference, there's no way we wouldn't know if there were so many hidden places.”

“Many large ships!”

Gruier's clear voice echoed on the bridge of Odette II. On the main screen, on the star map centered on Garnet A, bright red spots indicating an unregistered objects were quickly increasing in one area of the sky.

“What an amazing energy reaction!”

“It’s a highly motivated battle fleet.” Ririka murmured when she saw the fleet's reaction on the display in the captain's seat.

“Already powered-up for anti-ship combat. If it's that easy to understand...”

“Would you like to contact the Imperial Fleet?” Gruier asked.

“If the rebels showed up with such a large fleet, I would think that would be reason enough to call in the imperial fleet.”

“That's it!” Ririka let out a loud voice that surprised the bridge staff.

“Gruier, Bentenmaru, you're connected to Barbaroosa on the other line, aren't you?”

“Yes.”

“Send it to me.” Ririka tapped the communication panel in the captain's seat.

“Ah, I can see it here too.” Barbaroosa's captain, Kenjou Kurihara, replied to Odette II's captain Ririka.

“Seven large battleships, four aircraft carriers, a mobile cruiser, and a number of escort ships. I'm impressed that they were able to deploy such a fleet in the Empire's territory, which is supposed to be firmly held by the 6th Fleet.”

“*My sensors looks like they’re getting drunk from the high-energy reaction.*” Ririka nodded in relief at Captain Blackbeard's laid-back tone.

“*This sensor is old, so I can't get enough data to trust it, but is this real?*”

“Of course not.” Captain Kenjou chuckled.

“I'll forgive the lack of transponders because it is a rebel warship on maneuvers, and although the model and some of the ship names are real, we can't confirm the current location of all of them before they appeared here. If it is a warship on maneuvers, I won't complain about not knowing its current location until it appears in front of us, but if we can't even confirm the existence of some of them, there are two possible cases. Either our intelligence-gathering capabilities haven't caught up with theirs, or the enemy is making up non-existent spaceships on their own to make it look like they exist.”

“*So you don't think that such a large fleet actually set out.*”

“Unfortunately, I haven't lived a very honest life. I have a habit of being suspicious of too good to be true stories. How about you?　You're making a big deal out of it, thinking it's a real battle fleet, aren't you?”

“*No, to be honest, our crew is not as experienced as the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru, so we are not sure if they are real or not.*”

Kenjou Kurihara heard Captain Ririka's chuckle for the first time in a while.

“*It's okay, don't worry, we haven't made any emergency calls to the system's escort ships or the Imperial fleet. Maybe that's the enemy's goal.*”

“Well, well......”

Although their transponders were not transmitting, Marika looked at the diagram of the large fleet whose ship types and names were being identified one after another, and calmly turned her attention back to Jackie, the communications monitor.

“We have only two pirate ships and one training ship, and you have staked out the place with such a large fleet.”

“*I hope you can interpret this as an acknowledgment of your worth. I apologize for the extreme lack of subtlety. I'd like to mention by the way, that I have a message that I'm told to convey by my sponsors. Would you please listen to it?*”

Marika tilted her head. “What is it?”

“*I told them it's useless to tell them that. I'm a subcontractor. I can't go against the wishes of my sponsors.*”

On the other side of the dirty monitor camera, Jackie showed an ornate message card at his fingertips.

“*What do you think it is?*”

“Some sort of advertisement?” Marika said, annoyed. “It looks kind of useless to me.”

“*An accurate observation. It's a recommendation to surrender.*”

“Huh ......?” Marika asked again, unable to understand Jackie's words. “Recommend we surrender? Now?”

“I'm sorry.”

Jackie opened the message card, which was printed in old-fashioned paper.

“*I've come this far, and my opponent is a pirate. I said that no matter how many orders of magnitude the difference in strength is, it's a waste of effort, but the sponsors won't listen to me, saying it's best if things can be resolved without actual combat. I don't mind if you ignore me, so could you just listen to me?*”

“I think it's a waste of time, but go ahead.” Marika waved her left hand with an absentminded look.

“*Thank you. I'll make this quick, so bear with me. Well, I say this to the descendants of brave pirates. A pointless battle is not our intention. To avoid wasting each other's time and resources, we recommend unconditional surrender. If you surrender, they promise the safety of your ships and human resources, as well as your release after a certain period of time.*”

Marika waited for the rest of the message. Jackie looked up from his cards, and Marika frowned.

“That’s it?”

“*That's it. Thank you for your attention.*”

“No signature from the person in charge or the commander?”

“*If you accept the recommendation to surrender, I'm prepared to make that part public, but my order is to keep the identity of the sponsor as secret as possible.*”

“You want me to surrender when I don't even know who I'm dealing with?” Marika waved her hands in disgust.

“*It’s reasonable. In order to convince you of this, the sponsor's logic is to assemble a great force, a large fleet that will spare no effort. Just as you can only convince a pirate by your ability, you have no choice but to show off in order to convince your sponsors.*”

Jackie carefully folded the message card and threw it behind him like trash.

“Well, I think it's about time for our entire fleet to show up. I've advised you to surrender, and I won't laugh even if you run away with your tail between your legs.”

“The number of large battleships is 9, and the response has increased to 6 aircraft carrier class ships!” Lynn reports cheerfully.

“I was wondering what that redhead was thinking when he suddenly deployed a large fleet, but I guess he was expecting us to call in reinforcements.”

“Does that mean that the enemy also thinks that we are not at full strength?” Gruier summarized the situation for confirmation.

“So he just made a non-existent fleet appear in hopes of bringing in reinforcements?”

“That’s my judgment.” Ririka, sitting in the captain's seat, agreed.

“They're trying to use a supernova bomb as a strategic weapon, and I'm sure they want to know what kind of force we'll use to stop it.”

”Well then, if we were to call in the Imperial fleet at this stage...”

“It would be a good opportunity to let the enemy gauge our strength. And since we have never captured the main fleet of the enemy, including the Black Swan, it will not be difficult for them to hide again, even if the Imperial Fleet arrives sooner than we expect.”

Ririka looked at Lynn with an amused expression. “Now, what would you do in this situation?”

Suddenly asked a policy question, Lynn pondered for a few moments.

“If the enemy is inviting us to make a move, we should stay put and see what happens.“

Ririka shook her head.

“Not moving when you can is the way of the elite. If you just want to see what's going on, you can do it on an unmanned ship that's not in the network. That doesn't make you a pirate.”

“However, we still don't know which part of the enemy is phantom data and which part is a real ship.” Lynn protested, pouting.

“There is no guarantee that only the Black Swan is real and the rest are all decoys. I think it's more likely that there is more than just one ship, given that they are this far away and were deploying that much electronic warfare.”

“You're not wrong about the current situation. Then what exactly should we do?”

“We probe the enemy's exact strength.”

The answer to that point was immediate. But looking at the captain with his arms crossed, Lynn knew that Ririka wanted an action plan beyond that.

“...The fact that the enemy waited for the Odette II's arrival before embarking on this offensive means that they want to get as much information as possible before they can coordinate and prepare themselves, right?”

“Well, what do you think?” Ririka laughs meaningfully.

“For the record, I am on a training ship that just arrived in this airspace. I can only guess at the enemy's true intentions and situation based on the same information you are seeing. If I'm right, the war will go the way we want it to go, but if I'm wrong, I don't have to explain what will happen, now, do I?”

“It means you lose.”

“Lynn scanned the information displayed on the electronic warfare console in front of her. It seems that the deployment of the enemy fleet over Garnet A's North Pole has been completed, and the increase in reaction has stopped. The electronic reconnaissance aircraft launched from Odette II has not yet arrived at its next target, the Barbaroosa, and even if it were to be in perfect condition, our ability to search for enemies would not more than double.”

“...No matter what, accurate information about the enemy is necessary. All we know now is the reaction of the shipwreck that pretended to be the transponder of the Black Swan, and the red-haired’s ship named Lunar Lion. If that's the case, I think the best way to gather information would be to attack them with the Odette II, which they want the most.”

Ririka's eyes widened slightly and she looked at Lynn's face.

“With an Odette II that can't do FTL speed?　Without a single onboard armament? Are you going to attack a large fleet with not only battleships and aircraft carriers, but also an escort fleet with just one ship?”

“Earlier, Hyakume from the Bentenmaru told me that what was expected of the Odette II was to act as a decoy.” Lynn looked straight back at Ririka.

“If the enemy has brought out a large fleet that doesn't exist, now is the best time to use a decoy.”

“That’s a lot of courage. Will we be able to get enough results by exposing this ship to danger?”

Lynn once again checked the enemy fleet's positions on the console's display.

“I think some of the enemy fleets are real spaceships. When creating a large non-existent fleet like this, the most common method is to deploy multiple spacecraft and control them with electronic decoys. There is also a way to float a balloon that only returns a reaction, but either way, a non-existent ship will not be a force.”

“What do we do with ships which we presumed to exist?”

“The ship's role is as a decoy, right?”

Lynn reviewed Odette II's current position and the fleet's alignment on the poles several times.

“If you use normal engines in combination with solar sails and inertial control at maximum output, you can approach the fleet at the pole at a fairly high speed. In order to win, we need to know the exact enemy strength, so I think the sooner the better, right?”

“Using normal engines is not a good idea.” Ririka crossed her arms and shook her head.

“Even though you have a solar sail, if you emit plasma in a flashy manner, the enemy will be able to see exactly where you are moving. On the other hand, with solar sail propulsion, energy emission and sensor response can be kept to a minimum. If you're going to act as a decoy, it's better to be as slow as possible before your enemies notice your movements, but sooner or later, unless you're really stupid, the enemy will notice your movements as well.”

Lynn as well as Mario and Gruier nodded in anticipation of the enemy fleet's movements.

“We can ask the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa to escort us when the enemy fleet concentrates on intercepting us, but what if the enemy fleet's strength is greater than ours?”

“Then that would be the time to call for reinforcements.” Lynn tapped on the keyboard of the electronic battle console.

“If you report that the Odette II will appear at the front of a large fleet as a decoy, I think the Imperial fleet will do its best to come flying in while you're doing that.”

“Since we can expect reinforcements, things are much better than before.” Ririka looked around the bridge.

“Let's get out there. Let's pay homage to the way this ship fought back in the days when it was the White Swan, and show them how a sailing ship is supposed to move.”

“She's going ahead as a decoy, so she's asking for cover!?”

In response to a message from the Odette II’s Captain Katou Ririka, which was summarized by the communication operator, Barbaroosa Captain Kenjou Kurihara dropped the communication he had been monitoring with the Bentenmaru’s Captain Katou Marika and the Lunar Lion’s Jackie.

“Wait a minute, Ririka! It's been more than ten years since you left the front lines! What do you mean you’re going to the front lines on a training ship with no weapons!?”

“*I've heard from the Bentenmaru's Hyakume about your policy.*” Ririka replied in a cool voice.

“*The role expected of Odette II is to act as a decoy. As you said, this spaceship doesn't have any armament, so I have no intention of going to the front and initiating anti-ship combat.*”

“Why would you leave if you knew that!? It isn’t Captain Ririka who can’t control the young crew members!?”

“*If the Grand Fleet doesn't really exist, then there's no need to worry, right?*”

“That's just an appearance!　The Black Swan may be clad in a shipwreck exterior, but you never know what tricks it may have inside, and the small Lunar Lion with the redhead on board are definitely there, and there must be several more ships to make such a large fleet look so clearly present. Are you going to run into one of them with your poorly armored sailing ship!”

“*So, please protect me.*” Ririka clasped her hands together in a coy gesture to Captain Blackbeard.

“*There's no such thing as a sudden burst of naval gunfire, so my crew is eager to dodge it.*”

“What kind of amateur nonsense is this?”

“*Besides, what the enemy wants most is the Odette II, so they probably won't aim and destroy her.*”

“That isn’t like Captain Ririka, who only thinks about what's convenient for herself and doesn't know what kind of pain she'll face!”

“*Don't worry, we'll only go as far as the enemy's effective range. If we make a move, the enemy will respond. Please cooperate with the Bentenmaru to collect data.*”

“The Odette II has started moving.”

“Slow!” When Kenjou saw Odette II's movements on the 3D display, he couldn't help but exclaim.

“...No, it’s accelerating only with the solar sail so as not to leave a wake? When it comes to fighting jointly with them, you have to think about a lot of things.”

“*This is a training sailing ship that doesn't have any weapons and can't even go FTL.*” Ririka, on the communications monitor, never stops smiling. “*Do you think the enemy would not send out a single scout ship against such delicious prey?*”

“What are you going to do if your opponent comes out in full force?”

“*So we all agree that the enemy fleet does not exist, at least not in the way it appears now. If the enemy could judge the battle situation properly, they would have attacked us with all their operational vessels. We can wait until we see what part of the enemy's fleet moves and how far they are willing to go before we make our escape.*”

“Jumping out as soon as you arrive on the scene, well, it seems like Captain Ririka's ‘A’ game is back.”

Captain Blackbeard laughed with his mouth wide open and saluted Ririka on the communications monitor.

“Roger that. Barbaroosa will now cover for Odette II. However, in order to have her dance as bait for the decoys as expected, we can't just walk right up to her and take a position as a visible escort.”

“*Thanks for replying so quickly.*”

“Contact the Bentenmaru and Hyakume on the Silent Whisperer, who is on his way here!　Cancel all rendezvous and stowage procedures and reschedule them later. Tell them to reestablish the data network with the Bentenmaru before the Odette II's baiting begins!”

“You don't want us to escape, do you?” Marika slowly tilted her head to Jackie as if to confirm.

“If a pirate ship, which you have gone to so much trouble to attract, escapes from the presence of such a large fleet, isn't it you who will be in trouble?”

Jackie, as if he had just realized what he had been told, struck his palm with a right hand as if it was a mallet. “*It’s exactly as you said.*”

Curious, I lean forward towards the communication monitor.

“Well then, can I have your company?”

“*Of course. That's why I came here.*”

Sensing a strange presence, Marika involuntarily backed away from the communication monitor.

“*Well, don't be so scared. I'll go easy on you.*”

Marika glared at Jackie and cleared her throat. “The declaration of war has indeed been accepted. Now let's get to work.”

“Give me a break.”

Vacuum working space suits are not suitable for delicate operations inside the ship. Hyakume, who was fortunate to be out of the public eye, continued working in the Silent Whisper's cockpit in underwear with the top half of his space suit off, ignoring the communications camera and returned it to the intercom.

“You're going to assault a large fleet over the poles with that slow training sailboat using only solar sails?　How many days will it take for them to notice?”

“*According to my calculations, if the enemy fleet were to ignore Odette II's movements, it would easily take more than a full day.*” Kane, who was also preparing to launch responded from the bridge of the Bentenmaru.

“*If the enemy wasn’t that stupid, things would start moving even faster. However, as you know, the Odette II, which is supposed to be the bait, is hopelessly slow, so the situation will depend on the speed of the enemy fleet once they start moving.*”

“Ah ha!” Hyakume, back in the operator's seat, raised his voice as he moved his hands. “I thought it would be an easy job if I could at least make it to Barbaroosa, but Captain Ririka has been rough with people since the moment she returned to active duty.”

“*As such, contact between the Barbaroosa and the Silent Whisper was inevitably postponed. I'll have to let Hyakume do his best for a while. What will you do? Do you want to come back here?*”

“No. If that's the case, I'll use him that way.”

Hyakume looked around Silent Whisper's cockpit, where almost every console was lit.

“The idea was to set up this thing, which was originally intended for anti-ship combat, for wide-area astronomical observation, so I was tired of thinking about the amount of time and effort it would take. For anti-ship combat, the standard mode and pre-installed settings are sufficient.”

Hyakume looked at the cockpit, which remained empty.

“Unfortunately, it will not be able to move as it should because there is no one to pilot it, but its eyes are still useful enough in the current combat observation search mode. I don't care, just incorporate it into the network. I'll send the observation data to you, and I'll manage the settings for analysis while flying.”

“*Roger that. The Odette II is out front, and the Barbaroosa follows to protect her. It is not yet clear whether the enemy's main force is hidden within the visible fleet, or whether it is deployed somewhere else. You're also unarmed, so don't overdo it.*”

“We don't have enough pilots to charge the front lines, but we're good enough for electronic warfare.”

Hyakume looked up at the console and scanned the display showing spatial information over a wide area. Although the spatial situation above Garnet A’s North Pole, where the large fleet appeared, is relatively stable, various electromagnetic disturbances of various sizes are occurring in other airspace. Observations by the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa have revealed that a percentage of this is man-made interference, but it has not yet been determined how much of this is natural phenomena and which is man-made electromagnetic interference.

“I'll leave anti-ship combat and observation of the fleet above the North Pole to you.” Hyakume said as he flicked switches here and there.

“I'll stay in the current airspace and you keep an eye elsewhere. If the enemy knows the theory of three-dimensional combat, which is to hit them from where they can't be seen, they'll have their main forces far away from the polar skies.”

“*For a theoretical target like the Odette II running away in front of a large fleet, the main force would have ambushed on the south polar side or the outer rim, but as you can see, it is a theory-breaker that it starts by them charging toward a large fleet. In any case, both the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa will be maneuvering at high speed, so they will not be able to make observations with the same precision as before. Your sensors, which will be observing a wide area without making any sudden movements, will be a valuable source of information. I'm counting on you*.”

“Course set.” The helmsman, Ai, reported. “The projected course has been set for the enemy fleet over the Pole.”

“No matter how dim-witted that fleet may be, they will eventually realize that we are moving.”

Ririka, in the captain's seat, checked the Odette II's projected trajectory.

“How many hours until the closest approach at full sail?”

“At the current rate of acceleration, it will take 36 hours for Odette II to enter the estimated effective range of the enemy fleet, even if the reserve sails are extended.”

Ai superimposed Odette II's predicted trajectory on the correlation diagram centered on Garnet A displayed on the bridge's main screen.

“However, this is a predicted value if we continue to approach the enemy fleet without slowing down, using only the solar sail until the end.”

“If the other side realizes that we have started moving, there will be no point in using only solar sail propulsion, which has no energy reaction. If we then accelerate using normal propulsion, how much can we shorten the time of closest approach?”

“It depends on when you start normal propulsion, but if you use normal propulsion together, you can roughly cut the remaining time by a quarter.”

“That gives us plenty of time.”

Ririka looked at the enemy fleet on the main screen. She can't confirm any movements yet, and she can’t tell if the enemy fleet hasn't started moving or if the Odette II's sensors can't detect it.

“Well then, let's take this opportunity and show you something a little more interesting. Bentenmaru, Barbaroosa, this is Captain Ririka of the Odette II.” Ririka spoke into the headset.

“The ship will now begin approaching the enemy fleet for a decoy mission. It will disappear as soon as it is ready, so we will cut off all transmissions from here until the operation moves on to the next phase. We will enter a state of radio blackout. I can hear your voice, so don't worry about it. Also, I don't think you will be able to see me from there, so please feel free to estimate the Odette II's current location.”

After making a unilateral declaration, Ririka cut off communications.

“Now, in front of the large fleet you've gathered, the spaceship you so desperately wanted will go out unarmed. Please show me some kind of reaction.”

The communication line with Jackie was disconnected from the other end. Marika looked up from the communications monitor, which showed only the most cursory communication data.

“Did you get any useful information?”

“I was able to at least identify the location of the other party.”

Coorie, in the electronic warfare seat, replied with a sigh with her back turned.

“I see, it's a troublesome opponent. Once they identified our location and protocol through the current communication, they suddenly tried to attack the computer by adding noise to the communication signal.”

From my previous experience, I know that my opponent will attack as much as possible if given the chance. If Coorie is dealing with him at the back door, we don't have to worry.

“The camera is dirty, the image data is not very useful, and the amount of image data sometimes drops, though it may be intentional, so they aren’t a good partner.”

“I told you, they're a pain in the ass.” Marika tried to repeat Coorie's words.

“So, we didn’t get anything?”

“I'm sorry, I thought I could get more information, but it seems like all the ‘bots and traps I sent were repelled. Some of them are set with a delayed start, so if we're lucky, we might be able to open a back door and let the data flow in later, but with that kind of setup, it's futile to hope.”

“So much for that…” I have never heard such a complete declaration of defeat from the Coorie’s mouth.

“Electronic warfare is more about technology than performance, so I didn't think the Bentenmaru would lose to most enemies, but this time I was a little disappointed.”

Coorie, who was still facing the electronic warfare seat, began to move her hands.

“Unlike us, who are forced to use older models, I think their equipment is the latest and expensive. The reaction speed is very different. I've never lost a speed match before.”

Despite her tone of voice, her hands were moving at a good tempo. Marika asked timidly. “Do you think you can win?”

“It's okay, if the machine specs are different, there are different ways to do it, and I'm sure there are faster ones coming our way.”

“Where can we find electronic warfare equipment that is faster than the Bentenmaru’s?”

“Hyakume is on board now.”

At Coorie's reminder, Marika remembered that she too had ridden in the other Silent Whisper.

“Even if the manufacturer's advertising claims are half bluff, it should be as capable as the electronic battleships of a decade ago, and if Hyakume sets it up well, that alone should raise our electronic warfare capability by an order of magnitude.”

“That much…”

”Even now, with the Barbaroosa and the Odette II adding their capabilities, our strength should be higher than it was with just the Bentenmaru.”

“If the Silent Whisper can operate with the same performance as in the catalog, it should be able to put up a good fight even if the entire large fleet on the poles were real, but I don't think we can expect that much.”

“You're going to give a Hyakume a hard time.”

Marika confirmed Silent Whisper's current location. Launched from the Odette II, it continued inertial navigation and hardly changed its position.

“The question is how much time Ririka and the others will be able to buy us, and how much time that redhead will cost us.”

In front of Marika's eyes, Odette II's symbol on the 3D display faded and disappeared.

“...... it has disappeared.” Marika said what she saw.

“They've entered stealth mode.”

Lightweight and slender in comparison to its dimensions, Odette II's radar reflectivity can be reduced to a much lower level by adjusting the hull angle and mast yard. Furthermore, by combining active stealth, which analyzes the radar waves of an opponent and sends a phase-matched response to our reflected waves, it is possible to make the Odette II disappear completely.

“Well then, be careful not to accidentally expose the Odette II, which is hiding.”

“Active stealth is most effective in certain directions. If radar waves emitted from other directions are reflected in the direction of the enemy you want to hide from, you will be giving the enemy extra data.”

“Ririka said that the Barbaroosa will protect the Odette II, didn't she?” Marika confirmed the contents of the communication with other lines during her conversation with Jackie.

“That's right.” Schnitzer replied.

“Unlike the Bentenmaru, which is a hit-and-run ship, the Barbaroosa has a full complement of large-caliber guns for anti-ship combat. If you want to match the slow-moving Odette II, there is no problem even with a large battleship.”

“Then I'll leave Ririka and our training sailboat to Captain Kenjo.”

Marika confirmed their current position with the fleet on the correlation diagram centered on Garnet A displayed on the 3D display.

“What we need to do is find out how big the enemy's main force is and how motivated they are.”

Marika looked at the main force of the enemy fleet, which was displayed as a cluster of dots in the sky above the pole.

“Well then, let's go mess with them from our side. We will stick to the surface of the Red Giant star at the shortest possible distance, move to the pole with Garnet A at our back, and conduct a forced reconnaissance on the main force of the enemy fleet.”

Kane let out a huff. Sandaime in the engineer's seat began tapping on the control panel at a fast pace.

“Even if it is a red giant star that is nearing the end of its life, its surface temperature is well over 4000 degrees Celsius.”

“I just refilled the coolant the other day, which helps. What is the current remaining amount?”

Kane runs a check and reads the exact amount of LCF coolant remaining in the tank.

“89%, would we have been okay if we hadn’t thought about it?”

“All I need is enough left for at least one jump.”

During normal navigation, large amounts of coolant are rarely used.

“If I have that much left, I can go to replenish it later, and in case of an emergency, I'll order a delivery.”

“How close will you get to Garnet A?” Luca, in the navigator's seat, asks.

“Don't worry too much about speed.”

Marika opened her mouth as she thought about the flight conditions.

“Since the Odette II, sailing in stealth mode, is not going to go that fast no matter what we do, there doesn't seem to be much benefit in getting to the enemy fleet before the Odette II does. More importantly, can we get down to the very edge of where our sensors can be used?”

“Are you going to descend into the hot gas of Garnet A with the sensor antenna extended?” Coorie screams.

“If you plunge into the upper corona at interplanetary cruising speed, all our delicate antennas will fly off.”

“Because the only area left in the vicinity of this star that has not yet been observed is the immediate vicinity of Garnet A.”

Marika zoomed down the display in the captain's seat to a star system map centered on Garnet A.

“Now, they'll think we forced ourselves to get closer to the star to fool the enemy's sensors a little bit. From the Bentenmaru's current position, we'll probably have to skim Garnet A from the equator to the poles, but we still want as much data as we can get.”

The equatorial radius of Garnet A, which has turned into a red giant star, is now nearly as large as the orbital radius of Sea of the Morningstar, the third planet in the Tau star system. Although it was a low-altitude flight along the surface of a star, it is still a long-distance flight comparable to interplanetary navigation.

“Thinking about the future, it would be a pain to not be able to use the antenna at this point.”

“However, at altitudes where there is no resistance from thermal radiation or high-temperature gas, it is difficult to get lost in the reactions of Garnet A.” At Schnitzer's snarl, Marika clasped her hands together.

“Please find a good balance. I'm not saying it's okay to burn out the antenna, but get as close to Garnet A as you can, and then take a trajectory that will open up a gap in the enemy fleet above the pole. If the enemy fleet notices the movement of the Odette II, they will start to move, and then we will have to get out of the way instead of flying low over the surface of the sun. So, until that happens…”

“Even though it's a red giant star, it's still a stellar surface flight, so there's no need to channel energy to the weapons.”

Sandaime steadily adjusts the power distribution of the main engine.

“If you don't want speed, then focus the power on the heat shield. If you spread coolant without thinking about what happens next, you should be able to maintain both the engine and the hull for a flight around a quarter of the circumference.”

“The problem is that the Garnet A data accumulated so far is almost completely unreliable.”

Luca projected a model of Garnet A, created based on observation data from the unmanned station, on the navigation panel.

“The basic structure model is not so special, so it should be fine, but the distribution of the upper atmosphere, which is the most important factor for surface flight, is completely unreliable. If we were to fly near the surface, as the captain said, we would want to follow a path that would connect the thin and cold areas of the atmosphere, but we can only fly in a way that is safe and easy while watching the gas distribution on the course.”

Marika looked at Luca's tentative route transferred on the 3D display in the captain's seat. “What's the problem?”

“Although it is necessary to keep a large safety distance, sudden changes on the surface of Garnet A cannot be predicted. It's a stable red giant star, so it probably won't eject flares or erupt like normal stars, but it's hard to predict what will happen just by observing the surface.”

“If something goes wrong, get away from Garnet A immediately.”

The fleet above the pole had not moved yet. Marika suspected that the fleet's next move would be to launch a picket ship, as was the standard practice.

“I don't want to descend so low that I can't see the movements of the enemy fleet. If I can just see the enemy's movements, and if the fleet starts moving, I have to follow suit. Besides, this job has only just begun, and I don't mind having them use as much coolant and ammunition as needed, as they can easily be replenish, but I want to avoid damage to the hull as much as possible.”

“Well then, I’ll set up a route that won't be too hot, though the Red Giant will have to serve as a cover for us.” Luca began sliding her fingers across the control panel at high speed.

“Main engines and normal propulsion ready!” Sandaime announced.

“The ship's maneuvering systems have been checked, and we're ready to launch.”

Setting the helm seat forward, Kane regained his grip on the rudder wheel.

“The sensor system is being prepared, but the setup will be finished by the closest approach, so you can start moving.” As usual, Coorie's hands never stop.

“Coolant preparations for launch completed.”

Hearing Schnitzer's voice, Marika waited for Luca's report. Soon, the future route of Bentenmaru appeared on the bridge display.

“I'm sure there will be some modifications in the future, but is this flight plan all right?”

“That’s okay.”

Looking around the bridge, Marika confirmed that all crew members were ready.

“Now, let's go to work. Bentenmaru, launch!”

A black rectangular object with white text

Description automatically generated

“The training sail ship is hiding with active stealth, and the Bentenmaru is heading straight for Garnet A.”

In the Luna Lion's cockpit, which is buried under food shells, junk parts, laundry, and a wide variety of media, Jackie comments on the pirates' movements displayed on the 3D display.

“So, that leaves the Barbaroosa to provide cover for the sailing ship, and I'm curious about the movement of the remaining one, a new type of electronic reconnaissance aircraft that has come out of the sailing ship.”

Jackie checked the latest movements of the pirate ships once again.

“Only four ships, only two of which are capable of a proper head-on battle, are ready to take on our large fleet. You make me cry, pirate!”

Somewhere in the Lunar Lion's cockpit, where clutter is still an understatement, a jangling bell rang out.

“Yes, yes, yes.”

As the bell continued to ring at regular intervals, Jackie backed up in the cockpit and dug out an old-fashioned black telephone with a rotary dial from the pile of trash at his feet.

“Yes, just a minute. I'm coming.” He picked up the receiver, connected with a curled cord, and answered the phone.

A black and white drawing of a person in a car

Description automatically generated

“Yes hello, this is the Lunar Lion, Jackie Fahrenheit. ...... Yes, sensitivity is good, I can hear your voice perfectly. ...... image communications?　Give me a break, image transmissions are only an order of magnitude higher in data volume. You don't think the pirates aren't monitoring the transmissions in this airspace?　No matter how much encryption is in place, the more data that is captured by the enemy, the greater the chance that it will be deciphered, and the more chance that they will know who you are talking to. I don't think you need a lecture on that kind of thing now. I'm glad you understand, .......”

Jackie deftly placed the receiver on his shoulder and began tapping on the control panel with both his free hands.

“Yes, yes, I've conveyed the recommendation to surrender exactly as you requested. Yeah, I've already lined up as many of my forces as I can according to your orders. Strength ratio? Well, even if I conservatively estimate it, they are two orders of magnitude apart. ...That's why I told you, the enemy is pirates. And they're not amateurs who worked their way up and left their military status today to change trades, but licensed pirates who are proud of their formality and tradition. If they were easy opponents who would raise their hands just by me showing my strength, there would be no need for us to show off all our strength in the first place. Well, if I may just give you my personal opinion, I think we should be grateful that the pirates who came all the way here didn't run away just because we showed them our great strength. What's more, they are coming at us full of motivation. ...No, let me be clear, the other party is neither fools nor outlaws. They are amazing people who have the courage to not run away even in the face of such a huge difference in strength, the intelligence to figure out what needs to be done, and the skills to make it happen. It is much easier to deal with the Imperial fleet, which only uses force. Yes, yes, I understand. This job has only just begun. However, as I have said from the beginning, this is not an easy opponent where we can win by holding back on our strength. Yes? The enemy are pirates. They are difficult opponents who are not bound by a chain of command, who can flexibly respond to the ever-changing battlefield situation on their own without having to consult their superiors, and who will do whatever it takes to maximize their military results. Yes, yes......, I will not spare them, but I will not let them suffer any losses either. What are you going to do by being so timid at this stage of the game? Yes, I understand. I will take command of the entire fleet. I may look like this, but I am no amateur. I've got the gimmick, and you'll see how it turns out. All right, then, let's get started.”

Jackie caught the receiver dropped from his shoulder with his left hand and put it back into the phone. He silently drops the phone onto the pile of trash.

“They won't give me command unless I go to this much trouble. I don't think the bureaucratic work over there is any laughing matter for the Empire. Well, I'll give them credit for having the guts to entrust their fleet to such a drifter. Well, now that they've set the stage for me, I will have to produce results that will satisfy our sponsors. ......”

Jackie switched the display. His entire fleet, three strike fleets with two aircraft carriers, three battleships, and a mobile cruiser for anti-ship combat, had finished assembling above the Red Giant's pole.

“It's a pity that we don't have as many different types of ships as the Imperial Fleet.”

The basic structure of a fleet is to have ships of the same type and class with the same performance. This basic principle is adhered to in the Imperial fleet of core star systems, which has plenty of leeway in fleet organization and operation, but this is not the case with the Rebel Army.

“The base carrier, which is not expected to have mobility, and the Black Swan will stay in the rear and concentrate on command communications and information gathering, while the battleships and cruisers will come to the front and face the pirates.”

Jackie typed instructions to each ship on a command panel tuned for as it’s top priority.

“Ah, I get it, I get it. I'll have you work on the promotion for the large fleet you've assembled. Even if I don't explain it to you now, it's only natural that the pirates will doubt whether you really assembled such a large fleet of rebel forces within the empire's territory. If that's the case, it would be best to move in a direction that arouses that suspicion. Engagement? Let's allow it. Yes, it would be a big win if we can attack the pirates However, of course, in that case, you will have to bear the risk yourself.”

Jackie commanded the entire fleet under his command with an extremely complex future trajectory that he had assembled almost instantly.

“Yes, yes. There is plenty of time left before the first enemy encounter, so everyone can analyze, speculate, and evaluate as they please. Come on, the battle begins!”

The space around Garnet A, which had once been clearly visible, was once again filled with harsh interference waves.

“It's not a noise disguised as a natural phenomenon like before, but an electronic interference for combat that is faithful to the basics of hiding yourself and exposing your opponent's position.”

Captain Blackbeard of Barbaroosa showed his fang-like teeth as he saw the electronic interference superimposed on the three-dimensional display of his ships.

“Great, this area is finally starting to look like a battlefield. So, on our side, our training sailboat took cover and charged at the enemy fleet, while our colleague the Bentenmaru, the only force we could rely on in this airspace, flew straight to the red giant and flew over the surface of the star.”

On the bridge of the Barbaroosa, Captain Kenjou zoomed in on the current position and detailed data of the Odette II and the Bentenmaru.

“The much-anticipated new reconnaissance aircraft is still being set up. Come on, what's wrong with my ship?”

“Put the Silent Whisper on.”

Nora stood up from the XO's seat.

“The Odette II is so slow that the enemy fleet will be able to get to us faster than we can get to them. But we have time for that. We can even afford to make the Silent Whisper available.”

Kenjou looked at Nora and returned to the 3D display. The Odette II's current location, which has entered active stealth, has been replaced with estimated coordinates, and the Bentenmaru has begun approaching Garnet A via the shortest possible distance.

“......I guess that's the only option. Even if we were asked to provide cover, we’re escorting a sailing ship with active stealth. We can't take a stupid route that would allow them to guess the Odette II's current location from our orbit, even though we've gone to the trouble of hiding. All right, first we'll contact the Silent Whisper and, if necessary, bring her inside to set up. After that, we can deal with the enemy fleet.”

In space combat, there are not many cases where the positions of friend and foe are known before the battle begins. In most cases, the battle begins with the search for the opponent while keeping one's position secret, and in some cases, the battle may end without finding the enemy to fight.

Once the entire fleet had been shown, as in a review ceremony, the large fleet began its routine electronic jamming. The Barbaroosa, on the other hand, did not actively engage in electronic jamming. Being far away from gunfire range, it made leisurely contact with the Silent Whisper and then set a course over the poles.

Nora, who was dispatched to the Silent Whisper from the Barbaroosa, boarded the ship with a case strapped to her space suit, just like Hyakume. The Silent Whisper, which had just doubled its forces for the time-consuming re-setting of the electronic reconnaissance aircraft, changed its orbit from its previous inertial cruise and began its ascent from the ecliptic plane of Garnet A to the north pole side in preparation for a close encounter between the pirate ship and the training sailboat.

“That bearded devil, jumping out so fast, even though I told him to take cover.”

The Odette II, receiving sunlight from Garnet A with its nine masts spread out, took a meandering trajectory over the North Pole at maximum acceleration for a sailing spacecraft. Under active stealth navigation with low power output, the movements of fellow ships can be clearly seen, down to the Silent Whisper that begins to move slowly behind.

“Barbaroosa will overtake our ship in an hour and approach the enemy fleet.”

On the screen on the main bridge, Lynn depicted the current position and future trajectory of Barbaroosa, which was moving forward at a leisurely pace unaffected by electronic interference.

“If the acceleration rate remains unchanged, contact with the vanguard of the enemy fleet will take place in four hours.”

“That's what you get when you're dealing with warships in an airspace where no one is controlling the course and you don't have to worry about civilian vessels.”

Ririka looks at the main screen with a frown.

“That said, if they deliberately slowed down in the airspace around our neighborhood, it would be like telling the enemy that there was someone in the area to cover, and they wouldn't do that.”

“Initially, the Barbaroosa probably intends to attract the enemy's attention and act as a decoy.” Gruier gave her personal opinion.

“The Barbaroosa would have an easy time fighting and escaping against the rebel battleships.”

“It would be easier if the enemy thought the same way.”

Ririka thought for a moment. “Lynn, can you read the enemy's movements?”

“To a certain extent.” Lynn looked up at Ririka in the captain's seat.

“Active stealth requires you to carefully read and respond to enemy electronic warfare deployments.”

“Do you know how it works?”

Lynn looked down at the electronic warfare display

“......The enemy's main force is motionless above the pole. It looks like multiple forces are moving towards us from there.”

“Multiple? How many specifically?”

“Minimum of four, maximum of six. I can't read the formation, but I think a small fleet with a similar formation is breaking away from the main fleet and starting to move in a similar dense formation......”

“Are they heading this way?”

“Yes.”

“What is the estimated contact time?”

”It’s the same as before. If the enemy's acceleration rate does not change, it will still take four hours for the leading force to make contact with the Barbaroosa.”

“Four hours......”

Ririka glanced at the chronometer in the captain's seat. “Okay, keep the operational staff to a minimum and everyone take a break!”

The bridge fell silent, as if it did not understand the captain's words. Smiling bitterly, Ririka continued speaking.

“Ever since we jumped from the Tau system, we've all been working without a break. In any case, the battle was much slower than originally estimated, since neither side could predict each other's strength. So this time, even though it's called a battle, it's just a face-off, and things like that tend to go on for a long time. If there's an emergency, I'll have to wake everyone up, so if you're free, go eat and sleep!”

After making his booming proclamation, Ririka added humorously. “However, since there is a possibility that we may be in a rush when woken up, alcohol and drug-related activities are prohibited.”

“Don't you need to rest?” Ririka called out to Lynn, who did not get up from the electronic warfare station. Looking up at the captain's seat, Lynn turned her attention back to the electronic warfare display.

“Active stealth is not a mechanism that will work fine if you leave it alone. The electronic warfare density in this airspace is steadily increasing. I don't think I'm getting caught by the enemy's search for now, but from now on, if the enemy changes their scanning pattern, we will have to respond immediately to keep ourselves hidden.”

“There's no need to suddenly go all out and show your hand, right?” Ririka said in an admonishing tone.

“As I said at the beginning, our expected role is to be a decoy, bait to pull them out into the light of day. And as you probably know, the mission probably won't end with this contact.”

“......We want to be found in a suitable place?”

Ririka smiled at Lynn's dissatisfied words. “It's nice you caught it quickly. Just as you should save everything so that you can fire one last shot, you don't need to use your trump card from the beginning. And maybe that's what the other side is thinking too.”

“Is that right?”

Gruier, who was still on the bridge, joined the conversation. “Uh, may I offer an opinion?”

“Okay.” Ririka answered leisurely. Gruier opened her mouth cautiously.

“The rebel forces are deployed in Imperial territory. We still don't know for sure how large the fleet we just saw really is, or how big the enemy's main fleet is, but isn't it normal to think about getting things under control as quickly as possible?”

“If it's a job with a time limit, there's no way you're going to engage me and then designate a place to relax and wait for me.”

Ririka looked at the main screen displaying the surrounding airspace.

“We coordinated the situation with the surrounding departments, procured a vintage FTL booster, and took our student-only training sailboat out into a red giants’ airspace, which we knew would surely be a battleground, even if there were no good stations in a ten light-year radius. The Imperial fleet could have launched a sweep with all the forces at its disposal before we arrived. However, our intent was to wait and see to try and capture the big one by the tail. And the other side probably knew that.”

“Are you saying that you understand that this is the leeway you have been given and are proceeding with the operation with that in mind?”

Ririka nodded at Gruier's confirmation.

“Well, of course, they may not be so good-natured as to let us off the hook if we show more openings than necessary and give priority to our own plans, but still, they know we have reinforcements and are on guard against the cavalry rushing in.”

“I can't decide where it will be the gap I created and where it will be my mistake.”

Lynn responded to the electromagnetic interference caused by enemy search from another direction.

“So I'm doing what I can now, that's all.”

“It's good that you're willing to do it, but that's a beginner's approach.”

Lynn was surprised and glared at the captain. Ririka's expression did not change.

“It's fine when you're young and full of energy and confidence, but you can't always expect to face the same kind of enemies as before in our business.”

“That's why humans have to deal with it every time!”

“I'm sorry, but the biggest weakness of this spaceship is the lack of qualifications and careers of the crew. If you collapse, or even if you don't collapse but make a mistake due to fatigue, are there any electronic warfare staff members who can cover you?”

Biting her lip, Lynn shook her head. Currently, Lynn is the only one who specializes in the Odette II's electronic warfare weapons.

“It is part of the captain's job to take care of the crew's physical condition, and I can't have my irreplaceable crew members concentrate on their work and fall ill. At such a great distance from the enemy fleet, we don't have to worry about ultra-long-range fire without precision-fire radar beams. So go rest while you still can.”

“...... I still haven't read up on the enemy's interference patterns.” Lynn resisted reluctantly.

“The Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru have sent me observation data on this airspace prior to the arrival of the Odette II, but I haven't finished analyzing that data yet.”

“I see.” Ririka gave Lynn a kind look.

“Well then, can't we program it to automatically respond until the enemy approaches dangerous airspace?”

Stopping her hands, Lynn looks around at the electronic warfare display. This time, she sees her favorite computer, HAL-bou, which has been connected since she boarded the ship. “......I think it's possible.”

“Well then, please do it.”

Ririka looked at the chronometer again. “The current projection is that contact with the enemy will be in four hours, but in reality it should be around six hours at the earliest.”

“May I ask the basis for that?” Lynn looked up at Ririka, who nodded.

“Whether it's an enemy or an ally, everyone wants solid information before starting a battle. More accurate information can only be obtained by getting closer and reducing relative speed. Knowing this, the Barbaroosa will definitely slow down before approaching the enemy, and by doing so, the enemy fleet will have no choice but to slow down as well. Since this is the first contact, the enemy fleet should move its ships more carefully than necessary. Therefore, the actual contact usually takes about one and a half times longer than initially expected.”

“Huh......” Lynn looked back at the electronic battle table with some doubt. “What if the enemy doesn't slow down?”

“Then we can put out an emergency call.” Ririka answered simply. “This spaceship is not alone. All we can do is what we can do.”

Ririka looked around at the faces of Gruier and Lynn, who remained on the bridge. “Look, I don't like to say this too loudly when I'm in command, but one of the keys to getting a good job done is to make it easy on the crew so they don't get crushed and make it easy on yourself, too. It would be great if we could all work together comfortably, but I've never encountered such a case.”

After a moment of sighing, Ririka spoke again. “Did my daughter make it easy for everyone?”

After a moment of silent stares, Gruier and Lynn burst out laughing at the same time. Ririka shook her head in resignation. “I guess that’s going too far.”

“No, Marika, is a good captain.” Gruier replied with a laugh.

“There are so many things that need to be done that she is occupied just delegating tasks to others, yet she would never dream of reducing her own workload, but she makes quick decisions and is able to anticipate upcoming needs, and if we were a better crew, I think Marika would probably have enjoyed herself as well.”

Ririka let out an exaggerated sigh. “If the crew seems to care about her, Marika has a long way to go.”

As Ririka had predicted, the war situation was slow to change.

“Even in space, where conditions change at FTL speeds, this is how it is before contact.”

Looking sideways at the war display, which remained calm even two hours past the first projected contact time between the Barbaroosa and the enemy battleship, Ririka said to the crew on the bridge, which was starting to fill up.

“What we need to be aware of is that the situation continues to change even on the front lines, where it may seem like there is no movement.”

Once ahead, the Barbaroosa then enters inertial navigation and continues to search. The Odette II continues to accelerate by solar sail while maintaining active stealth, and the distance to the Barbaroosa is closing.

After a while, six forces emerged from the enemy fleet while covered in jamming waves. The search from the Barbaroosa revealed a small fleet of one battleship class and two cruiser class anti-ship formations, which were spreading out and deploying to the Barbaroosa and its surrounding airspace, the only place where the pirate forces could be seen without fail.

The Barbaroosa was transmitting her own observation information to her colleagues with only simple processing. The Barbaroosa is equipped with high-end optical sensors, but the fleet captured at maximum telephoto only yielded images of barely discernible bright spots.

“The Barbaroosa is supposed to be good at long-range artillery, but they haven't been able to get much data.” Lynn muttered while sorting out the data on the first fleet of the approaching enemy, tentatively known as the First Fleet. “The long-range radar doesn't seem to be increasing its output much either.”

“When did you find out what the Barbaroosa is good at?” Basically, there is no publicly available data on the strength of pirate ships Ririka explained with a wry smile.

“Barbaroosa's observation data could be intercepted by the enemy, so if we reveal our intentions at the beginning of the battle, we will be at a disadvantage in the next battle. It would be a different story if it was all-out war from the beginning, but it's just a first casual meeting, so keep yourself relaxed with that in mind.”

As she remembered, Ririka asked “By the way, do you think you can intercept the network traffic between enemy detachments?

The enemy fleet launched detachments one after another while the main force rose slightly from above Garnet A Pole. Although it is not certain since the movement was obscured by strong electromagnetic interference, there were six small detachments of roughly the same size that separated from the main force and set off. It is presumed that the main fleet and the 1st to 6th fleets, for convenience, are connected to the network and share information with each other.

The enemy's electromagnetic jamming was gradually getting stronger. The Odette II was aiming to intercept the network that was supposed to be set up between the First and Sixth Fleets using the antenna masts that were fully extended. If they could infiltrate the enemy fleet's network, they would be able to obtain a great deal of information.

“I'm also targeting the FTL network, but I haven't been able to catch any similar signals.”

Lynn switched on the electronic warfare display, which had finally become able to respond automatically. There are countless signals flying around on the battlefield, both artificial and natural, but the Odette II, under solar sail, can receive them clearly because her engine is not running.

“If Odette II is exposed to such powerful radar waves, she will be discovered by the enemy before long. If the fleet approaches from the other side, the reception accuracy will improve……”

“I guess it's about time we need to come up with a way to intentionally make the other side discover us.”

Quickly, Lynn reconfirmed the positions of the Barbaroosa, the Odette II, and the approaching First Fleet. If we can control the timing of the Odette II's detection, it would be better if she was not too far away from the Barbaroosa, who was supposed to be covering us now.

“You mean weakening active stealth?”

“I don't know how close-range Odette II's active stealth still works, but if it can be used, there is no need to expose our hand at this stage, is there?”

“I don't think it's too late to make a decision after finding out the identity of the enemy.”

It is still unclear whether the entire force of the enemy fleet actually exists or whether it is a disguised decoy.

“Please have some faith in the strength of a pirate ship.” Captain Ririka said in an admonishing tone.

“If you've researched th Barbaroosa's strengths, you should have seen its’ track record in the data. Are you worried about the Barbaroosa providing cover for you when you have to deal with the rebel battleships and cruisers that have been on a long expedition all at once?”

“……As long as we don't get in the way, I don't think we have to worry about dealing with one detachment at a time.”

“Then that's what we'll do.”

“The Barbaroosa and the First Fleet will make contact soon.”

Gruier gave an update, more precisely, that the Barbaroosa and the First Fleet will approach to a distance where their effective firing ranges overlap.

“What do you think?　According to the information from the Barbaroosa, are the battleships and cruisers in front of us real?”

Seeing Ririka's expression, Lynn turned her attention back to the electronic warfare display.

“They really exist.”

The data sent by Barbaroosa is scrolled through at high speed. Barbaroosa is equipped with a high-powered radar that has more power than a poorly designed beam cannon, but only regular radar/sensors are used to search for enemies.

“The battleship is the Glensmith class, an older but reliable fast battleship mass-produced for interstellar nations on the frontier, updated and still in front-line use. The cruisers are Aggregate and Vesmos class; the Aggregate is an older cruiser than the Glensmith, but the Vesmos is a more recent type.”

Lynn showed a picture of a spaceship on the display that appeared to be a public image.

“The power and performance are not quite the same, but fast cruisers have to keep up with the biggest battleships, so there is no problem with fleet maneuvering. They belong to the Seven Star Federation which, of course, is one of the frontier interstellar nations at odds with the Galactic Empire.”

Lynn superimposed additional data on the images of the three military spacecraft.

“For ships of this type belonging to the Seven Star Federation Forces, the only ones of this type whose current locations cannot be confirmed are the Glensmith-class battleship Dark Lady, the Aggregate-class attack cruiser Nanclade, and the Vesmos-class mobile cruiser Garveyron.”

“I don't understand what you're telling me.”

Even though she works at Sea of the Morningstar as an air traffic controller, Ririka does not know all types of spacecraft, nor does she need to. She has a broad range of knowledge, but there are countless spacecraft flying in the galaxy. Ririka compared the observation information with reference data sent from Barbaroosa.

“In other words, the public data and the Barbaroosa's observation data match. What about optical images?”

The image data from Barbaroosa is nothing more than a collection of bright spots with long infrared tails.

“Since it's optically camouflaged, you'd have to get very close or off-angle to get a clear enough image to distinguish it.”

In space combat, ships rarely get close enough to distinguish each other. In long-range artillery combat, if the enemy can be detected electronically, it can be sighted and fired upon.

Ririka confirmed the present and future positions of the first enemy fleet approaching the Barbaroosa and the Odette II.

“Can't you take a usable image from here?”

The bridge, which should have been noisy, fell silent. Only one person, Gruier, started tapping away at the control panel.

“The distance is too far away. The ship's optical observation equipment is outdated, so we don't know how well we will be able to obtain images.”

“Hmmm...” Ririka thought for a moment. “I guess that would mean that the Barbaroosa would get a better picture if we drew the First Fleet this way.”

The bridge buzzed. Lynn opened her mouth. “Do you mean to intentionally show ourselves?”

“And make it look as if our active stealth is no longer working against the other side due to the shortened distance. Can you do it?”

“It’s possible.” Lynn is already moving her hands.

“Instead, if this ship shows itself, there is a possibility that not only the six detachments, but also the main force will fly in.”

“Not enough?”

Lynn's hands stopped.

“I'll think about that after I've dealt with this.” Lynn's hands began to move furiously.

“I’ll adjust the antenna angle and power to reduce the effectiveness of active stealth. The accuracy and output of the radar waves from the First Fleet have increased, so we can make it seem like we can no longer hide ourselves.”

“I'll leave it to you.” Ririka, who wasn't that well-versed in electronic warfare, simply waved her hand.

“There's no need to worry the Barbaroosa noticing right away. They should be able to figure out what happened by watching the First Fleet's movements.”

The First Fleet, which had been on a direct orbit with the Barbaroosa, suddenly changed its trajectory while subjecting the Barbaroosa to intense electronic jamming and powerful radar for data collection.

The sudden change of direction, reaching almost 90 degrees, and which maximized the projected area relative to the Barbaroosa, was carried out within effective firing range, albeit at a long distance. Despite the fact that the first fleet had an advantage in terms of strength, it quickly changed its trajectory to escape, but the Barbaroosa changed its trajectory to pursue it, and then noticed the Odette II appearing vaguely along its course.

The Barbaroosa, which was too far away to be the Odette II's direct guard, accelerated rapidly and began to close the distance with the First Fleet, taking a trajectory that cuts between the fleet and the Odette II rather than directly following the First Fleet.

The Odette II, which had been on a trajectory toward the main body of the enemy above Garnet A‘s north pole, begins to change its trajectory toward the outer system in order to delay its closest approach to the first fleet and receive cover from the Barbaroosa. The First Fleet is maintaining electronic warfare readiness and collecting data by bombarding the Odette II with powerful radar from a distance.

“Regardless of other reactions, the three ships of the First Fleet definitely exist.”

On the Odette II‘s bridge, which cut active stealth at the same time as the First Fleet changed course and shifted to a concentrated observation posture with all onboard radars and sensors deployed without giving the enemy any further electronic warfare information, Lynn reported to Ririka.

“As usual, the transponders are off, so we can't identify the ships, but the energy response and mass measurements are consistent with the observed data.”

“Do warships in battle really emit transponder signals? Are we still unable to obtain optical images?”

“The enemy ships continue to use optical camouflage.” Gruier answered.

“Because of the distance, we can't get a clear image with our observation equipment.”

“We can only hope for data from the Barbaroosa.”

Ririka ran her eyes over the projected trajectory of the Barbaroosa, which was pursuing the First Fleet on its changed course. Since optical camouflage is most effective in the direction of travel where the projected area is minimized, there is a high possibility of obtaining good observation results from the Barbaroosa, which will be observing the first fleet from the flank. At this stage, the Odette II had not opened a direct line to the Barbaroosa, the Bentenmaru, or the Silent Whisper.

Electronic jamming also has its greatest effect in the direction of travel. The smaller the cross section presented to either radar or sensors, the smaller the response, but when the flanks are exposed to the enemy, neither concealment nor electronic jamming can be expected to be as effective as when facing the enemy.

Conversely, the Barbaroosa, in pursuit, had the opportunity to observe the First Fleet from their flank due to the different approach angles to the Odette II. While cornering the enemy fleet within an effective range, the Barbaroosa was gathering detailed information by bombarding the enemy ships with unrestrained and powerful radar waves.

The Odette II's crew has no experience in fleet battles, let alone actual combat experience in the position of being chased, so the only thing the Odette II can do is run away. The acceleration rate of Odette II could be increased by using the normal engine, but Ririka purposefully allows only the solar sail to propel her. The First Fleet is steadily closing the distance with the Odette II, which can only achieve interplanetary cruising speeds that are slow even for Category II spacecraft, which cannot exceed the speed of light.

“It's okay, they can't shoot us.”

Ririka, perhaps thinking that she would be in trouble even if she raised the tension on the ship too much and caused an outburst, continued to explain the situation of the battles’ slow pace.

“They want the Odette II. I don't know what level of destruction they can accept, but they would have to get much closer to conduct precision fire that would stop us in our tracks without destroying the hull. Before they get that close, the Barbaroosa will have the enemy fleet in effective range.”

“The enemy consists of one battleship and two cruisers.”

Lynn thought it would be okay, but she asked the obvious question, almost as if it were a stage play. “Isn't there a possibility that the enemy will divide their fleet into two and approach the Odette II while stalling the Barbaroosa?”

“Good question.” As if aware of Lynn's intentions, Ririka replied with one eye closed.

“If you want to stop this poorly armed ship, you don't need a battleship. Even the main guns of a cruiser would be too big. However, if they can stop the Barbaroosa with one battleship, or even two cruisers with the battleship on our side, they can take their time destroy this ship. So why not?”

As each question was answered with a question, Lynn looked around at the faces of the bridge crew, who were listening intently to the conversation with the captain. She thinks about what she knows about anti-ship warfare.

“If the Barbaroosa's purpose is to protect the Odette II, then they can’t stop her with just two battleships, right?”

“To be more precise, the other side probably hasn't fully determined how much force is needed to stop the Barbaroosa.” Ririka nodded.

“Battleships are durable spaceships, so even if they are attacked by a force several times larger, it will be a challenge to silence them. On the other hand, from the Barbaroosa's point of view, it doesn't matter whether it's two ships or three ships, there's no need for him to take them as a serious opponent. Since the Barbaroosa's purpose is the defense of the Odette II, it will be easy to take out two enemy ships.”

“It's more difficult for the enemy fleet to do, so it's okay, right?” Upon hearing Gruier's summary, Ririka looked at Lynn.

“Well, that's the thing. The ones who are crossing a dangerous bridge are the rebels who are expanding their business in Imperial territory, and we have an easier job than them. Honestly, they would probably want to get rid of the frontline forces like the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru as soon as possible and leave us naked, but they are afraid of the Imperial fleet coming out if they go that far.”

Ririka looked at the main screen, which displayed the relative positions of the two spaceships.

“The fact that they are advising pirates to surrender shows that the enemy is cautious and fearful of splitting up their fleet into smaller units. The First Fleet will probably escape before it gets within the Barbaroosa's range. This battle will probably take a while, though, so don't get too nervous and collapse!”

As Ririka predicted, the first fleet approaching Odette II turned before it was caught within the Barbaroosas’ effective range. It took a trajectory to join the main fleet over the Pole.

The Barbaroosa did not pursue the first fleet, which turned to flee. It slowed down to directly guard the Odette II. According to the Barbaroosa's observations, the Second Fleet was approaching the Odette II, which had changed course.

With the Barbaroosa as her direct escort, Ririka changed the direction of the Odette II's course again to aim for the sky over the Garnet A North Pole. This would speed up the contact time with the second fleet, which will be approaching next with almost the same composition, and it’s successor.

Both Captain Blackbeard of the Barbaroosa and Captain Ririka of the Odette II expected that the First Fleet, which had once left, would join the Second Fleet and make contact again. The more pieces they had, the wider the range of tactics they could take.

However, about an hour after the Barbaroosa lost contact with the First Fleet, only three ships, consisting of the same battleship and cruisers as the First Fleet, reappeared within detection range. Perhaps because the Barbaroosa and the Odette II were positioned with relatively small distances between them, the Second Fleet, with a battleship in the center and two fast cruisers at a large distance on either wing, was now just at the edge of Barbaroosa's effective range. It then spread out in three directions and disappeared toward the southern sky without slowing down.

Furthermore, the Third Fleet, which appeared an hour later, did not join up with the First Fleet, nor did it join with the Second Fleet for a pincer attack, and although it came within Barbaroosa's effective firing range, it was unable to approach any further. Instead, it retreated again towards the northern sky.

When the Fourth Fleet came within the detection range of the Barbaroosa and the Odette II from behind a thick curtain of electronic interference, the Bentenmaru finally broke away from its surface flight of the Red Giant Garnet A and entered a trajectory to ascend vertically to the enemy main fleet over the North Pole.

The enemy's main force, which was supposed to be occupying the sky above the pole, had retreated far into the sky after dispersing and launching six detachments. Captain Marika of the Bentenmaru was forced to choose between continuing to pursue the enemy's main force, or returning to the Barbaroosa and the Odette II, which had observed the existence of at least the first three of the six detachments. In the end, they chose to rejoin the allied fleet.

If the six detachments rejoin, the pirates, who only have one battleship and one training sailing ship, will have to deal with a much superior fleet of six battleships and twelve cruisers. In a fleet battle, the balance of forces would not be disrupted even if the single ship Bentenmaru rushed in, but as long as the enemy's main force was hiding, it was determined that even if they pursued further, they would only be able to escape.

However, if the Odette II keeps its the current orbit and does not use normal propulsion, only solar sail propulsion, the Bentenmaru will not be able to rendezvous with the remaining three detachments until after contact is made with them. Of course, there is a possibility that the six detachments will rejoin or attack at the same time before then.

Nevertheless, the Bentenmaru took a trajectory to intercept the First and Second Fleets, knowing that the regrouping timing would be delayed.

The detachment never reunited, as had been feared, and the Barbaroosa and the Odette II were never attacked by the far superior rebel forces.

When the Bentenmaru returned to the space near the Barbaroosa and the Odette II, much later than it would have if it had taken the shortest trajectory, the six detachments that had made contact with each fleet had disappeared without any exchange of gunfire.

“*Hey, you're late!*”

After almost half a day of nerve-wracking contact, a bearded man with no signs of fatigue appeared on the Bentenmaru's communications monitor.

“I was going around a bit to see if I could make contact with any of the fleets from the first to the sixth.” The directional beam communication had little risk of being intercepted, but as a precaution, the output was turned down, and Marika answered on a screen that was getting a little noisy.

“*It must have been a lot of work. Were there any results?*”

“No.” Marika shook her head apologetically.

“We managed to catch sight of the 4th and 5th fleets, but only for the 6th fleet can we claim to have seen the fleet. How was it there? Did all six fleets actually exist?”

Initial predictions were that only one, or at most two, of the six flotillas were real, with the rest believed to be electronic ghost fleets.

Captain Blackbeard snorted. “*The six fleets, six battleships, and twelve cruisers are all real, at least according to our observations. The optical camouflage was carefully applied, so only the last two cruisers of the 6th Fleet could be seen, but the rest all match the catalog list.*”

“Still…” Marika let out a sigh. “So, will the Barbaroosa believe that?”

Captain Blackbeard chuckled. “*I don't know. According to our original estimate, at least 70% of the enemy fleet over the Pole was supposed to be non-existent ghosts or decoys, but when a dozen and a half large warships appear right in front of us, we have to completely re-evaluate the strength of the fleet. I had no idea that the enemy had brought such a large fleet out into imperial territory, and if I were to alert the Joint Chiefs of Staff Command, they would probably panic.*”

“Direct communication line established with the Odette II.” Coorie announced. Ririka appears on the second communication panel, looking quite tired.

“*Barbaroosa, Bentenmaru, this is Captain Ririka from the Odette II.*” Ririka gave a perfunctory salute, barely able to raise her hand.

“Thank you for your participation in combat on a training ship that is not a combat ship.”

“*Absolutely.*” Ririka, on the other side of the communication monitor, had a pathetic smile on her face.

“*I was wondering what we would do if the fleet that came out would have attacked us en masse, but it didn't come to that, and we survived. Although we didn't have to do too much, I think it was a good experience for our crew members, who had never fought in anti-ship combat before.*”

“Are my club members alive?” Marika asked, concerned about the strangely quiet state of Odette II's bridge. “It took longer than expected, is everyone ok?”

“*If the enemy fleet wants to attack the Odette II, now is certainly the perfect time.*” Ririka looked around the Odette II's bridge.

“*I just forced the president and the princess off the bridge for overtime. The remaining members are also overworked, and the only ones on duty right now are junior high school students who are apprentices and reserve personnel who have been brought in early, and almost everyone in other departments have been put on leave. This is the Odette II's top secret, so don't divulge it to anyone else.*”

“Absolutely.” The Bentenmaru, which was in combat operations for the same amount of time, was in a similar situation, but Marika and Ririka had a much different crew to command. During the cruise on the surface of the Red Giant, Marika was forced to take a rest, saying that she would be woken up if they had to ask the captain to make a decision. When she returned to the bridge after entering the orbit to ascend toward the enemy fleet from above the north pole of Garnet A, the crew was so relaxed that Marika did not needlessly strain herself and exhaust her energy.

However, even though the Barbaroosa was providing cover, the Odette II's crew would not be able to rest in a situation where battle fleets appeared one after another, and Ririka would not let them relax unnecessarily.

“If necessary, I can send my ship's doctor.”

“*I'll save that for a last resort.*” Ririka waved her hand in annoyance.

“*After all these operations, even their fleet would like to rest for a while. So, have you been able to prove the existence of the main fleet of the enemy forces?*”

“I'm sorry to say…” Marika also sent an abridged version of the same mission report to the Odette II that she had sent to the Barbaroosa.

“Although they are showing off their military strength, the rebel army seems to be extremely afraid of having their strength confirmed. The Bentenmaru was unable to obtain any evidence that the enemy's main force was as large as the enemy claimed.”

“*Just as I thought.*” Ririka's face came back to life. “*So, on your way back, were you able to contact the six detachments that showed up?*”

“Just the last one.” Marika answered honestly. The same information is also included in the abstract version of the report.

“The ship types and proper names of one battleship and two cruisers match those registered in the frontier district catalog. If we limit ourselves to the last one, one battleship and two cruisers actually exist. Also, I think there are probably shipwrecks named Luna Lion and Black Swan in this airspace.”

“*What about the other five?*” Ririka asks again. “*What about the First to Fifth Fleets, for which there is data from the Barbaroosa that they actually exist?*”

“There have been several responses that seem to indicate this, but no contact has been made. As for the First through Fifth Fleets, the Bentenmaru has seen only distant responses.” Marika turned her gaze back to Captain Blackbeard on the communications monitor.

“I trust the Barbaroosa's observational data. But our staff says it's something that can be faked, something that can be made in any number of ways by various means.”

“*My analysis team has come to the same conclusion.*” Captain Kenjou scratched his head, looking like he couldn't help it.

“*If we look only at observational data, we have collected a dozen and a half pieces of data, but unfortunately, what we have obtained is only radar responses, energy responses, and even infrared patterns, all of which could be created if we wanted to. It's true that different data is collected each time each fleet approaches, but even the target ships of the exercise fleet can do that. What do you mean? Do you think the training sailboat is an elaborate play?*”

“*The president and the princess also realized after the third fleet. If they contact us at this time, it is possible if the first fleet patrols in circles.*”

Gruier was the first to notice the strangeness of the fleet's behavior, repeatedly approaching and leaving after a certain period of time.

If the enemy's objective is only to gather battle information on pirate ships, it is more effective to stick with a single fleet for an extended period of time than to go to the trouble of forming multiple fleets and approaching them individually. If the purpose is to see if the enemy will call for reinforcements, whose presence is not certain, it is more certain to launch a slow siege with a large force than to launch a small fleet of ships.

Nevertheless, the enemy approached the Odette II with a separate squadron based on a formation of one battleship and two cruisers. The formation changed from time to time to only three cruisers or two fast battleships and one mobile cruiser, but the basic three-ship formation remained unchanged. And although all of them have characteristics that match the catalog, their actual bodies have not been confirmed thanks to optical and electronic camouflage.

Gruier was the first to notice this possibility after repeatedly replaying the observed orbits of the First and Second Fleets and the estimated orbits of the Third Fleet.

“Maybe only one of these fleets is circling around.”

At this point, the communication lines remained closed, and the Odette II was only receiving observation data from the Barbaroosa unilaterally.

“This type of trick is sometimes used when you want to make the line longer at an inspection ceremony, or when you want to buy time.” Gruier said, who has attended several review ceremonies both on the ground and in space as a member of the Serenity star royal family. “Since the audience sees only the ceremonial hall, they can watch the endless procession of honor guard and ships as they pass in front of the audience, and then quickly exit backstage and return to the ceremonial hall.”

“Excuse me…” Marii, in the navigator's seat, raised her voice. “You can build any army you want with that kind of trickery.”

“However, honor guards with the same faces and ships with the same shape pass endlessly in front of the audience.”

Ririka, remembering that she had heard of such a technique somewhere, asked the obvious question. “Don't they notice?”

“Of course, those who care about the emblem of the honor guard, the detailed model of the ship, and the identification number will notice it. But for most people, it's all about the image, so just showing them that there are a lot of them and that they go on and on is enough to have an effect.”

“You think the same move is being used by the First through the Sixth Fleets?”

“I tried to reproduce the approach of the First Fleet and the Second Fleet with a simulation.”

Gruier, in the observers’ seat, drew a schematic diagram of an orbit centered around Odette II on the main screen.

“For clarity, the position of the Odette II is fixed and the position of the Barbaroosa has been removed. The First Fleet will first approach the Barbaroosa on the inner planet side from the northern sky, then detect our presence and change course towards the Odette II.”

A simplified trajectory of the First Fleet is drawn on the main screen using blue bright lines.

“Then, without approaching close enough to be seen with the naked eye, allowing us to see the details, they separated and disappeared out of our observation range. The Second Fleet was detected at a position closer to the outer planet than the First Fleet's initial detection position, and they dispersed and took a trajectory that would pass us.”

The trajectory of the Second Fleet was drawn with a green bright line. The green bright lines indicating the three military spaceships split into three parts, and then disappeared.

“And the Third Fleet appeared in a position closer to the outer planet than the Second Fleet.”

The trajectory of the third fleet is now depicted as a yellow bright line.

“This is just a very rough guess, but if each fleet moves in this way, I think it would be possible to depict these movements using only one fleet.”

With a light pen in hand, Gruier used her free hand to add handwritten lines to the bright lines on the main screen. A white bright line is drawn out in a circle, and when the first blue bright line disappears, it turns and connects with the second green bright line, and then the ends of the three bright lines split into three, each taking a circuitous route and returning to the northern sky again. It is connected to the yellow bright line that indicates the trajectory of the Third Fleet.

A sigh of admiration flowed over the bridge.

The sailing speed of a warship is not tied to catalog numbers. Published numbers are usually more conservative than those used in actual combat. Without even having to simulate it, Ririka could see that the fleet movement was completely possible within common sense.

“The reactions of individual fleets can be reproduced by flying slightly more elaborate drones.” Lynn supplemented Gruier's speculation.

“The trickiest part is disguising each ship that appears in front of you as a different ship every time, but it's still much easier than pretending something isn't there.”

“The basic idea of electronic warfare was that it is more difficult to make something that exists seem like it doesn't exist than to make something that doesn't exist seem like it exists.”

Ririka was also aware of this possibility. But at the very least, it is true that a powerful fleet of battleships and cruisers is cruising in the nearby space, and she pretended not to notice because she thought it would be a good opportunity to let the crew experience the tension of real combat.

The fourth and fifth fleets approached from different directions without much pause, as if the enemy fleet was also considering the possibility of being noticed. However, Lynn pointed out that even this was possible if the fleet was divided into two and one ship deployed electronic ghost ships to form a fleet, and Ririka was convinced that the enemy fleet that came to the front was only three ships, the first formation.

“*I'm sorry that I can't provide clear evidence because it's all speculative data, but that's why Odette II's opinion is that there was only one fleet that actually appeared, not six, and only three ships in that fleet.*”

Ririka looked around at the faces of Marika and Captain Kenjou through the communication monitor.

“*So, I thought that if the Bentenmaru brought reliable data on the enemy's main force, I would be able to accurately estimate its strength, but I guess they were able to escape after all.*”

“*I thought it was a big deal to be so calm in a spaceship crewed by amateurs in the face of such a frustrating war of attrition, but I guess they noticed after all.*”

Kenjo, whose fangs looked like they were going to bite through his black beard, raised his thick thumb.

“*Just because there are fewer enemies there’s no guarantee that they won't shoot at you.*”

Ririka smiled as if to hide her embarrassment.

“*The question of why they don't do that when they should just attack at once if there are enough of them can be explained by saying that the enemy has their own circumstances as well. Also, when it comes to creating variations in the 4th and 5th fleets, the opponents are no amateurs either.*”

“*So you are estimating that the only enemy fleet deployed in this airspace at this time is one battleship, two cruisers, the little red-head’s ship, and the Black Swan?*”

“*At this point, I think that is the most likely and reliable number.*” Ririka nodded.

“*But of course, it's not impossible that the enemy could prepare a ship of that size in advance, unveil it to us, and then, in an emergency, the real one could come flying at us. After all, of the 18 warships that appeared from the 1st to 6th fleets, the latest information on their current locations was only three days old. Of course, it is basic for warships in operation hide their current location, but it is unclear how many of them are mobilized here.*”

“*Well, well, even Captain Ririka has fallen completely into the enemy's trap, hasn't she?*”

At Kenjo's smirk, Ririka bared her teeth.

“*If you don't make them nervous by listing all the possibilities, our crew is full of thick skulls that can get sloppy anywhere!*”

“*Oh, that's because we've assembled a crew suited for pirates.*”

“I am honored by your praise.”

Greeted on behalf of the Hakuou Academy Yacht Club, Marika looked around at the captains on the communication monitor.

“Silent Whisper should have started electronic reconnaissance during this battle. With their data, we should be able to obtain more reliable combat information, so why don't we first analyze everyone's information together?”

“Yes, that's right. According to the report I sent you, the first operation ended as planned.”

In the cluttered cockpit, Jackie held the receiver of an old-fashioned telephone while checking the latest information about his fleet and the red giant.

“As you can see, the objective was fully achieved. Well, it doesn't really matter whether they noticed our trick or not. At least, it's good to know that we have someone who is willing to play our game. Questions? Please feel free to ask anything.”

Jackie listened to the receiver as he tapped away at the control panel.

“……that's right. During this operation, neither the pirate ship nor the training ship made any communication to the outside world. Even if the Imperial Fleet or similar organizations were monitoring the situation, there was no sign that a third force would rush in to intervene.”

Jackie's voice cracked.

“In other words, if they are relying on the Imperial Fleet for backup, the Imperial Fleet has earned their trust, and the pirates are trusted by the fleet. Yes, you can be sure that they are as formidable an enemy as they can be.”

With the receiver between his shoulders, Jackie began tapping on the control panel with both hands.

“Can you win? of course. As long as you provide the necessary budget and time, we can fulfill your order.”

A black and white sign with white text

Description automatically generated

“There are 108 drones flying from above the North Pole of Garnet A to the orbit of a planet outside the ecliptic plane on the side where Odette II was!?”

Marika raised her voice when she heard Hyakume's report.

“It wasn't enough just to have a large fleet as a game of numbers, so the rebel army spread them all over the place!?”

“It is also specially made, with stealth functions, high-power transmitters, and various antennas, and is equipped with everything from normal waves to faster-than-light radar.”

Hyakume replied as he reviewed the data on the Bentenmaru's mainframe, which was wired directly to the Silent Whisper floating next to the Bentenmaru.

“If we could capture and analyze just one of them, we would be able to gain a great deal of knowledge, but unless we trap them very well and disconnect them from the network, they will probably self-destruct without leaving any debris behind.”

Marika remembered the drone used against her when she fought against Jackie's Luna Lion in the Tau system. After the battle, even a minesweeping effort carried out with the cooperation of a star system military escort ship failed to find a single piece of the drone that was supposed to have been released by Jackie.

“I'm surprised you found it......”

Coorie murmured in admiration as she saw the model of the drone reproduced in rough lines on the display.

“It’s almost nothing but antennas. Despite its size, it must have a very small mass.”

“Also, depending on the location, there is a possibility that three LMS sizes may be used.”

Hyakume, who had returned to his seat on the Bentenmaru’s Bridge for the first time in a while, commanded the main computer to start processing information and exhaled.

“Judging by its size, the propulsion system, not to mention the communication equipment, shouldn’t be too complicated, so if we can find its location, we can deal with it as long as it does not go FTL or disguise itself. But this is much more troublesome than the large fleet they claim to have assembled.”

Hyakume lowered his seat from the radar/sensor station and leisurely turned the reclined seat inward on the bridge.

“Depending on how it is used, a single drone can perform the same missions as an electronic warfare aircraft, if its performance is estimated conservatively.”

“There are at least 108 of them in this star system......”

Hearing the lack of inflection in Coorie's voice, Marika, sitting in the captain's seat, said with a shiver running down her back. “That doesn't mean they had already finished deploying their electronic warfare fleet before we got here. We've managed to stay safe until now.”

“Electronic warfare is a method of deception, and although it is a form of combat, it is not a form of shooting live ammunition.”

Hyakume looked at the correlative display showing the position of the pirate fleet in a loose vertical formation with Odette II in the center.

“It's not uncommon for battles to end without actually opening fire and shooting each other, or battles that can't end unless the fighting force is completely crushed.”

“Does that mean it's included in the enemy's victory conditions?” Schnitzer asked from the battle command desk, having finally finished setting up a joint battle information line with the Barbaroosa.

“Well, at least it means that even if they display a large fleet or display a small amount of military power, they can expect that we are an opponent that won't surrender or run away.”

Hyakume superimposed the current location of the drones he had found on the three-dimensional display. Numerous visible dots of light appear in the airspace around Garnet A, centered on the three pirate ships.

“Thanks to the time it took to set up Silent Whisper, it wasn't very useful in the beginning of the battle, but if used properly, even a delicate drone of this size can be easily spotted. If we had two more aircraft of the same class, it would be easy to run a three-dimensional search and get a clear picture of the situation in the combat airspace.”

“There's no way we could bring two more planes like that.” Marika answered in a low voice.

“It's weird that something like that is here.”

“Instead, I created a radar system by combining the Barbaroosa's high-power radar and the Odette II's antenna. No matter what the training sailing ship's processing power is, it's below third-rate by today's standards, so there's nothing you can do about it with just one ship, but if information can be shared over a faster-than-light network, the processing can be done by the Bentenmaru or the Silent Whisper.”

“……Is that okay?” Marika asked, looking worried.

“With just that much, can we fight on equal terms against an enemy who has already deployed over 100 drones?”

“You don't have to deal with all the drones at once.” Running his fingers on the keyboard behind his back, Hyakume selected only a few drones placed in the nearby airspace and made them blink.

“Since there are fewer of us, our combat airspace is naturally limited. As long as we know that there is such a device, we can deal with it as much as we want, since they are drones that cannot fire even a single live bullet.”

Marika looked at Hyakume's face and Coorie's back. She mumbled only in her mouth. “I believe in you.” She nods and opens her mouth. “So, even though Nora and Hyakume were able to use the Silent Whisper properly, they still couldn't find the enemy's main force?”

“There you go.” Hyakume expanded the display area of the 3D display and placed Garnet A in the center.

“In fact, Silent Whisper has not yet demonstrated its true potential. For testing purposes, it has only been used for a short time for low-profile exploration, and because its resolution is nearly two orders of magnitude higher than that of the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa, it has only been used for passive observation using other ships' radars. And, at least for the time being, this observation mode does not reveal the existence of a large fleet that is supposed to be sitting over the pole with elaborate electronic jamming.”

“You mean you haven't used it properly yet?”

It has already been more than a day since the enemy fleet launched its detachment into a close battle, even considering the departure of the Sixth Fleet. And Marika has learned that there is always a reason why veterans don't use something that should be available. She thought for a moment, and the answer came quickly.

“In other words, if you try to use Silent Whisper's abilities at full potential, the enemy might be able to deduce it’s performance?”

“That's what I mean.” Hyakume nodded his head in agreement, relieved that he did not have to start with a layman's explanation to the captain.

“In fact, it's a rather monstrous reconnaissance plane because it has enough power to reach FTL speeds, it is equipped with a powerful radar similar to that of an electronic battleship, and a computer that can easily process vast amounts of information, which requires a tremendous amount of money and effort. The technology of the central government is really quite impressive.”

“I'll listen to the explanation later.” Marika urged him to go on, because he was going to be talking about his knowledge for a long time if she left him alone.

“If you use that radar at full power, the enemy will be able to read its performance, right?”

“That's what I mean. Although the Barbaroosa's long-range radar is more powerful in terms of output alone, Captain Kenjou did not use the Barbaroosa's radar system to its full potential the last time the detachment tried to interfere with him. And if we use the Silent Whisper's radar at maximum output in the same airspace, even in the name of testing, anyone with a good eye can easily calculate our detection capability.”

Hyakume looked around the Bentenmaru's bridge.

“As you know, detection is a much more useful and important weapon for us pirates than frontal combat power. Why should we go to the trouble of showing off that power to our opponents before the main battle has even started?”

“......I wonder if I'll be able to put it to good use when the situation calls for something so important.” Marika honestly expressed the doubts she felt.

“If Silent Whisper's detection ability is so powerful, wouldn't it be possible to figure out the location of the enemy fleet now, grab the main force by the neck, and catch the main culprit?”

“Ah, I know that feeling.” Hyakume grinned.

“There are many stories in history of heavy battleships that were equipped with combat capability that was more powerful than any of the enemy's ships, but they were wasted and failed to use them and lost the war. I hope that the captain will not make the mistake of using it in such a way.”

“Don't talk like it's someone else's problem.” Marika looked at the layout of the fleet with only three ships in front of her. The Silent Whisper, which is supposed to serve as the fourth ship in the fleet and its best eyes, is currently floating next to the Bentenmaru, and although it is operational, it is not a ship that can be counted on as a force.

“We're just going to pretend we didn’t notice the 108 unmanned drones, right?”

“That is my recommendation. You can get the Silent Whisper catalog anywhere, but fortunately it has been out for so short a time that there are almost no actual battle records. The detailed specifications of the drone are not yet known, but it should be impossible for the other side to determine whether or not our detection capabilities would be able to detect the drone's location. If that is the case, they will decide how to use the drones based on our reaction. It would be best to pretend not to know for the time being.” Hyakume deliberately kept his voice low.

“In fact, I think the reason why the six detachments were able to display such clearly different reactions was due in large part to the support of the drones.”

Marika's face clouded over as she considered a possibility. “That means we were set up by them from the beginning, weren't we? I'm glad we got away safely.”

After saying that, Marika realized a horrifying possibility. “......Does that mean they succeeded in their plan?”

“You should think so.” Hyakume spun around in his seat and turned to the console.

“The purpose of the opening battle should have been to gauge our strength and then, if possible, pull out the reinforcements that would have flown in. Of course, we had that intention as well, and we didn't show our full strength or reinforcements. However, if they came within effective range of us, even though we were far away, it was safe to assume that they were reading our data to the same extent as we were reading theirs, and we still have no accurate reading on their capabilities. You know the saying that by the time the battle actually starts, the outcome of the battle is 90% determined.”

“I've heard of it, but......” Marika is aware of the importance of advance preparation, but she has never been that sure of the outcome before the actual battle begins.

“Right now, we are still making various preparations for each other before the final battle. And combat is determined not by diligence or equipment, but by intelligence. I'm looking forward to it, Captain Marika.”

“So don't put any extra pressure on yourself beforehand.”

Feeling a dull stomach ache, Marika gently held her stomach over her captain's uniform.

“If the outcome of a battle is determined by intelligence, then it would be a good idea to have commanders test their abilities against each other.”

“Yes, I managed to complete the tuning of my computer and the Silent Whisper.” Hyakume enabled the communication line with the Silent Whisper, which was connected to the Bentenmaru through a thick wire.

“Bentenmaru to Silent Whisper, please resume scanning in all-sky mode.”

“*This is Silent Whisper.*” The cool voice of Nora, the Barbaroosa's XO, who has remained on board since being transferred from the Barbaroosa to the Silent Whisper, answered. “*Resuming all-sky scanning.*”

Spacecraft in operation, whether pirate or military vessels, do not neglect to gather information on their surroundings. The Barbaroosa, the Bentenmaru, and even the Odette II keep their radar/sensor systems running all the time and never take a break from observation.

Before the Odette II arrived at Garnet A, an information network connecting pirate ships and the training ship had already been formed. Spacecraft participating in the network can share observation information with each other and use it as their own.

With the addition of the latest and greatest electronic reconnaissance aircraft to their forces, the pirates took this information network one step further into a shared radar system.

The Silent Whisper has the detection ability to collect enough battle information even as a solo ship. Its resolution and target resolution are outstanding.

The Barbaroosa is equipped with a much more powerful radar than ships like the Silent Whisper, but the receiver does not have the same resolution as the Silent Whisper. Additionally, the receiving sensitivity of the Odette II, which has antennas spread all over its widely spread mast, exceeds that of the Barbaroosa, but its radar output is far inferior to that of the Barbaroosa, and its information processing speed cannot match that of the Bentenmaru.

Hyakume and Nora, with the consent of the captains, networked the entire fleet into one system so that each piece of equipment could demonstrate its best performance.

The radar waves received by the Silent Whisper are not only those emitted by itself. It receives and analyzes all radar reactions from the Barbaroosa, the Bentenmaru, and the Odette II. In addition, the antennas of all vessels, not just its own, are used for this reception.

In exchange for the huge jump in detection range and accuracy, the amount of information that must be processed also increases dramatically. Each spaceship is busy just processing its own information and doesn't have a lot of spare power, but the Silent Whisper is equipped with a monstrous computer that boasts a capacity and speed comparable to the latest electronic battleships.

As a result of a simple simulation, Hyakume and Nora built a radar/sensor system using the Silent Whisper as the center of information processing. The radar/sensor system created by the Silent Whisper, the Barbaroosa, the Bentenmaru, and the Odette II should enable far more precise observations than before.

“What do you think?”

After confirming that the network around the Silent Whisper was operating without problems and sending observation information that seemed to be an order of magnitude more than just Bentenmaru's, Hyakume turned to Coorie. “Is it working well?”

“......Energy reaction confirmed over the North Pole.”

The report came before the feedback. Almost immediately, the communication panel beeps.

“Yes, this is the Bentenmaru.”

Lynn appeared on the communication monitor. “*This is the Odette II. As soon as we established a network with the Silent Whisper, we received an energy reaction that looked like an explosion over the north pole of Garnet A.*”

Lynn, on the communications monitor, moving her hands frantically, rattled on. “*Isn't this a battle reaction?　Is there some kind of battle going on over there?*”

“Hey, hey, wait a moment.” Thinking that the red giant star, which was nearing its end, was causing some kind of rare natural phenomenon, Hyakume tapped on his console.

“That said, the Barbaroosa and the Silent Whisper are both within easy reach, and even if the fleet above were to attack, I haven't detected any spatial anomalies as if something flew in from elsewhere.”

“Anti-ship combat?” Coorie decided against it.

“Not only battleship-class beams, but also fine radar responses for fire control are being recorded.”

“Yes, that’s it.”

Before checking for himself, Hyakume informed Odette II of the results of Coorie's analysis.

“I wonder if the rebel fleet has started some live-fire exercises?”

A sharp alarm rang on the bridge of the Bentenmaru. Marika noticed that the same kind of alarm was also ringing on the Odette II's bridge. A sign indicating that a distress signal has been received is flashing on the communication panel.

“......again?”

“It’s from the Black Swan.” Hyakume told them in a somewhat disgusted voice. “Another distress signal. What do we do?”

“What should I do......” Marika looked down at the communication panel. Lynn is on the comm from the Odette II, and there is still no response from the Barbaroosa.

“You have to go after them. That's why you came all the way here.”

With a reluctant expression on her face, Marika straightened up in the captain's seat. “Yes, fine, connect me.”

“*Ah, hello, this is the Lunar Lion, Jackie Fahrenheit, as you know.*” The red-haired pompous idiot appeared on the communications panel, speaking faster than usual.

“*I will explain later about the Black Swan’s disguised distress signal. I have an urgent matter, er, will you listen to me, Bentenmaru?*”

Seeing the cluttered control room in the background unchanged, Marika gave a small shake of her head.

“This is the Bentenmaru, Captain Marika.” Marika answered as expected, keeping her voice as calm as possible.

“What on earth is it this time, Jackie Fahrenheit?”

“*Thanks for the quick response, Captain Marika.*” While reaching for the control panel here and there, the redhead gave a salute to the communication monitor.

“*I'll explain the details of the situation later, so could you please help me out?*”

“Huh?” The only sound was the bridge's air conditioning fan and a faint electronic hum. Blinking her eyes, Marika took a slow breath.

“Uh, I didn't quite hear you, Jackie Fahrenheit. Please explain your request again.”

“*Please help me!*” Jackie, who was shown face-on on the communication monitor, enunciated especially clearly. “*I'm being chased by the rebel army because of a slight misunderstanding. I am prepared to explain the situation to your satisfaction, and if you wish, I will disclose any information I have on the rebels. So, please help me.*”

Marika stared at the redhead in the communication monitor. “Weren't you a rebel, Jackie Fahrenheit?”

“*Me?*” While busy with manual controls, Jackie waved one hand at the camera with all his might.

“*Ah, well, it can't be helped if you judge me that way based on my actions up until now, but I don't belong to the rebel army. It's true that my current job is sponsored by the rebel army, so I'm doing work for them. I have a principle of not choosing sponsors as long as the compensation is sufficient.*”

“Oh, that's a shame.” Marika closed her eyes and shook her head.

“I'm sorry, but we are small pirates, and it seems unlikely that we will be able to pay you enough to satisfy Jackie Fahrenheit. Excuse me, but could you please resolve the trouble with the rebel army yourself?”

“*That's why!*” Jackie exclaimed impatiently. “*As you can see, I have already passed the level where I can solve the problem.*”

The image from the communications camera switched to a local display of battle information. The Lunar Lion, with Jackie aboard, was apparently being pursued by six mobile cruisers.

Marika looked around the Bentenmaru's bridge, hoping to get some advice. Everyone except Coorie, who is busy gathering information, is paying attention to what kind of decision Marika will make in the captain's seat.

“You're messing with me.” Marika returned to the communicator. “I'm sorry, but I don't think I can help you.”

She shook her head as seriously as possible. “Jackie Fahrenheit's current position and our current position are too far apart. With only two pirate ships, it will be hard to take on a large force of rebel cruisers, and our weapons won't be able to reach that far to provide cover.”

Marika added as she remembered. “The story might be a little different if Jackie Fahrenheit disguised his current location and is actually right next to us.”

“*Here is my current location!*” Location information is now included in the communication data.

“It matches our observation data.” Coorie immediately reports.

“Too far.” Marika summed up the current situation succinctly. “I don't think I can help you.”

“*I won't be so unreasonable as to ask you to come here to help me or help me engage in a battle with the pursuing cruiser fleet.*” Jackie bared his teeth in a grin.

“*If you can hide me, that's fine. I'll take care of the rest.*”

Marika once again confirmed the Lunar Lion's current location and its distance from the Bentenmaru. Since they are both too close to the red giant, it is impossible to expect accurate short-distance jumps, and even if they were able to get close, the solitary Bentenmaru would not be able to take on six mobile cruisers.

“Will you surrender unconditionally?” Marika remembered the time she faced Jackie's Lunar Lion in the Tau system.

“If you surrender unconditionally to us and disclose all information, we can promise you full cooperation.” With a sideways glance, she checks the expressions on the faces of the bridge crew. Everyone is sitting at their consoles doing their jobs.

“*I'll do anything, even surrender!*” Jackie shouted in a desperate voice, with both hands on the communication monitor while controlling the aircraft.

“*I know it's a small thing, but I'm not ready to surrender with the rebels in tow. If you can shelter me and guarantee my safety, I'll gladly surrender.*”

“I don't think we have enough time to discuss the difference between surrender and capitulation.”

“*Ah, I understand, I'm okay with this status, this Jackie Fahrenheit will gladly surrender unconditionally to the pirates!*”

“What about Jackie Celsius?” Marika tilted her head. “Will Jackie Celsius agree to this unconditional surrender?”

“*Ah, I get it now, you win. This Jackie, the real me, unconditionally surrenders to the pirates! Is it okay?*”

“It doesn't change the fact that I can't trust you.”

Marika scanned the information display. The mobile cruiser is further closing the distance to the Lunar Lion ahead of it.

“I confirm my acceptance of your unconditional surrender. So how can we help you?”

“*I don't have time to discuss detailed arrangements.*” Jackie said as he maneuvered around the cockpit. The image sometimes jumped white, perhaps because the cruiser-class beams grazed at close range. “*I'll contact you again when I get there, so please listen for a while.*”

The next moment, the communication image flashed and vanished. “Direct hit on the Lunar Lion.” Coorie reports calmly.

“The cruisers are continuing to fire.”

If even one round hits, other ships will share the aiming information, and the bombardment will quickly become concentrated.

“The Lunar Lion's location information has disappeared. The cruiser fleet has ceased their salvos.”

“Can you detect Luna Lion's response?” Marika looked up from the panel where the communication line had been cut off. After thinking for a moment, Coorie began to move her hands again.

“It might be possible to increase the output of our radar, but that would expose our detection ability, so that's no good.”

“Let's see......” Marika looked around the bridge of the Bentenmaru. “What is the cruiser squadron that was chasing the Lunar Lion doing now?”

“Slowing down. I think they are confirming the sinking of the Lunar Lion.”

Marika knew that she was not mistaken. “Was the Lunar Lion really sunk?”

“Judging by the information we're getting, they've got six cruisers' worth of rounds focused on them.” Hyakume pulled out Luna Lion's estimated basic data.

“It was a cruiser-class main gun, and at least a dozen direct hits. For the Lunar Lion's size, it would be so hot that it wouldn't be surprising if it evaporated without leaving a single drop of armor behind. It will be hard just to pick up the pieces.”

“Really?” After murmuring doubtfully, Marika hurriedly repeated her words.

“Was the Lunar Lion really sunk?”

“What do you think, Captain?” Hyakume pushed his seat back once more and turned to face the captain's seat.

“Captain Marika is the only person on this ship who has had direct contact with the redhead, Jackie. Captain, do you think Jackie was sunk along with his spaceship?”

Marika shook her head. “I could believe it If the whole spaceship disappeared, but I can't believe that someone who is so well prepared and a con artist who uses cowardly tactics could be chased by a cruiser fleet and sunk so easily...... There are many ways to make it look like a starship of that size was hit by a cruiser's main gun and sunk.”

“There are many ways to survive, from using a spaceship as a decoy to making it look like the spaceship itself was destroyed by a direct hit.” Schnitzer said. Marika nodded.

“Well then, let's wait. He told me to keep an ear out for him, so if he needs anything, he'll probably call out to me from his side.”

“*The Lunar Lion was sunk?*” Lynn, from the communication monitor, mocked.

“*That pompous idiot? Really?*”

“Is that what you saw there as well?” Since they share the same data, the only difference in information displayed on the bridges of the Bentenmaru and the Odette II is their processing and display systems.

“*Yeah, it looked exactly like Luna Lion had been blown away by the cruiser's concentrated fire. What other interpretation can there be?*”

“It looked the same over here. But can you believe it?”

Lynn looked into the monitor and looked at Marika's face with wide eyes, smiling fearlessly.

“*No, I'm not so gullible as to believe what I see with that pompous idiot. Wait a minute, Gruier wants to talk to you.*”

The communication monitor switched. “*This is the Odette II, Gruier speaking!*”

Leaning over the monitor, Gruier formally introduced herself before speaking up. “*Marika, I can't believe that man was sunk that easily, this is definitely a trap!*”

Marika nodded yes. “Don't worry, no one on my spaceship thinks this isn't a trap. But why does Gruier think this is a trap?”

“*I was monitoring communications with that man before he was shot.*” Gruier removed herself from the communications monitor and sat back in the observer seat.

“*He seems to have been busy with various things, but even in such a short communication, that man is hiding a lot of things. There was so little tension in the situation, considering that such an opportunistic and cunning man was in a situation where his life was in danger!*”

“If you're saying there was no tension in a life-threatening situation, I guess we're in good company.”

Marika looked up from the communication monitor and looked around the bridge of the Bentenmaru.

“It's only natural that the redhead is hiding something, but was he serious when he said he would surrender? Or was it a lie?”

“*I’m sure he just let that come out of his mouth!*” Gruier shook her head sharply. “*He’s the kind of man whose words come out of his mouth before he thinks. His words are not worth a speck of dust!*”

“Well, that's the kind of character he is.”

“*I'm sure he jumped at the moment of the hit and was able to escape! Marika, don't listen to what that man says!*”

“That's not true.” Suddenly, Coorie interrupted.

“Since the main guns of the cruiser were firing in concentrated volleys, the energy per unit of space would be enormous, but no spatial distortion was detected, as if a spaceship of this mass were leaping or bouncing. No matter how hard you concentrate your fire, even a cruiser is not so dim as to not notice when it leaps in front of you.”

“*Besides, that man is the only negotiating channel the rebels have with us now.*” Gruier's voice sank. “*No matter what the circumstances are, there is no way the rebels will try to destroy their negotiation channel with us.*”

“Maybe the rebels got tired of that negotiating channel and moved to eliminate it themselves?” Marika stuck out her tongue.

“If that's the case, we might be able to have some decent negotiations with the next partner who comes along. No matter who they are, they’ll probably be more trustworthy than that pompous idiot.”

Marika looked at the correlation display showing the status of the surrounding airspace being observed by the newly assembled system.

“But that pompous idiot, knowing that I couldn't reach him, called out for help and asked me to listen for a while, and then disappeared.”

“*He also asked us to hide him.*” Gruier pointed out. “*That means, without a doubt, that man will appear before us again in the near future. I think we should discuss what to do with him now.*”

“Well, that makes sense.” Marika nodded. “Got it. I'll discuss with Captain Blackbeard and Captain Ririka what to do if that man appears.”

For the next several hours, the rebels took no noticeable action.

After pursuing and concentrating fire on the Lunar Lion, the cruiser squadron carefully scanned the airspace where it had been shot down before pulling back to a fleet position above the pole. The newly assembled radar system with the addition of the Silent Whisper, when fully activated, would be able to closely monitor the status of the enemy fleet, which was hidden behind strong electronic jamming. However, since this would at the same time alert the enemy to our detection capabilities, no further observations were made.

The 108 drones that Silent Whisper had discovered also remained silent. It is not even clear whether that control lies with the rebels or with Jackie personally.

Based on the last communication before the ship was sunk, "Listen for me," the four spaceships, including Silent Whisper, were monitoring the communication waves in the surrounding airspace with increased sensitivity. At the same time, radar sensitivity was increased in preparation for the approach of unidentified ships.

The radar/sensor system, which detects even the smallest cosmic dust particles, did not detect the approach of the man-made object. The rebel fleet, which was thought to be occupying the airspace above the pole, did not move, and the pirate fleet continued to test the system built with the Silent Whisper in a loose formation around the Odette II.

The communications from Luna Lion were carried out by being mixed into the communication network connecting the pirate ship and the training sailing ship.

“*Bentenmaru, Odette II, even the Barbaroosa would be fine, this is the Lunar Lion.*”

Coorie, who was crammed onto the bridge, shouted out at the sudden audio transmission, which was supposed to be cut off for security reasons.

“Hey!” She reflexively searched for the source of the intervention. As if he had no intention of hiding it, the Lunar Lion had carefully joined the communication network between pirate ships.

“*This is Lunar Lion, Jackie Fahrenheit, and thanks to you I've made it back here safely from the afterlife. Well, Marika, Lynn, or whoever, can you please respond?*”

“Who is Marika-chan?” Marika was in the midst of a detailed scan of the surrounding airspace using the new system, accompanied by Coorie and Schnitzer at that moment. Marika bit into the microphone of the headset she was holding.

“Bentenmaru to Lunar Lion, the next time you call me that, I will consider it an insult and will fire unconditionally!”

“*This is Lunar Lion, thanks for responding. Hey, hey, that's scary. Well then, Captain Marika, unfortunately, if I reveal myself here, the rebels will know that the Lunar Lion that was supposed to have sunk is still alive, so please forgive me for remaining hidden, but I've finally made it to the neighborhood.*”

The communication monitor remains blacked out. While holding the communication panel, Marika asked Courier and Schnitzer with a look of her eyes.

“I'm looking for it now.” Coorie's hands are moving furiously.

“Could it have been disguised as an excluded asteroid?”

“There are no asteroids in our vicinity that are approaching at interplanetary speed.” Schnitzer replied.

“So far, no Lunar Lion-like aircraft have been caught in our system.”

“This is the Lunar Lion, erm, I will report my current location using separate data, so please refrain from making any careless movements.”

There was a cautiousness in Jackie's voice that I didn't usually notice.

“*I’m probably not visible on your radar or sensors. Since I’m on the run I want to rule out any possibility of my current location being revealed even by your movements. Of course, I also don't want the rebels to detect that I've made contact with you.*”

“What are you doing and how are you doing it?” Looking at the display, which still shows no reaction, Marika's lowers her voice.

“*You all tried it out on your practice sailboat, didn't you? Active stealth is not that unusual. But, well, I do a lot more than that.*”

“What else?”

“*For example, injecting propellants can cause unnecessary infrared signals. Using inertial control and anti-gravity, it is possible to move without infrared signals.*”

“How do you fool the gravity sensor? Even inertial navigation without using jets doesn't mean that infrared radiation will be zero, right?”

“*That would be the case with a normal spaceship. However, the Lunar Lion is specially made. By equipping two systems with anti-gravity engines and operating them in such a way that they cancel each other's gravitational waves, it is possible to make it appear that there are no gravitational reactions or gravitational anomalies.*”

“Such precise control......”

“*Even with infrared radiation, you don't even have to radiate heat to the outside, so if you modify the input of the fluid condenser of the inertial control device a little, you can absorb any amount of surface temperature of the ship. Have you ever heard that fluid condensers can replace and store not only kinetic energy but also heat?*”

“That’s sneaky.” Marika gave her honest impressions, only understanding that the Luna Lion was equipped with rather underhanded equipment.

“*It's just not possible to be a sole proprietorship with decent equipment and have an equal relationship with the military or the fleet.*” Jackie said as if it was nothing.

“*If you want to pretend to be sunk and convince the rebels that the Lunar Lion has been destroyed, you cannot use the jump-and-run method. No matter how much the Lunar Lion is capable of distorting space or jumping into hyperspace suddenly without high acceleration. No matter how well timed, it is impossible for a massive spacecraft like the Lunar Lion to leap into hyperspace without a gravitic or spatial distortion reaction. So, conversely, without such a reaction, the rebel cruisers would believe that the Lunar Lion had been sunk. The infrared response to the rapid acceleration was masked by concentrated fire, and the rest was a secret trick that was not revealed even the rebels: I sneaked here under an invisibility cloak.*”

Marika looked at Coorie, unable to decide how much she trusted Jackie's story. With a reluctant look on her face, Coorie nodded to Marika.

“In other words, the rebels are not aware that the Lunar Lion has not only not been sunk, but has even reached the point of contacting us, Jackie Fahrenheit?”

“*That's right, Katou Marika. And if I keep it a secret, it will take a while for you to figure out the Lunar Lion’s stealth, so I won't unilaterally reveal my secrets by talking about it. Think of it as a souvenir of my surrender.*”

Marika looked at Coorie again.

“What he’s saying makes sense.” Coorie said in a small voice.

“That's not enough to explain why the Lunar Lion is so completely hidden. There are many ways to hide if you are scanning from a single direction, but we have four ships' worth of antennas scanning the entire sky from four different directions. And yet, we can't even find a single response, so I have no idea what kind of magic he’s using.”

“Lunar Lion from Bentenmaru." Marika called out to Jackie. “We do not yet know your current location. Can you provide an explanation for this?”

“*Oh, one of the many other things I do. Once we arrive there safely, I will be able to explain it to you in person.*”

“*Bentenmaru from Barbaroosa.*” Captain Kenjou appeared on the sub-monitor. “*Preparations to accommodate the Lunar Lion are complete. The aft deck has been vacated. There, even if it self-destructs, it won't damage the main body.*”

“He’s not the kind of obvious opponent that will self-destruct.” Coorie’s responded was displayed only on the sub-monitor, which Marika glanced at.

“So the Lunar Lion will approach and dock with us while maintaining stealth?”

“*Jackie is willing to surrender unconditionally, so let's take a closer look at his stealth.*”

The Lunar Lion's current location and vector were sent to the sub-monitor as separate information.

“So close!?”

“*I'm telling you, please don't focus on scanning my current location. The rebel army is watching the pirate fleet's every move. We want to avoid as much as possible any unintentional hints.*”

“You're very cautious.” Marika turned her attention back to the monitor, which showed only voice communication data.

“Bentenmaru to Lunar Lion, we have confirmed your situation. We are taking you to the Barbaroosa.”

There was a pause in the reply. Jackie replied as if he was distracted. “*Ah, well, I know I'm not in a position to make requests, but if possible, could you please accommodate me on the training sailing ship or the Bentenmaru?*”

“I’m sorry, but both the Bentenmaru and the Odette II are so cramped that there is not enough room to accommodate your spaceship.” Marika answered coldly, feeling as if she could see the depths of Jackie's soul.

“The Barbaroosa is the only ship in our fleet that has a deck large enough to accommodate the Lunar Lion.”

“*That’s right. I understand. The Lunar Lion will now approach the Barbaroosa. I don't need any guidance. Just tell me where the storage deck is so I can get there by myself.*”

“Use the aft deck of the Barbaroosa.” Marika thought of the Barbaroosa, which maintains the style of a classic space battleship.

“The door to the ship's deck is open. Do you have any requests for landing?”

“*The Lunar Lion is not a very large spaceship. If you leave enough space for a shuttle, we can land. However, it has a huge antenna for its size, so it will have to be folded up just before landing. I will also remove the magic at the same time, so if you want to observe it, I recommend you to do so.*”

Normally, when an unrelated spacecraft lands on another spacecraft, detailed discussions are required, such as the differences in the control and guidance systems of each spacecraft and the type of propulsion system that can be used to fine-tune the craft's position just before landing. However, it seems that Jackie has no interest providing information, so Marika quickly ends the conversation.

“I got it. This channel is available as is. ...I have one request for you, is that okay with you, Jackie Fahrenheit?”

Jackie answered cheerfully. “*Yes, what is it? I'll do what you say, so just say anything.*”

“Currently, Jackie Fahrenheit's spacecraft exists in this communication network under the name Black Swan. It's obvious that Jackie Fahrenheit is not on board the Black Swan, so could you please change this name to something more believable?”

“*Oh, excuse me.*” Jackie started laughing over the communicator. “*As you said, it would certainly be uncomfortable to have a ship name that is known to be a fake. Well, is this okay?*”

“Hey!” Coorie made another strange noise. The words "Black Swan" that had appeared on the network between the pirate ship and the training sailboat, which was supposed to be linked by sniper-like narrow-directional communications with strict encryption conversion and reduced output to prevent interception, were quickly replaced by "Lunar Lion".

“Oh, no. I had everything ready to intercept, but it was rewritten before I could react at all.”

Marika responded while listening to Coorie’s whining. “I have confirmed the rewrite to Lunar Lion. See you after your arrival at the Barbaroosa, Jackie Fahrenheit.”

“*Hey, I'm looking forward to seeing you again after a long time.*”

Marika took a deep breath after making sure that voices from her side were not accidentally transmitted on the communication channel.

“Is it possible to check the Lunar Lion's current location against its self-reported location information?”

“I've been working on it for a while now.” Schnitzer replied.

“We are still getting the same level of noise as we have in other airspace. If we can identify the characteristics and habits of the noise, we may be able to use it the next time, but if he is active stealthy, he can easily change that level of detail. We might be able to flush him out if we use fire control radar directly into limited airspace, but we promised not to do that.”

“He said we could do anything we wanted as long as it was passive, but if we did anything else, the rebels would notice.”

Marika, who was at the electronic warfare seat with Coorie, flew toward the captain's seat.

“I can't help but think of doing something even more suspicious to make the rebels more nervous, which puts pressure on Jackie as well.”

Taking another breath, Marika shook her head.

“Regardless of the rebels, does that pompous idiot feel any pressure?”

“*Barbaroosa to Bentenmaru, a word, Captain Marika?*”

Marika involuntarily straightened her back at the sight of Captain Blackbeard appearing on the communication monitor.

“Captain Kenjo!　This is Marika of the Bentenmaru.”

“*Negotiations with Captain Jackie of the Lunar Lion were very good!*” Captain Blackbeard, who may or may not be aware that the same line is open to Lunar Lions, said with an amused grin.

“I'm sorry, but it seems like I've forced a problem on you.”

“*Our job is just a series of troubles, don't worry about it. So, when the Lunar Lion lands, will only our crew greet her? Or will someone from the Bentenmaru be present?*”

Marika quickly looked around the bridge. Marika is the only person on the Bentenmaru who has direct acquaintance with Jackie. We also need an electronic warfare expert.

“Coorie, will you come with me?”

“I was thinking of asking you to let me come.” Coorie answered while facing the electronic battle station. “There are so many things I have to ask.”

“Is there anyone else we should bring?”

“Misa” Coorie began to pack up the various snacks and drinks she had spread around her.

“Misa?” Marika asked back. “Isn't there a doctor on board the Barbaroosa as well?”

“You want to hear to a lot of things, right?” Coorie stood up from her electronic warfare seat. “If we take Misa with us, I'm sure she'll bring me medicine to make him more docile, medicine to stop him from lying, etc.”

“Is that so?” Marika called the medical bay. She tells Misa to accompany her to the Barbaroosa.

“Is it okay for the captain to leave the ship?” Marika asked everyone on the bridge for confirmation. Schnitzer answered.

“With the current situation, even if the rebels were to make a surprise attack, there would be enough time for the captain and Coorie to return. If they can't come back, we can still fight.” Schnitzer only turned his head toward the captain's seat.

“However, if the main force of the rebel army is equipped with stealth capabilities like the current Luna Lion, there is a possibility that we could be approached by the enemy unnoticed and hit from an unexpected direction.”

Marika's shoulders trembled. “If our opponent was full of such magicians, I think they would be able to complete the task easily without all this trouble.”

Marika muttered something to calm her nerves and turned to the communication monitor.

“Myself, Coorie, and Misa will be there to attend. Is that okay?”

“*Of course. If I leave the ship's deck door open even though nothing is coming in, the rebels might become suspicious. If you want to come, you are more than welcome.*”

The Barbaroosa is a pirate ship modeled after an old battlecruiser built for frontier patrol. The ship was built sturdily to be able to carry out long-term operations in remote areas where sufficient maintenance facilities, such as those in the core, could not be expected. The ship's internal environment was well-designed, and even now, more than a century after its construction, advanced versions of the same series are still being built.

Since the Barbaroosa was expected to function as a mothership during long-term operations, it was equipped with multiple decks that were quite large for a battleship. The storage deck, which was used as food storage and spare parts storage during long-term operations, is now used as the ship's dock.

The Barbaroosa's rear storage deck is located further behind the aft main turret, which has not been used much since becoming a pirate ship. Although the approach course is not elevated, it will pass at close range on the axis of the rear quadruple turret.

Marika, who approached the Barbaroosa in Bentenmaru's small shuttle craft, exclaimed when she saw the internal structure of the open rear deck. “Okay…”

The shipboard deck, illuminated by bright shipboard lighting, with the movable landing deck arranged in three dimensions, there still seemed to be room to bring the Bentenmaru and Odette II onboard without much difficulty.

“And it comes with an air shield? As expected of a great pirate...”

Air shields, which can maintain pressurization inside a ship even when the airtight bulkheads are left open, and which do not impede the passage of spacecraft more than air resistance, are a not-so-uncommon technology that is often used on space stations and the like these days. However, old battleships like the Barbaroosa are rarely equipped with them.

“The Barbaroosa is so big that some jobs involve stowing away or kidnapping entire small spaceships.” Coorie said, who was sitting comfortably in the parallel pilot seat.

“During such work, it would be very impressive to be able to bring you directly into the ship's deck with an air shield.”

“I see. If you want to do business with rich people, you need to have the necessary equipment.”

Marika thought for a moment about the Bentenmaru's operations and the cost-effectiveness of adding luxury equipment such as Air Shield. “With a slender hull like ours, it's probably a waste of equipment.”

Marika, who was holding the control stick in the captain's seat of the ferry, entrusted the aircraft to the guidance system on the Barbaroosa's aft storage deck and slowly approached. She descends in front of four large-caliber beam cannons lined up at close range and enters the storage deck.

Perhaps because it decelerated enough, there was almost no shock when passing through the air shield from the vacuum of space to the containment deck filled with pressurized atmosphere.

A slender crewman, wearing no space suit and holding a shiny, color-coordinated paddle in each hand, waves at a corner of the flashing landing deck.

“Oh, it's Chiaki.” Marika landed the shuttle craft exactly in the middle of the guided landing deck, using the landing gear that had been left out since leaving the Bentenmaru. As soon as the ship lands, the same gravity as on the planet's surface returns to the inside of the ship.

In response to the familiar “stop” gesture of slicing the controller's neck, Marika canceled the protection mode and raised her hand through the now transparent windshield, and cut off all power.

Leaving the aircraft to be secured by the deck crew, Marika unbuckles her seatbelt and stands up from the captain's seat. She walks through the cargo hold, where the seat behind the captain's seat is folded down, opens the rear hatch, and jumps down to the Barbaroosa's deck, where artificial gravity is working.

“Welcome” Chiaki, who was wearing work clothes with a folded guiding paddle inserted into her waist belt, greeted Marika who was wearing a captain's uniform. Marika saluted Chiaki.

“Bentenmaru’s Katou Marika, Coorie, and Misa. Requesting permission to board the ship.”

“Permission granted to come aboard.” Before Chiaki could say anything, Captain Blackbeard's deep voice echoed on the ship's deck.

“Captain Kenjo.” Marika bowed to the big man, who was dressed even more roughly in his age-old captain's uniform.

“Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Welcome to the Barbaroosa, Captain Marika.” Captain Kenjou bowed deeply, like a knight to a princess. “Today is a great day to be able to welcome a daughter pirate who is active on the Bentenmaru to this ship.”

“Oh, thank you very much for that.” Marika, in her captain's uniform, saluted Kenjo.

A group of cartoon characters

Description automatically generated

“Bentenmaru’s Captain Katou Marika and two others, please come aboard.”

“Oh, Marika looks like a proper captain.”

“President!” Marika shouted out as Lynn appeared from behind Captain Blackbeard, wearing her school uniform. “You left the Odette II!?”

“We can't just have the captain come.” Lynn nodded. “Since we know the redhead directly, Gruier and I decided to attend.”

“Good day, Marika!” Gruier, also in uniform, came running from behind Captain Blackbeard.

“Ah, I'm glad, you seem to be doing well. Isn't it difficult having Ririka as the captain?”

“I am grateful to have such a good captain.” Gruier, with a calm face, gives a bland answer as usual.

“It must be difficult for you to oversee all of the Odette II by yourself, and I think you're probably overworked.”

“It looks like Gruier is worried about her, so I wonder if Ririka is still worried about her. Even so...”

Even though work clothes are normal the Odette II, Marika voice trailed off when she saw Lynn and Gruier on the storage deck of the pirate ship, wearing school uniforms.

“Why are you wearing uniforms?”

“Gruier’s opinion is that its fine if it's your own place, but if you're going to visit another ship officially, it's rude to wear work clothes, so we should wear formal clothes.” Lynn poked Gruier, who had a gentle smile on her face.

“Oh, because our formal wear is uniforms.” Gruier looked around at Marika in her captain's uniform. “If I had the chance, I would like to have a formal uniform like Marika's.”

“I told you to stop.” Marika secretly sighed.

“Just don't say you're going to do cosplay like when you were a pirate.”

“Besides, uniforms are well received by the gentlemen.” Gruier spun around. “There's no better outfit than this to catch your negotiators off guard and make them relax.”

“But it's so nice to see a pirate girl in formal attire.”

Captain Blackbeard, who had been watching Marika and the others from some distance away, wiped his eyes with a bandana as if overcome with emotion. “If only my Chiaki had this level of fashion, my shabby ship would be a little more colorful.”

“So what do you expect from your daughter?” Chiaki glared at Captain Kenjou with murderous eyes.

“No, that's why I think it's a good idea for you to dress a little nicer when welcoming guests.”

“A pirate's job is not something you can do in a school uniform!” After giving her father a once-over, Chiaki, dressed in her work clothes with her arms and legs rolled up, looked up. “Here he comes.”

Not only Marika and Lynn, but everyone on the storage deck looked up at the universe beyond the air shield of the open deck door. The light from the red giant star that serves as its home star is much weaker than that of G-type stars, which have many habitable planets, but it is still able to illuminate an approaching spacecraft with a dull red glow.

“Do you see it?” Marika asked Chiaki, who was holding military electronic binoculars full of bulky additional equipment to her eyes. Shifting them to the infrared range, she could barely make out the outline of the Garnet A side.

Chiaki took the eyepiece away from her eyes and handed the binoculars to Marika. Marika looked through the electronic binoculars, which projected an electronically processed image superimposed on the actual scene.

The spaceship that was supposed to be approaching for landing was unexpectedly close.

“It’s not that close.” Marika swung the field of view of the binoculars a little. “If they were that close, we should have been able to see it before we landed.”

Marika removed the binoculars from her eyes. When she looked up into space with her naked eyes, she couldn't see a small spaceship, only a vague red outline illuminated by a red giant star.

“Let me borrow them.” Marika handed Lynn the binoculars. Lynn held the stabilizer-equipped binoculars to her eyes with her left hand, and began adjusting various dials with her right hand.

“What kind of spacecraft can use not only electronic camouflage but also optical camouflage at such close range?”

“It's not just the narrow range of visible light that we humans see, but also the ultraviolet to infrared range, as well as electromagnetic waves.”

Captain Blackbeard compares the console at hand with the one just outside the storage deck. “If you can't even see it when it's right in front of you, it's going to take a lot to find it and bring it down in a real fight.”

“Ah......” Gruier let out a small voice. “I can see it.”

Looking up from the brightly lit shipboard deck, a corner of the starry sky, which to the naked eye was just a few twinkling stars in black space, suddenly blinked with a rainbow noise-like seven-colored light. Reddish-black shadows flashed and formed round shapes, as if the transparent glass was reflecting some landscape as a display.

“...... Is that the Lunar Lion?”

Marika remembered the image of the Lunar Lion seen on the surveillance camera image of the docking port of the Sea of the Morningstar Relay Station. It appears with an ungainly tropical fish-like hull painted in the same unrelated rich colors as her owner, with oversized antennae folded on either side.

“Oh my!” I heard Captain Blackbeard's growl. “It's thick, it's short, it's unbalanced, and if you met it without stealth or anything you wouldn't think it was a strong enemy. A formidable opponent.”

Lynn took the binoculars away from her eyes and looked up at the descending Luna Lion with her naked eyes. Even if the antennas, which have been shortened in several stages and folded together on both sides of the thick fuselage, it still looks too large.

“It’s just one ship, but it is a formidable enemy that can easily sneak through our net, which even includes Silent Whisper.”

The Lunar Lion, with its navigation lights blinking in various parts of the fuselage, which seemed to be in compliance only with the location of their installation, passed through the air shield and entered the Barbaroosa's deck. The Lunar Lion deployed its landing gear under its short, thick body with a noisy mechanical noise that sounded like a combination of antigravity engines and fan-driven precision-controlled propulsion, sometimes mixed with a dull explosion sound.

“He's equipped with strange landing gear.” Kenjou muttered as he noticed that it had simply deployed a number of thin manipulator-like landing legs that had been folded into the bottom of the ship. “Are they thinking of using it to attach itself to other spaceships? But what a noisy flying spaceship!”

Absorbing the shock of landing with a dozen radially spread landing legs, the Lunar Lion descended onto the space that had been flashing to indicate the landing site. The mechanical noise, which had been making irregular sounds as if it might break at any moment, stopped and subsided. The tips of the antennas, folded in bundles on either side of the ship drooped, obeying artificial gravity.

“Energy reactions have almost stopped.” Lynn reported as she took the electronic binoculars, which had been adjusted to the infrared range, away from her eyes. The spacecraft, which could be classified as small enough to be used as a shuttle craft, or even medium-sized thanks to its bulky antenna when folded, stopped flashing its navigation lights.

A manhole-like part attached to the rounded end opened, and a bowler hat wearing a brightly colored patchwork suit slid down without a ramp.

“There he is!” Marika couldn't help but mutter. Sill looking the same as when he was in the Yacht Club room at Hakuou Girl’s Academy, the tall redhead faced Marika and the others and lifted his bowler hat.

“Hey, everyone, thank you for your help. This is Jackie Fahrenheit from the Lunar Lion.”

He looks around at the deck crews. “Um, do I have permission to board the ship?”

His gaze immediately stopped at Captain Kenjo, who stepped forward without taking his eyes off him.

“Kenjou Kurihara, Captain Barbaroosa. I’d like to ask permission to come aboard.”

Kenjo took a close look at the redhead in his patchwork suit, from the bowler hat to the toes of his pointy shoes. “Normally, permission to board a ship is given to someone who is treated as a guest, but didn’t you unconditional surrender?”

Jackie clapped his hands, as if he had forgotten. “Oh, now that I think about it, that's what the story was about. Well, I'm sorry, but I've never surrendered unconditionally before, so I don't know the formal etiquette, but for now, how about something like this?”

Jackie deliberately raised his hands. “Jackie Fahrenheit surrenders to the pirate fleet along with the Lunar Lion. I have no intention of resisting and certainly have no intention of causing any harm. Well, is there anything else I should say?”

“I see.” Captain Blackbeard waved his hand resignedly. “It seems like he's someone you can't engage unless you're ready for battle.”

“Oh no, I came down unarmed expecting to be searched, but let's take it easy!”

“Considering my position and situation, I can't just relax and say yes.” Captain Blackbeard crosses his arms and stares at Jackie.

“I don't think you are in a situation where you can just drop out of the rebellion and surrender to the pirates and take it easy.”

“Yeah, well, that's what I mean.”

With an innocent look on his face, Jackie looked around the Barbaroosa's deck. There were no openly deployed guards in sight, but he couldn't tell how many weapons were aimed at him, or even how many people were watching him.

“Let's ask about your business first.” Kenjo said, crossing his arms.

“You didn't take a dangerous path and use a secret invisibility cloak to get here without wanting to do anything, did you?”

“What?　You're going to go there all of a sudden?” Jackie asked again, looking a little disappointed. “I thought it would be more exciting if I talked about more about the truth I was going to reveal, but as expected of a pirate, you talk so quickly.”

Jackie glanced back at his spaceship, the Lunar Lion. “I thought I was going to be asked a lot of questions about my stealth, and how I used my secret optical camouflage.”

“We'll talk about that later. Let's talk about his purpose for surrendering here first.” Captain Blackbeard showed his fang-like teeth.

“What did you want us to do by coming here?”

“I've been thinking of the most important thing to ask, and now you're suddenly asking me about it?” Jackie shrugged disappointedly. “I was planning to make it the topic of a dinner party, if possible.”

“I'll treat you to a full course meal, depending on how the conversation goes.” Captain Blackbeard doesn't take his eyes off Jackie. “My cook's specialty dishes are difficult to prepare.”

“He has a hard job.” Jackie raised his hands again.

“Okay. Let's talk about this first. Don't be surprised, I want to take Stellar Slayer.”

A strange silence reigned on the ship's deck. Captain Kenjo opened his mouth.

“Stellar Slayer, you want to steal the supernova bomb for the rebels?”

“Ah, it's a little different.” Jackie waved his hand. “We leaked information with that intention, so it's no wonder you think the Stellar Slayer is a supernova bomb, but it's not really a supernova bomb.”

Marika and the others are watching Jackie closely from a short distance away. Captain Kenjo looked at the spaceship behind Jackie and turned his attention back to Jackie.

“During the Revolutionary War, the Stellar Alliance tried to turn a red giant star here into a supernova. Luckily, that plan didn't work and fell through, but aren't you guys trying to do it again?”

“Unless we are in a desperate situation where all the positions and interests we have built up so far are blown away, we can't really use a troublesome annihilation weapon like a supernova bomb.”

With a look as if he were kidding on his face, Jackie looked around not only at Marika and Kenjo, but also at the crew members stationed throughout the ship's deck.

“I know that neither Captain Kenjo nor Captain Marika are amateurs in this matter, so I will skip the history lesson, but even the Stellar Alliance did not start out with the intention of developing a supernova bomb, a difficult-to-use annihilation weapon. What was being developed in the experimental arsenal on Garnet A was not a mechanism that would turn the home star into a supernova, but a supply facility that would deliver energy extracted from the star to any desired location. Did you know that?”

When asked, Marika and the others looked at Captain Kenjo. Kenjo turned back to face Jackie.

“Apparently the original plan was to extract energy from a red giant star and send it via hyperspace to a distant relay station or storage base. In the future, they were thinking of sending the energy directly to spacecraft that had no way to resupply.”

“If you knew that much, the story would be quick. Therefore, the fact that the Stellar Alliance tried to turn the host star into a supernova using this star's experimental equipment was actually a use that was far removed from its original purpose, and was not what it was originally intended for. In reality, they were just trying to make effective use of a star that continues to emit a huge amount of energy even though it is at the end of its lifespan in the dark and cold interstellar space, but that in itself is not some devious research that would be banned by the Empire.”

Jackie cleared his throat and continued.

“The Stellar Slayer was originally supposed to deliver the extracted energy to the receiver via hyperspace. In the future, there was also a plan to use it to supply energy to a distant spaceship. Let's consider, for a moment, the case of forcibly sending stellar energy to a destination that is not equipped to receive it.”

Jackie slowly looked around at Marika and her friends, trying to read each person's expressions.

“The energy sent via hyperspace is not as focused or narrowed as that used in anti-ship combat, but it is still a powerful beam of energy. If you don't care about the convenience of the person receiving it, then…”

Jackie looked at the girls. “What do you think will happen if you send it to Shin Okuhama City?”

Marika glared back at Jackie, imagining a powerful energy beam raining down on the unarmored city of Shin Okuhama. Chiaki cried out. “That's impossible!”

“Comments are welcome. Go on, why do you think it's impossible?”

“Don't you know why you can't jump from near a star! Because strong gravity twists space, making the jump inaccurate. Even the slightest deviation in distance or angle at the point of departure would result in an error accumulated in light-years, to the point where it would be impractical to make the jump. Therefore, a superluminal jump can only be made at a sufficient distance from the source of gravity. It's not like you don't know that!”

“That's right. So?” Jackie urged her forward as if he knew all about Chiaki's logical development. Chiaki continued.

“Therefore, it is impossible to precisely aim an energy beam at a place like the surface of a planet, there is no way you can do it!”

“You are correct up to that point. Then how about designating a place far away from Sea of the Morningstar, where Shin Okuhama City is located, yes, even several hours away at light speed, as the place to send the energy beam?”

Chiaki's eyes widened.

“At such a distance, the jump will be less affected by Sea of the Morningstar and will be quite accurate. The position of the outer planet may affect it a little, but that is something that can be worked out with a little fine tuning.”

“After all, it's impossible to accurately target a single point on a planet billions of kilometers away.”

“You are certainly right. At first, it will be difficult to send out energy beams precisely aimed at urban areas. However, the target point is on the surface of Sea of the Morningstar, which has been in the same orbit for a long time. No matter how much we adjust our sights, there is no danger of it escaping.”

“That’s…”

“You're only making those faces because the target is the Sea of the Morningstar, but what if it were a big space city in the center, or the Joint Chiefs of Staff Headquarters of the Imperial Fleet?” Jackie looked around the ship's deck.

“It could be anywhere, such as the Imperial Planet where the Holy Royal family resides, or the fleet base. Battleships and cruisers will be able to withstand a direct hit from a large but unfocused energy beam, but ground facilities and port facilities that are not heavily armored will be easily blown away. That's still enough to render the fleet useless. And what does this mean for future plans include direct refueling of individual spacecraft?”

“Are you saying that if you aim accurately, you can target spaceships individually, even if they are not fixed targets with fixed positions like space cities or planets?”

“Thank you for being so quick to the point.” Jackie gave Captain Kenjo a big nod.

“In other words, this is the true identity of the Stellar Slayer that the rebels are trying to revive, and the reason why I have asked you all to come all the way here.”

Captain Kenjo looked at Marika and the others with a doubtful expression on his face.

“Is it my turn?” Misa, wearing a white coat, held up a black doctor's bag.

“Would you like me to give you an injection to see if you're telling the truth?”

“Eh, a truth serum?” Jackie waved his hands at Misa in amusement. “That's not a smart way to do things. Besides, I swear to you, I'm not lying about what I've said so far.”

“It's a far-fetched story, though.” Gruier, too, stares at Jackie.

“And although I feel like there are some intentional omissions here and there, at least up to this point, he is telling the story as if it were the truth.”

“I've heard that the trick to a scammer's job is to believe what they're saying.” Kenjo turned his attention back to Jackie.

“I see, an energy beam that jumps through hyperspace. Moreover, the energy beam is limited by the current specifications, and it can probably be changed to any number of powerful beams depending on the output of the home star, changes to the equipment, and adjustments.”

“If an entire star is used as an energy source, there would be no limit to the amount of energy that can be supplied, as is the case with battleships. If a single star is not enough energy source, it is possible to build multiple similar facilities and shoot at a single location at the same time. The Stellar Slayer would not be cutting through its own star as an energy source, but rather the target it is aiming at. It's an utterly devastating weapon.”

Kenjo and Jackie looked at each other head on and laughed.

“I see. If it is as you say, it's a very nasty weapon. But that doesn't mean there haven't been weapons like that in the past.” Kenjo continued, his mouth curling.

“Even FTL missiles equipped with FTL engines can approach targets far away and blow them up unnoticed. No, you don't have to go out of your way to find a FTL missiles, you can just buy a suitable transport ship, load it with as many bombs as you like, and fly it to your destination using unmanned control.”

“As you say. Can you please explain to me why FTL missiles are not a common strategic weapon today, and why there are no wars going on with transport ships full of bombs destroying each other's planets?

Kenjo glanced at the girls.

“That's not to say that interstellar FTL missiles don't exist. But a missile that takes the trouble of jumping and then flying straight at the target would be an easy target for interceptors. Any planet that has a minimal military, whether it be the Star Defense Force or the Planetary Guard, is well-prepared to detect and intercept interstellar missiles.”

“What if we were dealing with a star that wasn't even that well-prepared?”

“Then it becomes a problem for the side that uses strategic weapons to destroy an entire planet against such an opponent. I t's probably a political issue between the parties involved, so it's not something we pirates know about.”

“How about a transport ship full of bombs?”

Captain Blackbeard continues to lecture sullenly to Jackie, who seems to be enjoying himself.

“If it's a lawless area that's at war and beyond anyone's control, it's out of our pirates' power. And since explosives are treated as dangerous goods, both within the Empire's territory and on the frontier, they must be handled under strict control. As a practical matter, it would be difficult to accumulate enough bombs to fill a single transport ship unless you were a military or one of its suppliers.”

“Well, for reasons like that, interstellar strategic weapons are actually surprisingly difficult to use.”

Jackie turned his attention back to Marika and the others.

“Well, there are a lot of shortcuts and loopholes in the world, so you can do anything depending on your budget and method, but most of the time, people who are motivated don't have enough budget, and people who do have a budget are usually short on brains. Thanks to this, the galaxy is running smoothly without having to face definitive destruction, but then a strategic weapon called Stellar Slayer appears that violates the rules.”

Jackie snapped his fingers and pointed diagonally. Marika noticed that he was not pointing at his spaceship, but at Garnet A.

“If it is just a weapon that threatens to turn a star into a supernova, it is more of a political issue, and I am not too keen on getting involved. But a strategic weapon that can be easily used like this is a different story.”

Jackie shaped his right hand into a pistol.

“As you say, there have been many weapons and tactics to penetrate deep into enemy territory and strike a blow. However, they all require a certain amount of effort, in other words, they are all systems with many safeties that can be stopped in mid-stride. But not so with this one. With a single, on-the-spot decision, it can fire a beam of energy directly at any destination, no matter how far away.”

He pretends to fire a live bullet with recoil while saying "Bang."

“This system is too convenient, or rather, it's too easy. This system makes it too easy for one side to do whatever it wants.”

Jackie brought her index finger to her mouth and blew. “After all, the bomb and the means of delivery are one. Whether it is an interstellar missile or a suicide attack by a transport ship full of bombs, there are plenty of opportunities to abort or stop it between planning and execution, launch and hit. However, once this facility is completed, it can fire an energy beam with unlimited range anywhere at the operator’s discretion.”

Jackie looked around at the containment deck where his ship and the Bentenmaru's ferry, as well as several other shipboard aircraft, were stowed away against the wall out of the way.

“Until now, many such dangerous weapons have been developed, tested, and put into practical use. Most, if not all, are well managed. Of course, any person intelligent enough to maintain and operate an interstellar nation would, given time, construct such a reliable, fail-safe system with bureaucratic precision. But I'm not sure the rebels can wait that long.”

“Can we trust the Imperial Army?” Kenjo said in a derisive tone.

“The Imperial Army has more leeway. With more leeway they won't suddenly unleash the ultimate weapon. However, the rebel army is not monolithic. If the government of a remote star district that is under attack by an invading company and is on the brink of collapse at any moment had a strategic weapon that could be easily used without any need for support, it is easy to imagine that they would use it at the risk of self-destruction.”

Jackie put his index finger up to his mouth as if he was talking privately.

“And to be honest, it's not the buyers we want right now. It's time to make it known that this kind of weaponry exists. If we leave it as it is now, the rebels are going to unleash the Stellar Slayer without a second thought, and it's too dangerous to just watch.”

“Why?” Captain Blackbeard scowled at Jackie in a low voice.

“Why did you desert now that the rebels are at full force?　You don't mean to tell me you didn't know what the Stellar Slayer was until just now?”

“Well, I had heard the general details, but it was only recently that I got the whole story.”

After scratching her head in embarrassment, Jackie lowered his voice.

“In fact, the latest reality of the Rebel Army is that they are proceeding with analysis of how to use the Stellar Slayer in its original form, making preparations and readying equipment to make it a reality. Actually, it's only been in the last couple of days that they had any hope of being able to use it properly.”

“That's not what I'm talking about.” Kenjo growled.

“I guess that sponsor is the rebel army. I'm sure they're paid enough for you to cross a dangerous bridge, but you’ve been so active, sneaking into girls' schools and trying to steal practice sailboats, why are you running to me now? I'm asking you to tell me the real story.”

“I see.” Jackie raised his hand as if he understood. “You want me to tell you my true feelings now. I was thinking of doing that while having a leisurely drink after dinner, but I guess it's fine. This is my true opinion, I have no intention of hiding it, so I'll let you hear it.”

Jackie spread his arms. ”However, it's just like I said at the beginning. I want to steal the Stellar Slayer from the rebel army.”

Captain Blackbeard looked around at Marika and the others, then returned his eyes to Jackie. “How did you come up with that idea?　How can you maintain trust with your sponsors if you change your position so easily?”

“You don't have to worry about my business.” Jackie waved his spotless white-gloved hand. “As you can see, I have a lot of tricks up my sleeve. It's not a business where you can make a name for yourself, and besides, there are more important things in this world than work.”

“Oh?”

“The Stellar Slayer is, as I have just explained, a very simple and easy strategic weapon that is very destructive. If it were to fall unilaterally into the hands of the rebels, it would upset the balance of power in this otherwise peaceful galaxy.”

Jackie closed one eye. “Well, I don't think the current galactic situation of Empire vs. Rebellion is ideal or well balanced, but would you agree that at least the Empire trying to control the entire galaxy and the Rebellion resisting it are working reasonably well together?”

“Whether you agree with it or not, it's a big deal, isn't it?”

Captain Blackbeard grinned. “What happened to the balance of the galaxy?”

“To do this kind of work, you have to have a broad perspective and pay attention to various things.” Jackie nodded with a reasonable look on her face. “Can I continue talking?”

“I’ll listen to what you have to say.”

“The Empire is far superior in terms of overall power, but so far, thanks to its successful internal politics, the Empire's expansionist policies have not been as aggressive. The rebels are not a monolithic force, and although they are considerably inferior in terms of overall strength, they are able to maintain a reasonable front because the Empire has not adopted a policy of using all of its strength to pacify the frontier.”

Jackie looked around at Captain Blackbeard and the girls. “However, if a simple strategic weapon like the Stellar Slayer were to be brought to only one side, either the Empire or the Rebellion, it would upset the current balance of power.”

Jackie gave the girls a refreshing smile. “In other words, it can be sold at a high price.”

Marika blinked involuntarily, sending a shiver down her spine. Captain Blackbeard glared at the top of his brightly colored patchwork suit. “In other words, that is more important than trust?”

“No, of course profit is important. But if that means that the balance of the galaxy will be maintained and the universe will continue to be a peaceful place where we can do business safely, then I think this is a job worth crossing a dangerous bridge for, don’t you?”

“I can't help but think that your noble motives sound like mere talk, but let's leave that aside for now.”

Kenjo looked at Jackie's ship, which would be a rare sight even in the frontier, let alone in the Empire's territory, and returned his eyes to the bowler hat. “I understand that you don't belong to either the Rebel Army or the Empire. But you're forgetting something important. We're from the Galactic Empire, with official privateer licenses, right?”

“But you're pirates.” Jackie looked back at Kenjo. “Pirates, being neither part of the Empire nor the Rebellion, are not bound by position and can make their own decisions. Don't you agree?”

“That was expected. Do you want me to betray the empire?”

“Betrayal is outrageous.” Jackie spread his hands in a grand gesture. “I'm just saying let's think of a better way to use it.” He looks around at everyone with a smile.

“If you were part of the Star Force or some similar organization, I wouldn't even have thought of bringing this up to you. But you're pirates. You’ll listen to me, and more than that, you are in a position and smart enough to judge things for yourselves. That's all I have to say. I don't have much time, so how soon can you give me an answer?”

“There are still questions I need to ask you, redhead.” Captain Blackbeard glared at Jackie. “If everything goes well and you successfully get the Stellar Slayer, then what are you going to do?”

“That’s…” Arms crossed, Jackie paused to think with one hand on his cheek. “I will fairly publicize the contents of the property to the Empire and the Rebels, and sell it to the highest bidder.”

“You son of a bitch!”

“After all, it is a powerful sword that can cut through the stars. I think you can sell it for a higher price than selling the stars. That's right, both sides need time to carefully consider what kind of weapon this is, what effect it will have on their mutual power relations, and what is needed to manage it.”

“You’re shameless!”

“Then, once you have successfully found a buyer, sell it for as much as you can. Oh yeah, and don't forget to make it useless before they realize they've been cheated.”

Jackie pulled out a small memory card from the fingertips of his white gloves. “This is a souvenir. I know it's a bit of a joke, but I brought some technical data on the Stellar Slayer. I hope you'll take the time to analyze it and use it as reference material, whether or not you trust what I've just told you.”

“That's a big deal.” Kenjo, standing in front of Jackie, put out his hand.

“Yeah. If you're dealing with an army that's bound by a complicated chain of command, position, and circumstances, you don't want to disclose information that would be too obvious from the start.” Jackie placed the memory card in Captain Kenjo's large hand.

“Since I’m dealing with pirates, I've decided to skip the complicated games.”

“Thank you for letting me analyze it.”

“That's all there is to talk about.” Jackie spread his hands wide.

“The rebels took it upon themselves to eliminate the negotiation channel with this pirate named Jackie. I don't know whether they will forcefully use their far superior military strength, or whether they will set up another channel and try to negotiate with you pirates again, but either way, I don't think they will take it easy. I would like to hear your conclusions as soon as possible.”

“We haven't heard the bottom line yet.” Kenjo looked at Marika. Marika suddenly realized, looked at Gruier and Lynn's faces, and then stepped forward.

“What is it?” Jackie, chest out, hands on hips, awaited Marika's question.

“You……” The pieces came together in Marika's head. “……In other words, the Odette II is needed to fully operate the Stellar Slayer, right?”

Jackie looked back at Marika and whistled. “Oh, did you suddenly arrive at that? That's correct. There's no need to hide it now, so I'll tell you. The Stellar Slayer is a firing system that sends energy beams through hyperspace. Accurate aiming requires precise coordinates and spatial data of the target, as well as a launcher to accurately collate the energy beam and send it to the target.”

Jackie looked around at Gruier’s and Lynn’s faces, who were standing with Marika.

“What is required of a launcher is to accumulate energy to a high density and release it in a precisely aimed direction. For this purpose, a monocrystalline plasma crystal is required. The best choice would be a monocrystalline part made to match Garnet A's Stellar Slayer.”

Jackie laughed at Marika, whose eyes widened, and at Lynn, whose mouth hung open.

“Yes, I'm sure there's a part of your sailing vessel that rings a bell. The Swan’s, excuse me, the Odette II’s monocrystalline mast used in the bow split.”

Jackie was taken to the medical bay by Misa and the Barbaroosa's medical staff for continued questioning and physical examination. On the hangar deck, Coorie and mechanics are beginning their investigation of the Lunar Lion while talking to Jackie via shipboard communications.

Captain Blackbeard invited Marika, Gruier and Lynn, along with Chiaki, to the Barbaroosa's guest room.

“Wow!” Marika and Lynn shouted together as they were invited into the guest room, which was illuminated by a vintage chandelier and lined with a number of pure white, one-piece cloth tablecloths.

“Amazing, it looks like a hotel!”

“After all, it was originally a battleship for frontier duty.”

Captain Kenjo, dressed in his captain's uniform, led the way into a high-ceilinged hall decorated with authentic, aged wood panels and classic hand-painted paintings that would look like they belonged in a museum.

“Battleships at that time were not only tools of gunboat diplomacy, but also a stage for negotiations. Whether friend or foe, it was necessary to set up a proper place for those with whom tradition and prestige were at stake.”

Kenjo slowly walked over to a large round table with a small island-like candle stand in the center. “Usually we use it as a dining room, but a space like this can hold dinner parties for distinguished guests or small dance parties. Well, it takes a lot of time and effort to clean and maintain, but that is part of the necessary expenses.”

Kenjo put his hand on one of the chairs, which were precisely evenly spaced. “Please, take a seat.”

Kenjo pulled out a richly decorated chair whose backrest was higher than his head and sat down. Chiaki sat next to Captain Kenjo.

“It's a strange combination, isn't it?” Gruier took a seat. Kenjo nodded with a grin.

“Certainly. It's not every day that I arrive at a table with so many beautiful women, or that the average age is so low.”

“Father!” Chiaki kicked her father under the table. Kenjo then looked around at Marika and Rin who were sitting at the table.

“Captain Marika of the Bentenmaru, the princess from the Odette II, and the current yacht club manager? Is it okay to think of you as Captain Ririka’s representative?”

At Kenjo's question, Gruier and Lynn looked at each other. Lynn turned to Captain Blackbeard. “Captain Ririka told me to go and see for myself and make my own decision. She said that if she came to the Barbaroosa, it probably wouldn't turn out so differently.”

“I understand. In other words, we have to decide on the future course of this fleet.” Captain Blackbeard looked around at the faces surrounding the table once again. “So, what do you think about that redhead?”

“It’s a trap, right?” “I think it’s a trap.” “It’s definitely a trap.” Chiaki, Gruier, and Lynn spoke in unison.

“No, of course I know that.” Kenjo, who was half-seated, rested his elbows on the table and rested his chin on it.

“Even if the redhead was drugged or otherwise put in a situation where he could not lie, or even if he was telling the truth, it would of course be a trap. A nanomachine in his body would make it possible for him to cheat on his confession, and even if he had no intention of doing so, the situation itself could be a trap. The information brought by the redhead is very interesting, but I don't think it is enough to change our basic policy. The first question is how to take advantage of this situation, or not.”

“Even if it's a trap, I think there's no reason not to take advantage of the situation.” Marika chose her words carefully.

“I don't know if this trap was created by all the enemies colluding or if that redhead came up with it alone, but it's a mistake that he came here with information we didn't know. Thanks to this, we were able to obtain new information about the Stellar Slayer.”

“I don't know how much I trust him, though.” Lynn crossed her arms as she leaned against the backrest, which was much higher than she was.

“I don't know how much I can trust that a critical component used for the Stellar Slayer sighting was exposed on our ship and left unattended for more than 100 years since the Revolutionary War.”

“After the final battle, when they went to the surrendered enemy's station to make emergency repairs to their broken ship, they apparently did something pretty reckless with makeshift parts.” Kenjo remembered Nora’s story, who was still on patrol with Hyakume in the Silent Whisper.

“Our spaceship was originally a battleship, so it didn't seem to take much damage even though it was on the front lines, but the Bentenmaru and the command ship, the White Swan, were both quite badly damaged. In addition, the Imperial Army had ordered the destruction of the control station that the Stellar Alliance had built in this area for the Stellar Slayer. Even if all the surviving ships were gathered together, they were under capacity to carry all the enemy and allies out, and the pirate ships that returned looked like refugee ships!”

“Is that why the docking records are sometimes missing...” Lynn, who had studied the records of the Odette II before it became a training sailboat for the Hakuoh Academy, sounded impressed.

“When they gathered up the station's stockpiled parts and made appropriate repairs, did they even use core parts of the Stellar Slayer?”

“Well, there's no way they have accurate repair records.”

“Since it was too dangerous, they may have purposely stolen the key components to use them for emergency repairs.” Marika said, thinking with a difficult look on her face.

“Because monomolecular crystal parts wouldn’t melt away even if the entire station were sunk into a red giant star, right?”

“That's right.” Kenjo nodded.

“The only way to destroy a monomolecular component is to bombard it with exactly the same mass of antimatter. After all, the fact that the whole thing is made of just one molecule is something out of the ordinary, so it's hard to make it, but it's even harder to destroy it.”

“…So, since the spaceship uses such important parts, it was entrusted to the school under the guise of a training sailing ship rather than a commemorative ship.” Marika looked up at Captain Blackbeard.

“I think they didn't build a special wharf to store it because it was one of the Original Seven pirate ships that served in the Revolutionary War, but they kept it because it was such a space ship.”

“I don't know what our ancestors were thinking during the War of Independence.” Captain Blackbeard shook his head, still grinning.

“But as far as I know, I have never heard of such a forbidden strategic weapon as the supernova bomb being researched even in the pre-development stage after the War of Independence in the Tau system or in the Galactic Empire, and in fact, no one approached you until that redhead came messing with your sailing ship, did they?”

Marika nodded. Before she and her colleagues thought of moving the Odette II, it was almost forgotten, tied up to a dedicated wharf at the Sea of the Morningstar relay station.

“I don't know who dug up the old history, but I wonder if they came across some old technical documents of the Stellar Alliance, or if the first generation who fled to the frontier when their ancestors were incorporated into the Galactic Empire died and they sorted out their legacy, though super weapons of ancient civilizations are a topic that comes up from time to time.”

“It's not as old as an ancient civilization.” Chiaki pouted, having learned about the past in history class.

“That's why they were willing to restore it and use it without going through all the trouble of digging up the past. Most monomolecular parts are custom-made, one-off pieces. Even if there are still requirements and blueprints, it is not something that can be easily made, and when it comes to the composition of monomolecular crystals, it requires equipment and labor like making large jewelry. In addition, if the usage of the finished parts is limited, it would be better to use what is already available rather than to rebuild it.”

“According to the technical data the redhead brought with him, each plasma crystal used to extract energy from a star and send it to its target must be specifically designed.”

Gruier looked up from the electric paper display on the table. “It seems that the Stellar Slayer system itself will not have the desired effect unless it is constructed and adjusted according to the star from which the energy is extracted. It is not useful in times of war, where results are required in a short period of time. In this case, it would be much easier to turn it into a supernova.”

“So, even if the enemy's real goal is to commercialize or confirm the Stellar Slayer's interstellar beam attack, we should assume that the option of turning Garnet A into a supernova is still alive if it cannot be accomplished.”

Marika looked at Captain Kenjo with a shocked face, then looked back at Gruier.

“So, the fact that a supernova bomb might be used has not changed the situation, in fact, it has only gotten worse as the enemy has more options.”

“It's not all bad.” Gruier touched the large, spread-out electronic paper display with a thin fingertip and scrolled the screen. “The Stellar Slayer's control stations are distributed at six locations on Garnet A's equator and two locations at its poles. Isn't this the reaction that the Barbaroosa discovered in Garnet A's proximity during the previous battle?”

“.......You saved me the trouble of checking”. Chiaki said, and Kenjo shook his head.

“No, it is possible that the adversary, realizing that the hidden structure has been detected, may have provided fake data for the purpose of deception, or even if the arrangement was correct, they may have disclosed it to make us trust them. How much power does this control station hold?”

Gruier zoomed in on the control station's data for confirmation. “...There is no display regarding military strength.”

“Look at that. How is it possible that a control station for military purposes does not hold a single force for self-defense?”

“What does it say about the observation stations in the airspace around Garnet A?”

“It appears that 256 unmanned aircraft are deployed and networked to precisely observe the airspace around Garnet A!”

Gruier switched pages on the electronic paper display. “The fact that they can appear and disappear at will in this airspace is due in large part to the near-perfect spatial data provided by these unmanned observation aircraft.”

“256…” Marika murmured.

“There were more than 108... Well, if they were placed with the same density throughout the area, it would be about that.”

“In other words, the technical information he brought with him is not perfect, but it is not a lie either. The data is acceptable for a hired agent who is not fully a part of the company, and it can also be concluded that there will be no change in the balance of power even if it is released to the public.” Kenjo summed up the situation.

“Now, with this obvious trap in front of us, let's think about what kind of faces we should make to take the bait in order to achieve the greatest results.”

Silence fell in Barbaroosa's guest room.

Gruier was the first to speak. “If the other party came here as a con artist…” Gruier looked at Marika and Kenjo's faces. "A scammers' job is to exploit the greed of their victims and steal the results. If that's the case, isn't the best way for us to take advantage of scammers is to dangle bigger bait in front of them than they expect to get?”

“...Hey, Captain Marika” Captain Kenjo said, crossing his arms and looking at Gruier. “Is the princess always like this?”

“Not always.” Marika shook her head. “She's a little quiet today.”

“May I ask you something, Captain Kenjo?” With a gentle smile on her face, Gruier looked Captain Blackbeard squarely in the eye.

“What is it?”

“I am currently a member of the yacht club who is aboard the Odette II as a student. If possible, could you please forget about my royal family?”

“Yeah.” Kenjo raised his hands in surrender. “Apparently, it would be better for me. So, forgetting the rudeness to royalty for the moment, what specific bait should we dangle in front of the redhead's eyes to make the swindler greedy?”

“The reason that redhead was targeting the Odette II was because she is a part for the Stellar Slayer. Now, if the word of the con artist is to be believed, his goal has expanded to the Stellar Slayer itself.”

Gruier looked around at everyone at the table.

“After capturing the Stellar Slayer, it is only natural that he would destroy it so that it is no longer usable before selling it to a buyer. In fact, even a forbidden strategic weapon has only value as a commodity to him, and he has no interest in anything else. I think that's all there is to it. Perhaps the only thing we can present to him now that is more valuable than the Odette II is the Stellar Slayer itself, the one he dangled as bait with the intention of deceiving us.”

“So you're just going to take his word for it?”

“No.” Gruier shook her head, still smiling. “Based on the technical information he brought, we will propose a strategy to seize the Stellar Slayer, including its control system. This is consistent with what he wants to do and our goals.”

“...Hey, Captain Marika” With his arms crossed, Kenjo spoke the same line again. “Is Gruier always like this?”

“Yes.” With a wry smile, Marika nodded. “Yeah, well, it's pretty much like this.”

“How about a system-by-system takeover of the Stellar Slayer? If we can do that, both the Star System Army and the Imperial Army will be satisfied. Considering the magnitude of the results to be gained, it is worth considering for the time being.”

Folding his arms again, Captain Blackbeard pondered further.

“I'll have to do some more analysis of the exact strength of the rebel forces in the airspace now, the forces that may be mobilized in the future, and the leeway given to the Imperial fleet that we can call upon, as well as the Stellar Slayer itself.”

Captain Blackbeard looked up at everyone. “Yeah, it's a really interesting strategy to get that con man on board with an even bigger scam. Let's consider that line of thinking some more.”

The tall, lanky redhead, wearing a brightly colored patchwork suit and a bowler hat, appeared in the guest room escorted by Misa and the Barbaroosas’ ground forces, whose uniforms and equipment were in disarray.

“Hoho, here it is.” Jackie exclaimed happily when he saw the colorful array dishes already lined up on the table.

A group of people sitting at a table

Description automatically generated

“It's nice of you to congratulate me in advance.”

“Not yet.” Captain Kenjo, still seated at the round table in the center, raised his hand. “Depending on how the story unfolds, could be my last supper. In a battle, you can't worry about meal times, so on this ship, you eat what you can eat when you can eat it.”

“I see. So what time are you planning to have dinner?”

“Not until we're done talking.”

Kenjo offered Jackie the last seat at the table with Marika, Gruier, and Lynn sitting next to him.

“Putting a feast in front of me and leaving it with me is a good way to start a conversation.”

Jackie sat down, looking around at the food on the tables around him. Misa comes around between Captain Blackbeard and Marika's seats.

“I'll let you know the results of the diagnosis.” Misa said, putting her head between two people who were sitting at very different heights. “Generally healthy, no intoxication, infection or contamination to cause problems. No need to worry about his effects on the ship's environment.”

“I still take care of my health.” Jackie called out to Misa. “Working in space is all about your body, after all.”

“And by the way, quite lively.” Misa glared lightly at Jackie.

“No mechanized organs, no boosted bodily functions. He is covered in scars here and there, but her physical strength and reflexes are quite impressive. If you ever have to fight a white hand-to-hand combat, I suggest you shoot him quickly to shut him up before you even think about testing his raw combat ability.”

“Is he unarmed?” Standing behind Jackie, the captain wearing a black combat uniform, sunglasses, and a headset, raised a heavy-duty beam gun in one hand.

“He was not carrying any weapons, ammunition, knives, or tools.”

“I left my watch and seven tools behind because I knew this would happen.” Jackie, still wearing his white gloves, rolled up the cuffs of his suit.

“There are traces of a weapon, but it has not been installed.”

“What about drugs?”

“They don’t work.” Misa shook her head quietly.

“It's normal to have nanomachines in your body to prevent toxins and pathogens from entering your body, but the blend isn’t normal. What kind of blend did they use to not only react to all 12 normal diseases, but also show antibody reactions to all 84 legal infectious diseases of the empire and 97 frontier diseases?”

“I told you, I'm a big believer in spending money to stay healthy. After all, you never know what will happen in this business.”

“What do you mean?”

“I've tried several kinds of truth serum to test it. At test concentrations, they will be completely broken down in no time and will not be effective. With this blend of nanomachines, it would probably recombine and analyze the patterns even if we put in a unique one. Therefore, it would be more reliable to take out the brain and analyze it for reliable information.”

“Oh.” Jackie's shoulders shuddered, as he had heard the same complaint over and over again during the examination. “I'm scared.”

“If you're the kind of person who keeps nanomachines that elaborate,” Captain Kenjo asked Misa a question in a subdued voice “If you were to open up his skull and take out his brain, wouldn't he go as far as melting his own memory cells to maintain confidentiality?”

“I guess.” Misa just shrugged her shoulders. “But if that's the case, there are plenty of ways to do things like flash-freeze whole brain cells or connect pseudo-neural wires to make people dream.”

Misa looked at Jackie and smiled, then straightened her back. “That's all for the report.”

“Thanks for your hard work.”

“Thank you, Misa.”

Hearing the two captains' words, Misa stepped back. Captain Blackbeard turned to Jackie, who was sitting comfortably across the table.

“Well then, let's start talking about this.”

“I'm looking forward to a positive response.” Jackie lazily laced the fingers of his hands on the table. Looking over at Gruier, Marika opened her mouth.

“Your proposal was to pretend that you had taken over Odette II, sneak into the rebel fleet, and attack the rebel army from inside and outside at the same time.”

“Well, that's it in summary.” Jackie nodded.

“After all, our side has far fewer forces than the rebel fleet. If we want to inflict enough damage to make the rebels give up with the forces we have at our disposal, ordinary anti-ship warfare won't get us anywhere. If we can place even one friendly ship inside the enemy’s territory, it will be much easier to see the war situation and launch electronic warfare.”

“However, the only ship the rebels are interested in is the Odette II, and unfortunately they don't rate either the Bentenmaru or Barbaroosa as anything more than anti-ship combat targets.”

“Now, that's the point. As stated in the technical information I read, the rebels have no interest in pirates, and on the other hand, they cannot move from Garnet A. Incidentally, the rebel army is also suffering from a shortage of manpower, so once the objective has been achieved, even the large fleet that has been assembled will have to go various places under the orders from their original chain of command. If we give them the illusion that we've won, it will make the rest of our job a lot easier.”

“But your proposal would take too much time and effort for a pirate.” Marika continued while carefully observing Jackie's expression.

“And, to be honest, we're not really interested in destroying the Rebel fleet. All we're interested in is the Stellar Slayer, once called the Supernova Bomb. So…” Marika looked at everyone around the table and at the Barbaroosa's ground forces behind Jackie, then returned her eyes to the red-headed bowler hat. “How about taking over Garnet A's control station directly?”

“Oh?” Jackie looked around at everyone at the table with an amused look on his face, and then even Misa's face behind the captains. He asked for confirmation. “Are you serious?”

Marika nodded slowly.

“Well, did you see the materials I brought?”

Marika nodded again.

“So you know that there are six control stations located almost right next to Garnet A, right?”

Marika nodded. Jackie started counting on his fingers.

“As far as I know, you only have three starships, including the unarmed training ship, don't you?　No, I know you've even deployed a state-of-the-art electronic reconnaissance aircraft, but how can you expect a single shipboard aircraft to man a single station?” Jackie clapped his hands. “Ah, I see. Did you receive reinforcements from other sources? Well, there are still many pirate ships like yours operating in this galaxy, or are there other ships jumping in?”

“I'm sorry, but there are no plans for other pirate ships to arrive.” Marika stared at Jackie.

“But we can count your spaceship among our forces, right?” Marika said with a smile on her face. “Also, the 256 unmanned observation aircraft that are still in the airspace surrounding Garnet A, depending on how they are used, could become powerful reinforcements.”

Jackie looked at her and then pretended to ponder for a moment. “Let's see, an army of unmanned observation aircraft around Garnet A? Well, I don't remember what they’re called, but they’re just observation satellites with their antennas spread out, so I don't think you can count them as a military force.”

After receiving a look from Marika, Lynn began to speak. “Wouldn't unmanned vehicles connected by a FTL network be able to show the rebels a fleet that doesn't exist, or show them the illusion of a pirate ship?”

Jackie eyed Lynn suspiciously. “I don't think that was mentioned in the technical information I gave you.”

“You can see that in the communication performance, response time, and antenna transmitting/receiving accuracy.” Lynn omitted much of the explanation. “Even though it is a drone that must perform spatial observations, its transmission accuracy is too high. With that, you can send different information to multiple parties at the same time, right?”

“Ah…” Jackie studied Lynn’s face. “No, well, I thought that an expert could come up with that kind of usage, but that's not the way they're supposed to be used.”

“Also, I have no intention of seizing all the surrounding stations to capture the Stellar Slayer.” Marika added an explanation.

“According to the technical information you brought us, the station above the North Pole also controls seven others at the same time. Isn't that why Odette II's bow split is needed as a part of the launcher?”

“…Is that so?” Jackie tilted his head. Marika raised her voice a little.

“Haven't you seen the technical information you brought with you?”

“No, I'm busy with this, so I just skimmed through it and didn't analyze it in detail. It's a shame though.”

“So, if we can seize the control station over the North Pole, we can control the Stellar Slayer as we wish.”

Marika stared at Jackie. “That is, if the information you brought is correct.”

“It's technical information handled by the rebels, so as long as they didn't make some serious mistakes from the beginning, I think it's okay.”

“We won't know how well the Stellar Slayer will work as a weapon until we actually install the Odette II’s bow split in the control station above the pole, but if it's a long-range beam-launching system, it should be much easier to fire a beam at short range, in the airspace around Garnet A.”

“Are you trying to use the Stellar Slayer like a fortress cannon?” Jackie rolled his eyes. “Without testing?　With no guarantee that it will work?”

“Aren't you and the rebels the same people who are trying to put the Stellar Slayer into practical use even though there is no guarantee that it will work?”

“I'm sorry I joined you. I'm not seriously thinking of actually using such a dangerous weapon.”

“I wonder if the rebels would be willing to help us test it if they thought it would be a working test.” Gruier said with a social smile.

“I'm not an expert in this kind of thing, so I don't really understand, but I don't think you'll be able to aim properly at first anyway. However, I believe that if you test fire many times and make adjustments, you will be able to achieve a level of accuracy that is sufficient for practical use. Unlike normal naval guns and fortress guns, the energy is supplied from the red giant star, so I don't think it would be that difficult to fire it continuously.”

“Continuous firing. If the original purpose was to supply energy over a long distance, that would have been considered, but I wonder how far the rebel army has gone to improve the system to ensure that a machine that was left unattended in the vicinity of a star can withstand such use? As for whether it has been fixed and refined or not, is that included in the information that I brought?”

“So, our pirate ship, with your advice, is planning to attack the control station of the Stellar Slayer, which is located almost at the north pole of Garnet A, as our primary target.” Captain Blackbeard glared at Jackie. “Now, do you want to ride? Or do you want to get off?”

After a brief glance at Captain Kenjo, Jackie laughed. “......I thought I was the one who suggested the profitable offer.”

Jackie took off his bowler hat and dug his fingers into his spreading red hair. “As expected of a pirate, being able to take the story that far.” He puts his bowler hat on the table and leans forward. “So, could you tell me specifically what kind of strategy you have in mind?”

“In order to plan a strategy, we need accurate information on the enemy's strength.” Kenjo looked over at Jackie at the front of the table. “What is the current strength of the rebel army?”

“Oh, well, you know, after meeting you, if you don't have that kind of insight, it's not worth my time to talk to you.” Jackie scratched her head. “Well, from your response I thought you were aware of it, but when I first called out to you, the rebel forces that had arrived in this airspace were only one battleship and two cruisers.”

“Really?” Lynn gave him a suspicious look. “You didn't have two or three more ships hidden away?”

“When your training ships arrived here, only three of them were here and in operational condition. However, the large fleet that I showed you at the beginning is not entirely a lie.” Jackie looked around at the faces at the table.

“The rebel army has their own circumstances, so how long it takes to get everything together, and how long all the ships can stay here depends on the circumstances of the planet they each belong to. I can't say anything for sure since it depends on the situation, but at least all the ships I showed you are committed to participating in this operation.'”

“How many of them are here now?” Lynn asked, keeping a sharp eye on Jackie. “If we move to take the control station, how big is the rebel fleet now?”

“Did you see the six mobile cruisers that were chasing me when I was running away?”

Marika nodded.

“In addition to that, two battleships, an aircraft carrier, and a large carrier in charge of supply and maintenance have arrived and are already in operation. There is no need to include the large carriers in the numbers as they do not have the strength to fight and are not capable of frontal combat, but there are many more ships scheduled to arrive. So, if you want to do it, the sooner the better.” Jackie turned his attention back to Captain Blackbeard. “The more time you take to prepare, the more the rebel army will be able to gather its strength.”

“In other words, the sooner we start moving, the better.” Captain Kenjo unfolded an electronic paper display on the table showing an orbital map centered on Garnet A. “Well then, let's think about a strategy to seize the control station based on the rebel force we just heard about.”

At that time, somewhere in the cockpit of the Lunar Lion, which had landed on the containment deck of the Barbaroosa, strewn with everything from spare parts to rations to data packs to daily necessities, a telephone bell was ringing continuously.

A black and white sign

Description automatically generated

“Well, things went quite differently than I had planned.”

In the cockpit of the Lunar Lion, which had departed from the Barbaroosa, Jackie was looking over the results of the self-check.

Upon leaving the Barbaroosa, Jackie ran a self-check on all of his ship's systems. Since he had landed on an enemy ship with the intention of surrendering unconditionally, and then left the spaceship without even locking the systems, he has no idea what happened when he wasn't looking. He’s confident that the system won't be changed easily, and he keep the monitoring system running, but it's essential to check where and what kind of traps have been set.

Jackie, who had taken off after completing a preflight check, which he would normally skip, twisted his head when he saw the results of the self-check on the scratched display.

“I'm okay with the system checks from the outside, since I allowed them, but I can't see any other traces of prying eyes?”

He’s aware that some of the pirates are extremely talented hackers. If the system check doesn't catch anything abnormal, or even the simple traps that should have been set, and there's no evidence of a reaction, then there are two possibilities.

“I don't think even a skilled wizard would be able to scan the Lunar Lion's system without leaving any footprints. It should be possible if you take the time, but I don't think you had that much time.”

Sitting cross-legged in the cockpit, Jackie twisted his head even more.

“Does that mean they just believed my report and didn't do any further checking or cracking? Are the pirates who have survived this galaxy with only a privateer's license such a good-natured group?”

Jackie looked around the cockpit, which was undisturbed although there were signs that someone had entered it.

“...... or am I dumber than I think I am?”

The invisibility device that performs optical stealth is operating normally. It's a delicate system, so if it were to be insensitively investigated, a problem would have appeared right away, but no changes have been detected between before and after the landing on the Barbaroosa.

“Did they just accept my explanation, or did they do some investigation that I didn't notice? Did they set traps or bombs that I didn't notice, or were they so busy that they didn't have time to do such things?”

The basic stealth system equipped on the Lunar Lion allows almost all electromagnetic waves, from omni-directional high-frequency waves to ultraviolet rays, to pass right through. Radiation received by the miniscule scales that densely cover the surface of the fuselage are emitted from the opposite side of the fuselage unchanged.

The scales, which act as transmitters and receivers in a single microarray, are themselves precision electronic components, and are ineffective unless they are affixed to the entire surface of the ship. Furthermore, since all scales must be connected and controlled, a huge amount of calculation and energy is required to maintain the stealth effect. Moreover, due to its mechanism, almost no ballistic resistance can be expected. Although it is possible to spread scales over the armor, it easily loses its function when struck by a small diameter beam or even minute space debris.

On the Barbaroosa’s deck, Jackie gained acceptance by partially activating a system that is effective against visible light, but when Jackie revealed his trick, he was prepared to have every nook and cranny investigated while he wasn't looking.

However, even after performing multiple and time-consuming checks just to be sure, Jackie was unable to find any abnormalities in the Lunar Lion.

“Hmmm…” Some of the operating parts seem to have been adjusted without permission, and even the error that appeared in the antenna telescoping mechanism has disappeared.

“I wonder if they really haven't set any traps inside the Lunar Lion, or if they’re pretending like they haven’t set any traps, but in fact, they’ve actually set them up, or if they’re really not doing anything in hopes of making me suspicious like this. Maybe the real truth is that they found an opportunity in the Lunar Lion that I didn't know about and did something to it.” Jackie looked around the cockpit, which was cluttered with all sorts of items.

“Let's see, when was the last time I emptied the spaceship?” Unless it's heavy maintenance that would tear the hull apart, the ship won't be cleaned up until it's empty. Thinking about the last time the spaceship was cleaned, Jackie checked the weight on board.

“It's gone up.” Although it's just over a kilogram, the spacecraft's weight has increased even after taking into account the loss of propellant and weight changes due to maintenance. Jackie immediately looked at the area where the weight had increased and realized that it was at the top of cockpit.

“...It’s me?” After fumbling around in his suit to see if it had been bugged without his knowledge, Jackie held his stomach. “Is it the food I ate...”

Even if there is a small amount of poison or medicine in his body, the nanomachines in his body will break it down, so he doesn't have to worry about anything other than nourishment. In an emergency situation, even if it is not food it can be used as nourishment. After patting his belly for a moment, Jackie turned to face his control panel.

“No wonder. They gave me a good meal, so I'll do what I have to do.”

A telephone bell buried somewhere in the cockpit began to ring loudly.

“Oops!” Startled, Jackie began digging for the phone buried in the cockpit. “Yes, yes, why are you buried at the bottom like this? Yes, I'm coming out, just a minute.”

He finally dug out the phone with his left hand, picked it up with his right hand, and answered it.

“Yes, hello? Thank you for your continued patronage. What am I doing? Your job, of course. It's only natural that you can't get my current position, because I’m doing a job where I don’t want my current position to be known. Yes, I refuse to give a verbal report. I'm in the middle of that kind of work, so please don't make me do something like revealing my current location. In truth, I don’t even want a connection like this hot line. Yes, no matter how heavily encrypted the hyperspace communication is, as long as you and I are talking like this, there is a way to receive and unravel it. I have a policy of keeping in close contact with my sponsors, otherwise I would not be able to maintain the minimum level of credibility in this business. Yes, it may seem like I'm being disrespectful, but please understand that the reason I go out of my way to contact you during critical operations is because I value my sponsors that much. I’ll keep it short, it's best to think that for every second of communication time, the chance that someone you don't want to hear will know who you're talking to and what you're talking about increases by one percent. Yes, I'm on the job. I was successful in getting the rebel fleet to put on a show and pretended to have escaped and contacted the pirates. Yes, so far I have ostensibly gained their trust. However, we are talking about pirates who never let their guard down, and there is no guarantee that they are not listening to our conversation right now. It’s only impossibility within the realm of technology that we are aware of, and with such a large universe, there are many ways to do it. Or, would you prefer a long story? ...That's good, at least we agree on that point. Yes, the pirates are off to their next mission. Yes, the strategy I told you about at the beginning, bringing the White Swan here, was a really good idea. Yes, even though I have a track record of being chased by a cruiser fleet, pirates are not stupid enough to believe the suspicious guy who was on the enemy's side just now. However, by disclosing our situation to the extent that it doesn't become a problem, they will make the next move. Yes, of course I told the truth. I'm sure you know that they’re not the type of people who will do what I want based on just lip service. They’re going to check and confirm things based on this data, so if I don't give them enough data to confirm it properly, my story won't be convincing. Yes, thanks to you, I was able to earn at least enough trust to work with them. Well, of course we can't deny the possibility that the other side is pretending to trust me. Just like we let them get away with it. ...I'll leave it to you to deal with it. Perhaps the next step for the pirates is to conduct reconnaissance to confirm whether our information is true. Yes, it's an armed and armored pirate ship that will be setting out, so you have to take it seriously. The other side is not an amateur who doesn't know when to pull back, and if things get really dangerous, that's when the Imperial fleet standing in the background will come in. …What are you talking about now, you have to get under the nose of the Imperial Fleet to make it work. The best way to use a secret weapon is to keep it secret until you are ready to use it. The easiest way to use it is to give them a whiff of it. If you don't explain it, the other person will imagine things for you, and it will be even more powerful than the facts. Yes, don't worry, please take a leisurely look at the situation from the grandstand. ...Yes, contact me anytime. However, as you know, I am currently doing everything by myself, so if you don't think about the timing, I may not be able to do something important at a critical time. ...Yes, it's just a matter of possibility. Well, if I'm too busy, I'll just ignore you, so don't feel bad. Yes, the call is a simple repeating signal, so the longer it goes on, the more likely it is that the listener will notice that the line exists. Yes, yes, then I won't do anything bad, so leave it to me, yes, yes.”

Jackie, who had been flippant with the other party, carefully put the receiver back on the telephone, which was still held in his left hand. A clear "ding" sound echoed through the cockpit.

“Let's see.” Jackie looked at the old-fashioned rotary phone. “How can we achieve business results that satisfy everyone? It's getting difficult.”

Jackie placed the phone on top of the junk scattered in the cockpit. “So, I guess it's about time the pirates finished their preparations?”

The Odette II was docking with the Barbaroosa via an airtight passage. “It must be nice to have a battleship send you off.”

Ririka, who had been giving instructions from the captain's seat, waved to Rin, who was the first to rush into the Odette II and fly to the bridge.

“The situation is as I described earlier.” Lynn handed Ririka the data card of the operational procedure manual that had been created on board the Barbaroosa during the trip.

“Captain Kenjo and Marika have already given their approval, and there was no active opposition from Captain Ririka at the initial summary stage, so we are proceeding with the plan as is.”

“Well, if I think there's a problem, I'll stop.” Ririka looked at the data card with the Barbaroosa’s emblem that was handed to her, and inserted it into the slot in the captain's seat.

“When it comes to actual battle, the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru are much more experienced than we are. If the operational procedures have been considered by the staff on site, there is no reason to oppose them now......”

“Gruier, you’re back.” Following Lynn, Gruier, still in her middle school uniform, appeared on the bridge.

“Captain Cayenne of the Barbaroosa’s Ground Forces requests permission to come aboard.”

“Yes, yes.” Ririka stood up from the captain's seat and went to the bridge door. Flying into the weightless bridge, wearing all black combat uniform and wearing sunglasses, she gives a sharp salute.

A black and white image of a person

Description automatically generated

“I am Cayenne Gear, commander of the Barbaroosa’s Ground Forces.”

“Okay, everyone. It's not that far and it won’t take much time, but please take it easy.” Ririka returned the salute to Cayenne.

“Also, as you may have heard from Lynn and Gruier, the crew of our starship are all children, so please go easy on them.”

“I am aware of this.”

“Well then, someone please guide Captain Cayenne and her party to the dining room.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I would also like permission to board the ship.” Misa, wearing a white coat, entered the bridge following Captain Cayenne.

“Misa Grandwooe, Bentenmaru's ship doctor. Well, should I show you my medical license or school doctor's license?”

“I don't need a fake license.” Ririka looked at Misa, who gave a very different salute than the commander of the ground forces.

“And you, too, don't mess with my crew.”

“Well, I used to be the school doctor in the infirmary of Hakuoh Academy, so I am very close to the students, too.” Misa waved to the bridge personnel she knew. Ririka never took her eyes off Misa.

“Why would Misa, who is supposed to be working for the Bentenmaru, come over to our ship?”

“Because the Odette II has been selected as the attack ship.”

“It's not an attack ship! Just transporting the ground forces to Garnet A's control station!”

“If it's not an attack ship, it’s an assault landing ship, right?”

Misa looked around the bridge for the first time since Ririka had taken command.

“I think it is a reasonable decision to use a non-combat starship because it will be useless as a starship once it docks at the station, but I'm surprised you accepted the offer.”

“There are some people who are not afraid to board a starship with only electronic warfare capability with a surprise attack.”

Ririka checked the status of Barbaroosa's ground forces on the monitor, which were advancing into the dining room since the cargo deck alone was not enough.

“Even at full throttle, it's not as maneuverable as a modern high-speed cargo ship, and boarding a sailing ship from a previous era with almost no armor for hand-to-hand combat is a strategy only for pirates.”

“So, if you're going to do things like pirates, you'll be in trouble if you don't have a doctor.” Misa looked around at the bridge personnel, who, except for Ririka, were all members of the Hakuoh Academy Yacht Club.

“You don't want to have only a health committee member on board an assault ship. So I'll be along for the ride.”

“Huh?” Ririka looked at Misa's full body white coat with interest. “I thought you were going to take the lead and jump in like the bloody doctors of yesteryear.”

“Ah, something like that happened when you were active.” Misa smiled with a nostalgic look on her face. “Don't worry, we have enough operating personnel in the Bentenmaru now, so I'll just relax and take care of you. I don't know if I'll be able to take it easy again this time.”

“*Odette II from Barbaroosa.*” Captain Blackbeard appeared on the still open communication line.

“Yes, this is the Odette II, Captain Ririka.” She answers.

“*All the ground forces from the Barbaroosa have boarded. We're going to undock now and leave.*”

“Yes, everyone is confirmed aboard the Odette II.” Ririka told Captain Kenjo after checking the sub-display's ground forces roster and checklist. “We will be responsible for delivering them to the station.”

“*Oh, I'll be responsible for protecting your spaceship, so make sure no one goes missing on your side.*”

“The Barbaroosa is undocking.”

The Barbaroosa, which is used to approaching and docking with other spaceships as a pirate ship, was left in charge of the docking side, and the airtight passageway was detached from the Odette II, which had remained still, with it’s mast folded up on the docking side.

“All that's left are the external forces from the Bentenmaru?”

Marika and Coorie, who had boarded the Barbaroosa, returned to the Bentenmaru, leaving Misa behind. Among the expected developments in the subsequent operations, there is no phase in which the Bentenmaru will directly participate in hand-to-hand combat.

Assigning the Odette II, which had no anti-ship armament and weak armor, to the ship in charge of the forced entry into the control station would automatically put the rest of the rebel fleet in the hands of the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru. In the case of all-out anti-ship combat, the two ships would fight in formation, a basic tactic since the days when biplanes were used in aerial combat, with the Barbaroosa, with its superior armament and armor, as the leader and the Bentenmaru as the wingman.

If the Barbaroosa is entrusted with battle command and combat information can be gathered from the Silent Whisper, even the Bentenmaru, which is short on personnel, will have the manpower to participate in the suppression force. As long as the exact situation at the control station is not yet known, they would like to increase the strength of the suppression force as much as possible.

Due to the above circumstances, a suppression unit was formed for the actual battle, headed by Schnitzer, who was in charge of combat command, and moved to the Odette II by ferry in the place of Marika and the others who had returned to the Bentenmaru.

“So…” Ririka tapped on the console in the captain's seat to confirm the current location of the ferry that was supposed to have launched from the Bentenmaru. The Bentenmaru's external forces were selected not for piracy on luxury cruise ships, but for actual combat, in which they fired live bullets inside and outside a spacecraft. Some of the personnel were not able to board because of the ship's capacity, so they were said to be coming aboard in spacesuits, holding on to the ferry.

“The reconnaissance plane that was on board until we got here has been shipped out, so we can at least load a ferry, but we're also working to the very last minute.”

“It's a good tendency to have the timing right and not be inconvenienced.”

Misa flew to the captain's seat and glanced around the console. Lynn flew to the electronic battle seat and talked with her junior classmate who was sitting in her seat, and then took the main seat in place of the junior classmate who had moved to the sub seat.

“I’m going to contact the Lunar Lion.” Gruier, in the observer seat, informed them.

“Yes, please do it.”

Leaving communication with Lunar Lion to the crew, Ririka hushed her voice to Misa. “So, teaming up with that redhead and raiding the Stellar Slayer control station? He’s not someone you can trust, no matter how you try, right?”

“It's unknown.” Misa answered with one hand on the captain's seat. “The Barbaroosa's staff and Coorie investigated the spaceship, and I examined the man himself with the Barbaroosa's Dr. Zivaco, and it was quite impressive. I don't know how suspicious the spaceship is, but it's rare for a pirate crew to have such a suspicious body.”

“That bad?”

“I don't know how much medical knowledge he has, but unless he knows a medical expert, he has either put in very expensive medical equipment and spared no expense in maintenance, or he has connections to a very trustworthy medical syndicate. The human body is like a precision machine, and it takes a certain amount of effort to keep it in top shape, especially if you are trying to make it last longer. To put nanomachines into such a multifunctional machine knowing that, it’s black magic.” Misa nodded yes.

“If he has nanomachines, then are drugs such as truth serum ineffective?”

“It's not like there's no way to create an interceptor type nanomachine and neutralize the target, but it would take a lot of effort to do it without affecting the person in question. However, one thing I can say is that if someone takes care of their body that much, I'm sure they would place more emphasis on profit and loss than on faith, loyalty, and relationships of trust.”

Ririka looked back at Misa's face. “I see, that's the kind of person they are.”

Misa nodded. “That's right. So, as long as you know which side they are on, which side is more profitable, and you have tasty bait in your hand, I think he will be a useful piece.”

“I hope we'll put it to good use.”

Ririka saw the Barbaroosa moving away and the Bentenmaru remaining in place on the display.

“Everyone is the same, with multiple objectives.”

Misa patted Ririka on the back.

“Now, it's time to get down to business.”

“Lunar Lion on the line!” Gruier reported. “Data line is directly connected.”

The 256 drones deployed in the airspace around Garnet A are nominally under the control of the control station, but all of them can be controlled from the Lunar Lion. By prior arrangement, the three pirate ships were to receive data relayed from the observation network formed by the drones from Lunar Lion.

A large amount of data flowed into the Odette II through a FTL network connection to the Lunar Lion.

“Wow, he’s transferring all the raw data without any restraint.”

The crewmember sitting in the radar/sensor seat screamed. Lynn, in the electronic battle seat, gave instructions in a sharp voice. “We are receiving data from Lunar Lion, so please be careful not to accidentally let any strange viruses or ‘bots infiltrate!”

A large amount of data was transferred, an order of magnitude more than the patrol network that was supposed to have been formed by adding Silent Whisper.

“Hey! Don't treat me like it's an old ship!” Lynn moved her hands while complaining. “We’re as updated as any other starship out there, and I won't be drowned by this amount of data!”

Although the amount of data is large, the processing format is fixed. Lynn deployed the processing program sent in advance and quickly assembled an automatic processing program for the data feed.

“Leave it to other spacecraft with more computing power to fully process all the data. This is enough for a quick overview!

Sighing, Lynn looked at the display, which showed a visualization of the processed results.

“What do you see?” Ririka called out. “If you don't mind, could you put it on the main screen?”

“Here it comes.” Lynn displayed the nearby airspace data sent from Luna Lion on the main screen of the Odette II's bridge.

“The current data clearly shows not only Garnet A, but also debris and clouds in the surrounding airspace.”

Data with a much higher resolution than the data the fleet had previously obtained was displayed on the main screen. It not only shows the surface conditions of Garnet A observed from all directions, but also the asteroids orbiting the inner planets, clouds, and even the dust ring spreading on the equatorial plane.

“Well, that's pretty good observational data.” Ririka said, expressing the impressions of the entire bridge crew. “So, can we get the current location of the enemy fleet?”

“I’ve got them.” Lynn selected only the relevant data and flashed it red. “Above Garnet A's poles, it can be seen divided into two fleets.”

“How does that compare to our data?”

“It matches.” Lynn compared the enemy fleet data captured by their own sensor network displayed on the sub-monitor with the observation data from Luna Lion. “...As you can see, the observation data from Lunar Lion is much more accurate. Even if this was fake data, I wouldn't think to verify it...”

“I hope the enemy thinks so too.”

“*Lunar Lion calling Barbaroosa, Bentenmaru, and Odette II, can you hear me?*” A distracted voice drifted out over an open channel dedicated to pirates. “*This is the Lunar Lion, Jackie Fahrenheit. I believe we are almost ready for our next dance. If you don't mind, I'd like to show you all to the ballroom.*”

“*Lunar Lion from Bentenmaru.*” Marika's familiar voice responded. “*This is the Bentenmaru, Captain Marika. It will take a few more minutes for the ferry launched from the Bentenmaru to reach the Odette II, but if we are starting the dummy, both the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa can be launched.*”

“*Excellent. Well then, the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa will start first. Odette II, please enter active stealth as soon as the ferry is onboard. I made a mistake and launched the dummy Bentenmaru from here. The real thing is about to happen, so brace yourself.*”

The Odette II is the only ship in the pirate fleet that possesses active stealth and can put it into practice. The Bentenmaru has advanced electronic warfare capabilities, and the Barbarousa is also capable of electronic warfare, but although they can perform electronic interference against searching enemies, they do not have active stealth capabilities. The best they can do for stealth navigation is a state of radio blockade, cutting off all your transmissions.

The Odette II's active stealth can be used effectively on a battlefield where the enemy is searching from only one direction, but if the range expands to more than ten degrees, its effectiveness becomes limited. Currently, the main force of the rebel fleet is fixed in the sky above Garnet A’s pole, but three cruisers that serve as patrol vessels have advanced into orbit of the outer planet. Since a cross search is being conducted from multiple directions, even if you are placed in an orbit near Garnet A and immerse yourself in the powerful noise emitted by the star itself, the pirate ship's current location can still be seen.

The patrol network that the pirate fleet had built before Jackie surrendered the Lunar Lion was effective for searching for enemies, but it was not something that could be used for aggressive electronic attacks. It was determined that the network formed by a large number of drones located from Garnet A's proximity to synchronous orbit, which was discovered during subsequent enemy searches, would be quite effective if used offensively, but so far neither hacking nor cracking has been successful.

In this situation, Jackie's first suggestion was to pretend to surrender and send the Odette II inside the rebel fleet, then use electronic jamming from within the main force to take control of the flagship at once. A strategy that seemed to be based solely on momentum and opportunism was easily rejected, and instead, Lynn proposed a large-scale offensive using the drones deployed throughout the star system.

Using the hidden Barbarousa and Bentenmaru as decoy ghost ships, they will attack the main fleet in multiple stages and destroy them after they are dispersed and exhausted.

This plan was further refined by the Barbaroosa, which is experienced in combat, and the Bentenmaru’s staff, who attended the meeting via radio.

According to the final plan, the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru will sortie in a two-ship formation for anti-ship maneuver combat, first pretending to attack a patrolling mobile cruiser as a single ship.

If it is one ship against two, the rebels in single ship action will be at an overwhelming disadvantage. However, if the pirate ship moves even after applying electronic jamming, its current position will be almost completely known to the rebels, and it is highly probable that the rebel fleet will read the attack target from the predicted trajectory and send out an intercepting force.

It would be fine if the rebels didn't move, but if they do, the two-ship fleet of the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru will change course accordingly and drag the intercepting force around to get the most favorable starting position for the battle possible.

If the network of 256 drones stationed in the airspace surrounding Garnet A were to send out decoy responses towards the Rebel fleet, the rebels would have to respond until they could confirm that the ghost ships did not exist. Due to the current situation, it is not possible to confirm the effectiveness through simulation before execution, but it can be determined by looking at their reaction and the enemy's movements after the operation begins.

At the same time, the Odette II, which had hidden itself using active stealth, began approaching the Stellar Slayer control station above the North Pole in a close orbit of Garnet A, which the Bentenmaru had passed earlier, and directly forced docking to put the ground troops aboard and take control.

The technical documents and other data that Jackie brought contained only a summary of the information regarding the control station. There was no information on its defensive capability, which was the most important thing to know when launching a suppression battle. None of the pirates believed his explanation that he didn't deploy a fleet for defense because he did not want the pirates to notice his clumsy concentration of forces.

However, the observation network formed by the Lunar Lion’s drones and the pirates' sensor network, which even mobilized the Silent Whisper, made the deployment of the rebel forces in the airspace around Garnet A almost clear. No one believed Jackie's explanation that there was no defense force at the control station, but the pirates' sensor network also failed to confirm the existence of a separate defense force around the control station.

Thus, a plan was drawn up and implemented to control the control station, using the Odette II as an assault landing craft, with the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru as its escorts.

“*Well then, Barbaroosa, Bentenmaru, launch as scheduled.*” Jackie announced through the still open private communications line. “*So far, there have been no movements of rebel ships that could catch us. Therefore, the dance card remains unchanged. Please carry out the exchange with the ghosts as planned.*”

“*Barbaroosa, understood. We will now depart.*” Captain Kenjo's deep voice echoed on the Odette II's main bridge.

“*Bentenmaru, I understand. I will follow the Barbaroosa.*”

The symbols of the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru began to move in the multi-screen display, which was difficult to see due to scratches and dirt.

“Okay, okay, as planned.” Jackie looked at the Rebel fleet's layout on the wide-area display. “Now, the Odette II, my target, will be in the most defenseless situation since she arrived, naked without an escort, but I wonder if they are paying attention to that.”

After a moment's thought, Jackie shook his head. “No, even if we capture the Odette II now, the moment we get on board, the ground forces will attack us. The fact is that its total strength has increased after arriving in this airspace. That's why I said it would be a good idea to pour all your strength into a short decisive battle immediately after arriving as a single ship.”

“*This is the Odette II.*” Gruier's calm voice drifted into the Lunar Lion's cockpit. “*Accommodation of the ferry from the Bentenmaru has been completed. Active stealth can begin at any time.*”

“Acknowledged.” Jackie responded immediately. “I’m getting a response over here. No change in schedule. Move to the control station as soon as active stealth commences.”

“*Roger.*”

After the unbecoming reply, the Odette II's symbol changed on the display.

“So far, it's been almost as planned.” Jackie looked around at the display, which showed the status of as much airspace as he could get his hands on.

“Now, let's see how well you dance.”

The Odette II on the display began active stealth. Although it is exposed to cross-search from multiple directions, so it does not completely disappear, the response on the display becomes much dimmer and smaller.

“Now then, it's time to show off your skills.” Pulling his white gloves over his straight fingers, clasping his hands open, Jackie placed his fingers on the control panel. The reaction data of Barbaroosa, Bentenmaru, and Odette II will be carefully copied and digitized.

The reaction data for the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru matched what had been obtained from previous contact. Only the Odette II's reaction data does not match the previous data.

“Wow.” Jackie made a sound of admiration when he compared the difference between Odette II's performance last time and this time. “In this short period of time, you have further adjusted your active stealth to match the location, frequency, and search pattern. I'm impressed by your diligence.”

The previous data is compared with the latest data, and fine adjustments are made to match the pattern.

“However, I don't like it when they do that. If they tinker with active stealth details just because they have free time free, it makes it difficult for me to do my job of copying and distributing the stealth. For the scouting side, all they have to do is look for one reaction that is different from the others out of the countless reactions, but whether or not they notice it is another matter.”

Jackie loaded the Odette II's reaction pattern into the Lunar Lion's main computer, made some corrections, and tried running it in the simulated network. He checked the reactions from all directions and compared them to the real reactions to make sure there were no discrepancies.

“Well, that’s it. Lunar Lion to Barbaroosa, Bentenmaru, and Odette II.” Jackie called over the dedicated line to the pirate ships. “I have confirmed the reaction patterns for three ships. From now on, three ghosts will appear on the network and will take their scheduled trajectories. Oh, and I especially want to ask the hard-working crew of the Odette II not to change or update their active stealth patterns until the mission is over.”

Jackie paused for a moment. “Let me explain why, just in case. Your repeated efforts to fine-tune active stealth to suit the current situation are admirable, and they are certainly working. However, if the pattern is changed during the voyage after having created the Odette II decoy using the current pattern, there will be two different patterns that appear on the network. It is up to the rebels to tell which is the real one, but if they release a large number of decoys, it will be easier for them to tell the difference. For these reasons, please refrain from changing the pattern of active stealth during this operation.”

“Odette II, Electronic Warfare Officer Lynn, roger.” Lynn replied in a disappointed voice. “Until the completion of this operation, the current active stealth pattern will be fixed.”

She removed her headset and muttered. “Is it possible to catch such minute changes in the active stealth pattern?”

“Well, I said you can adjust it however you like.” Ririka, in the captain's seat, called out after confirming that the bridge conversation was not going out over the dedicated line. “Did you change the pattern even after you arrived here?”

“Active stealth is a method of pretending that you are not emitting electromagnetic waves, so it is more effective if you change the pattern depending on the location.” Lynn moved her hands to the console and called up the active stealth pattern she had just created for the Odette II.

“The more you adjust depending on nearby stars and planets and what kind of stars they are, the better you can hide. After I came here, I thought I could hide better than I did at Tau because of Garnet A's large radiation, so I did a lot of things with it.”

“No wonder you were so busy.”

“I finally have a program that can automatically change the pattern according to Garnet A’s latest situation, but if I am told that the pattern cannot be changed, I can't use it.” Lynn let go of the electronic warfare console. “Since we have so many antennas installed in the network, we should just be able to read out changes in our situation and analyze and copy them.”

“We’re in active stealth, but I'm not sure if they can analyze all of our moves.”

“*Lunar Lion to all ships.*” As usual, a tension-free voice came over the dedicated line. “*As you can see on your display, I've released decoys for three ships, the Barbaroosa, the Bentenmaru, and the Odette II, onto the network at this time. The first target is, as planned, a mobile cruiser on a solo patrol on the outer planet side.*”

“Display Confirmed.” Gruier conveyed in a cool voice. “We're picking up the same response as the ship.”

“*I'll tell you just in case. As I said in my preliminary explanation, the same data is available to the rebel side. It is true that the rebel side is more concerned with the network data, but the rebel side can also tamper with network data just like the Lunar Lion. Since we're sharing the same system, it's only natural.*”

It's quite an unusual situation that the single Lunar Lion can falsify the data of an entire network, but Jackie continued without any hesitation.

“*In other words, the rebels can also manipulate the network and send false information to us. I'll say it again because it would be troublesome if I was later accused of a surprise attack or betrayal. Remember that just as we can feed fake data to the rebels, it is equally possible that the data we are seeing is fake data from the rebels.*” Jackie added deliberately. “*And one more thing. I'm on your side.*”

Gruier muttered to herself. “I know you're suspicious, so you don't have to say anything else.”

“I think you mean that the chances are 50-50, both for the rebels and for us.” Lynn watched as the three decoys on the display moved away from their current positions.

“In short, the red-head is saying that he is not responsible for the attacks of enemies that may not appear in this display. How far is that con man willing to go to force his own convenience on us?”

“That's how combat works.” Ririka, seated in the captain's seat, said in a relaxed tone. “Enemies and allies push each other to do things to suit their own convenience. The situation before a battle is not much different from the real world's troubles.”

After chuckling, Ririka picked up the microphone. “Bridge to all ships. The Odette II will now set course for the Stellar Slayer control station above Garnet A’s North Pole. Arrival at the station is scheduled for six hours under sail plus normal propulsion.”

Ririka glanced at the sub-monitor, which displayed a list of the planned trajectory and future schedule. “I will make an announcement if something is about to happen, so until then, the suppression team should relax and conserve their strength. To the crew of the Odette II, don't mess around with them before the battle!”

The bridge, with its doors left open, felt a thud from all over the ship. Ririka turned off the microphone.

“Lynn”

“What is it?”

“Assuming we continue with our current active stealth unless something unexpected happens, how much can we tune our current stealth in the remaining time?”

Lynn reviewed the electronic warfare display in front of her. “…without testing?”

Although not limited to active stealth, it's basic to proceed with electronic-related tuning while checking each item one by one.

“Without testing.” Ririka nodded. “I don't care how many computers you use for simulations, we can't afford to do a field test under the current circumstances, and if possible, I don't want to show them.”

“What is your order?” Lynn pulled the seat up to the console. Ririka chuckled.

“I’ll make it quick. It only needs to be usable in space near Garnet A and at the same altitude as the control station. If we descend to such a low altitude, the drones deployed throughout the area will be able to rely only horizontally, and the noise from Garnet A will be much louder. If you could use active stealth in such a situation, wouldn't you be able to hide much more reliably than now?”

“So you want to set it up so that it can only be used around the control station?” Lynn started tapping on the keyboard. “And not in near-interstellar space, as is the case now, but a tuning that is really only useful directly above the star?”

“Can you do it?”

“I'll try.” Lynn stopped and looked back at the captain's seat. “...I don't think it's possible to set it to automatically continue active stealth. You would have to keep adjusting things according to the stellar surface conditions of the nearby red-giant star.”

“That's fine.” Ririka nodded in the captain’s seat. “Whether you set it up or not, you won't be in a situation where you can leave the bridge anyway.”

There are two reasons why the Odette II was chosen as the starship for the assault landing at the control station. First, it has no frontal combat capability, so even if it were to dock at the station and become stuck, the pirate fleet's loss of strength would be minimal, and second, it retains the monocrystalline mast, a component necessary for the operation of the Stellar Slayer.

Instead, movement to the control station is dependent on Odette II's movement. The acceleration of a solar sailing ship is far less than that of a large transport ship, which is the slowest spacecraft currently in common use, and it can only reach standard acceleration when combined with normal propulsion.

While the Odette II will directly assault the control station and occupy it, the Barbaroosa’s and the Bentenmaru's role is to serve as escorts, safely transport the training sailboat, which is poorly armed and armored, to the control station.

“I don't like it.” Hyakume muttered in the cockpit of the Silent Whisper, which had switched to electronic reconnaissance mode.

“What?” Nora, on loan from the Barbaroosa, asked from the operator’s seat.

“There are many things, but I think the most important is this data that the redhead is sending over.”

Hyakume projected the status of the airspace around Garnet A on a three-dimensional display that filled the cockpit of the Silent Whisper. The display shows only the western hemisphere from the north pole and only half of the northern sky, but almost all of the symbols for the deployed rebel fleet are shown.

“It’s too clean. There are 256 drones. According to the data we found, most of them must have been deployed by the rebels, since they are obviously a product of recent technology, but an observation system this large is not something that can be left alone and work just fine once it is up and running. No matter how smart the automatic control system is, as long as you are dealing with natural phenomena, detailed adjustment and maintenance are essential.”

Hyakume, who had expanded his display area to cover the entire star area, extended his arms to the drones, which were arranged in a dense pattern around Garnet A and a coarser pattern as they moved away from it.

“But there is no indication that the redhead is taking care of this network, at least not since the Lunar Lion arrived. No matter how you look at it, he is just receiving the data coming from this network as it is and passing it on. But for data coming from an untouched network, there is little noise and very little inconsistency.”

“Is it well coordinated in advance, or is the system so stable that there is no need to make any changes?”

Looking around at the three-dimensional layout of the drones, Nora pointed out several possibilities. “When Barbaroosa came this far during the recent turmoil, the Black Swan, which he thought he had cornered right in front of him, disappeared spectacularly. If the observation network was already in place at that point, wouldn't the system be able to operate stably without having to make such detailed changes now?”

“If that's the case, then this system isn't that redhead's.” Hyakume returned the 3D display to the northern half.

“Even if he uses it like he owns it, he is only transmitting the output of the system, and the system itself is not in his hands. Even if we brought such a state-of-the-art and expensive electronic reconnaissance equipment and we were in charge of it, it would take a lot of work to use it together with the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru, which we should know everything about, from the specs to the wiring. It took a lot of effort to modify the obtained data to make it easier to use, but the data flowing from there is too clean.”

Hyakume once again reviewed the rebel army's placement displayed on the 3D display. “Another problem is that the rebels have lost their agent who had a channel of communication with us pirates. The rebels have a huge fleet in Imperial territory, and there is no movement even though it is a stalemate. To put it more clearly, it looks like they're waiting for us to make a move.”

Hyakume looked at Nora in the operator's seat. “According to our information, the rebel fleet is a mix of ships from multiple star regions, so the chain of command may not be unified. It's understandable that they wouldn't be able to move if they were waiting for instructions from their home worlds, but even so, it's hard to see the confusion.”

“Communication between ships is increasing.” Nora called up the data captured by Silent Whisper's sensors on the monitor.

“Normal communication are up twenty percent, and long-distance FTL communications are up about that much, too. It would take our computers centuries to decipher it.”

“Padding the volume of traffic is easy. After all, with undeciphered encrypted data, it is impossible to distinguish between real communications and dummy data.”

Hyakume superimposed the current location of the rebel ships obtained from the pirate fleet network on the data from the Lunar Lion.

“Just as the current positions of the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa were real, even if the current location of the rebel army is real, we don't know when it will be rewritten with dummy data, and no way to confirm it if it is replaced by dummy data. At the very least, if there is some evidence that the current location of the rebel army is certain, the Odette II won't have to do anything about ships that are far away, she can just track those in her neighborhood.”

“…I wonder if our bosses think so too?” Nora touched the trajectories of the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru extending into the three-dimensional display in the cockpit with her fingertips. “You see, neither of the two ships that are supposed to be directly escorting the Odette II are changing course while heading toward the lone patrolling cruiser.”

According to the original plan, the Odette II would advance to the control station above the Pole via the shortest possible distance, and the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru would provide cover. Early on, the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru would attack a cruiser on solo patrol in order to attract the rebels.

What actually approaches the cruiser for attack are electronic decoys created by the network, and their expected role is only to disrupt the rebel fleet. If the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru were to make a move, it was feared that the main force of the rebel fleet might attack the Odette II, which had lost its escorts, but if the attack on the patrol ship was left to the decoys, the real pirate ships could protect the training sailboat.

However, the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru, which started moving in conjunction with the projection that was supposed to be a decoy, did not turn around even after passing the point where they were supposed to return to the direct protection of the Odette II.

“*This is the Barbaroosa, informing all vessels of the change in strategy.*” Captain Blackbeard's voice came over the dedicated line.

“*This is Captain Kenjo of the Barbaroosa. The Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru, which according to the schedule would have reversed course and entered the direct escort of the Odette II, will continue on their scheduled course to hit the rebel cruiser, er, Vesmos class mobile cruiser Garveyron, which is on solo patrol.*”

There was a pause as he waited for a response to the Barbaroosa’s communication. “*We will reduce the enemy's strength while we can. Considering future developments, it be inconvenient to engage patrol ships away from the enemy's main force, so we will focus on hitting their radar/sensor systems.*”

“It's not unusual for our strategy to change from time to time depending on the battle situation.” Nora switched to the radar/sensor system. “I wonder if the newcomers will be able to handle it.”

“I see, you suddenly started acting irregularly. As expected of Captain Blackbeard.”

Hyakume turned off the 3D display inside the cockpit. “So, the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru should be hitting the cruisers on patrol in sequence.”

Hyakume confirmed the rebel ships were deployed on Garnet A's ecliptic plane. “If the two ships were to attack the Garveyron, then next would be the Arctroi or the Gueskain, and finally the Nanclaud on the other side?”

The rebel army, whose main force is located above the North Pole, has four battleships on the ecliptic plane of Garnet A, and one battleship on the South Pole side.

“If you're not aiming to sink them, but just destroy their ability to search for the enemy, it's more advantageous to attack with two ships at once...” Hyakume saw, without the fake data, that the predicted trajectory of the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru extended to the first patrol cruiser, the Garveyron.”

“Meanwhile, the Odette II rushes to the control station at the North Pole without escort. From the rebel army's point of view, this is a perfect opportunity to attack an unescorted training ship.”

“If the rebels know what's going on, yes.” Nora, in the operator's seat, quickly created a new flight plan and displayed it on the monitor. “If that's the case, our extended mission is to ensure reliable surveillance of the rebel fleet. We have to go beyond the Odette II and follow the movements of the main force.”

“I agree.” Hyakume checked the new planned trajectory displayed on the monitor. “Go forward as inconspicuously as possible.”

“*Barbaroosa and Bentenmaru from Lunar Lion.*” A voice that sounded as tense as ever was heard on the dedicated line. “*This is the Lunar Lion, I understand the situation. If the attack on the patrol ship also serves as a diversion against the rebels, do you need assistance from me?*”

“*Lunar Lion from Barbaroosa, thank you for speaking so quicky, red-haired general.*” Hyakume and Nora looked at each other when they heard the smirk in Captain Blackbeard's voice.

“*Yes, the attack on the patrol ship is also a diversion against the main force, so there will be no need for false data using the network for a while. Or rather, if we can really use the network to broadcast fake data, we should save those delicious moves for a little while longer.*”

“*As expected of pirates, you are so greedy.*”

“*That's why what we pirate ships expect from the red-haired admiral is accurate information about the enemy's current location, thank you very much.*”

“Your captain, as usual.” Hyakume discreetly launched the Silent Whisper. “In addition to attacking the enemy's strength due to the change in plans, he even prepared an obstacle for the redhead. Now we can decide if his information is credible or not.”

“…I hope this works.” Nora looked down at the scaled-down rebel army's ship layout. “If the redhead earns enough trust to justify the damage done by the rebels, we'll be the ones who were fooled.”

“*Understood. The rebels must have sensed that the two pirate vessels have begun to move with great speed, not only against the patrol ships but also against the main fleet, but there has been no movement as of yet. The bigger the fleet gets, the more time it takes to send even one reinforcement. I'll give you all the information I can get, so you can attack the patrol ship with confidence.*”

“*And one more thing.*” Captain Blackbeard added. “*I'm sorry to have to tell you after the trouble of getting you to disclose this information, but I'm also going to have to destroy any drones that are on a scheduled orbit and within reach.*”

“*Wha-wha-what?!*” As expected, the redhead's voice flipped out. Captain Kenjo continued calmly.

“*There is no telling how many drones we will be able to hit in our planned orbit, but even so, if we reduce the number of drones, the accuracy of the observations will be reduced. It's nice to have accurate information, but it's not good for us if the enemy gets it as well. Think of it as a stopgap measure and bear with it.*”

“*…Well, if that's your decision, I'm not opposed to it, but if you inadvertently destroy the network, don't you wonder where the rebel fleet that I think is missing gets its information from?*”

“*You might think so, but we also detected the existence of several drones before coming into contact with the Lunar Lion. If you ignore what you should be able to see, you'll end up being suspected of having made a mistake. Don't worry, we'll just burn the drones in our range with a long-range salvo. I won't destroy so much that we can't read the spatial situation when it comes to the actual performance.*”

“*Go easy on them, will you?*” Jackie answered in a tone that didn't seem to be expecting much. “*The purpose of the drones is not to search for enemies, but to obtain reliable information about the surrounding airspace.*”

“*How far can you fire the Stellar Slayer without any problems?*” Kenjo asked immediately. “*Do you know up to how many drones we can destroy?*”

“You're asking that here?” Hyakume groaned. Jackie answered without much pause.

“*I don't know. Observation aircraft were originally installed to observe stars and the surrounding airspace, not to be used as anti-aircraft radar. I don't think the rebel army has much leeway, so they only have the minimum number needed, but wasn't this mentioned in the technical data?*”

“Don’t play dumb.”

“*Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find detailed numbers about that. Well, don't worry, the number of drones that will come within our effective range will probably be less than 10% of the total number. If that makes the Stellar Slayer unusable, this is also convenient.*”

“*Go easy on the desperate rebels so they don’t think about making Garnet A explode into a supernova.*” Jackie said jokingly.

“*With that structure, it should be easier to supernova a star than to fire an energy beam into hyperspace.*”

“*Well, I’ll have to finish it before then.*”

In the display, the Barbaroosa, which was flying from Garnet A to the ecliptic plane, stopped accelerating. Since there is almost no resistance from the interstellar medium, it enters a constant velocity linear motion with inertial navigation.

“*It's about time for the first drone to enter range. This will be the first real shot fired in this battle.*”

To this point, neither the rebels nor the pirate ships have fired a beam cannon in actual combat. Entering the unaccelerated, steady flight required for precision fire, the Barbaroosa slammed its powerful firing radar at the drone, which barely responded to normal radar, and fired its diffuse main gun with a reduced focusing rate to cover its lax aiming.

Beam guns can penetrate the armor of heavy battleships when focused, but when diffused, the area of irradiation is expanded, and the destructive power per unit area is greatly reduced. However, the destructive power is sufficient to disable an unmanned aircraft that has no armor but only a greatly expanded antenna.

Because the target was too small, the quadruple beams from the first turret on the bow were sucked into space without causing any impact radiation.

“*Did we hit it?*”

“Checking via dedicated communications, uhm”

“Well, that’s my captain.”

“*Wait a minute… 176's response is gone. It’s a hit.*”

“*Any movement by Garveyron?　If two pirate ships jump out and blow up their drone, they're not going to sit still.*”

“*…No movement as of yet.*” Jackie answered, still sounding as crisis-free as ever.

“*As you can see, neither the main fleet nor the patrol ships are moving yet. But the amount of communication has jumped.*”

The Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru approached the Garveyron, which was occupying an outer planet orbit, on a precise trajectory with Garnet A behind them. Approaching a target from the side of a star, which is a huge source of energy, is the basic theory of aerial combat.

The Garveyron, as a patrol ship, had deployed not only auxiliary antennas but also large disposable antennas wired around the ship, did not move at first. With observation drones deployed throughout Garnet A, it was impossible not to see the two approaching pirate ships.

The approaching pirate ship, even with the sun at its back, is accelerating at high speed, while the Garveyron, on patrol, is nearly stationary and has deployed ample observation equipment.

The Garveyron, a Vesmos-class mobile cruiser, does not have a long-range main gun like a battleship. In order to get as many hits as possible during the limited enemy encounter time, it is equipped with 16 twin-fired medium-caliber cannons on the top and bottom of the ship that can fire continuously.

The advantage of the main guns mounted above and below the centerline of the ship is that all guns can be aimed at targets on the sides. Instead of having the largest projected area, it has the largest attack power.

The Barbaroosa's main guns have a longer range than those of the Vesmos-class mobile cruisers, but the stationary Garveyron has a longer effective range because of its greater accuracy of fire. Before approaching the Garveyron, the Barbaroosa fired on three more drones, rendering them incapacitated.

After the long-range attack on the drone, the fourth in total, the Barbaroosa began powerful electronic warfare against the Garveyron in collaboration with the Bentenmaru.

If the opponent is a stationary target with a large extended antenna, electronic jamming can be extremely effective. However, the Garveyron, which was also able to obtain data from observation networks, began firing its naval gun salvo ahead of the Barbaroosa, which was equipped with larger caliber naval guns.

The effective range of a warship is limited more by the radar/sensor-based search radius than by the range of the beam. The focused beam maintains its destructive power until it disperses, but it cannot be effective unless it hits its target. Accurate and powerful radar/sensors are needed to accurately target the target.

The Garveyron fired a volley of 16 shots at the Bentenmaru, which was smaller but also had thinner armor, rather than the battleship Barbaroosa, which had powerful armor. The first salvo missed due to the long range and electronic interference, but it turned out to be a close miss.

When Captain Kenjo learned that the Garveyron was aiming at the Bentenmaru rather than the Barbaroosa, he began a uniform straight line motion without acceleration while allowing the Bentenmaru to take evasive maneuvers. After slowly aiming at the Garveyron, he fired naval gunfire with a reduced focusing rate, similar to what he did to the drones.

Even with the large-caliber guns on battleships, as the firing range increases, the beam focusing rate also decreases. A diffused beam cannot penetrate armored military spacecraft. However, it is enough to damage unarmored radars and exposed sensors, rendering them inoperable. If radar antennas tuned for long distances and wide areas become unusable and sensor accuracy declines, cruisers placed far away from the main force will no longer be able to fulfill their duties as patrol vessels.

The anti-electronic jamming of the Garveyron, which had until then been systematically emitting radar waves in all directions, ceased immediately after being hit by the Barbaroosa's naval gun salvo. In combat airspace, both antennas and sensors are treated as consumable items and replacement parts are ready to be deployed as soon as they are destroyed, but it takes time to fully repair the system and make it usable as it was.

The Barbaroosa fired another volley at the Garveyron, and turned around without seeking to further expand the battle damage. The Garveyron, whose sensors, antenna systems, and other parts essential for patrols were destroyed, suffered only minor damage, and neither the ship itself nor its onboard armament was harmed. The cruiser remained a viable military force.

Despite the fact that two ships, a battleship and a cruiser, could almost certainly destroy the enemy ship if they attacked it when their long-range radar and sensors are disabled, the Bentenmaru, which had been ahead of the Barbaroosa, reversed close to 180 degrees and moved away from the Garveyron.

The Garveyron, which was able to escape this first battle, reacted quickly. Almost immediately, it began accelerating after the two ships, as its communication with the main fleet had jumped.

“That’s right.” Captain Kenjo expanded the battle display on the Barbaroosa's bridge while watching the Garveyron pursue him. “There's no point in sitting there with a ship that can no longer function as a patrol ship because its long-range antennas and sensors are no longer usable. Well, once the damaged radar system is repaired, it will be useful for patrol again, but by then this job should be finished.”

Kenjo, in the captain's seat, switched the dedicated communication back on. “Bentenmaru, Kenjo from the Barbaroosa! I'm going to go blindside Arctroi as planned. As you can see, the Garveyron is chasing me, I think he'll probably follow you, so please take care of him.”

“Are you coming this way?” On the bridge of the Bentenmaru, Marika responded to Captain Kenjo. “If he follows the basic rule of attacking the strongest enemy first, wouldn't the Garveyron pursue the Barbaroosa?”

“*That would be true if it were a ship that fired a salvo aimed at the Barbaroosa first, but the Garveyron aimed first at you, not us. And that judgment was correct at that point. At that distance, a hit wouldn't be able to penetrate the armor of my battleship anyway, so if I were doing the aiming, it would probably be the Bentenmaru, which has thinner armor. If she targets someone who she can do even the slightest amount of damage to, the rest of the battle will be easier. Be careful. The other side is cool-headed enough, and the rebels are in the mood for a fight after being knocked flat on their backs.*”

“Roger that.” Marika checked the latest information on Garveyron, which was accelerating in pursuit. “So, Bentenmaru will now head out to destroy Gueskain's radar.”

The Bentenmaru, which was returning to a loose two-ship formation, took a course away from the Barbaroosa. It turned its course toward the rebel cruiser, which was also on patrol in an outer planet orbit 90 degrees away from the Garveyron.

From now on, the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru will attack the cruisers assigned to patrol Garnet A, which are placed every 90 degrees on the ecliptic plane. Initially, the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru were scheduled to form a two-ship formation and carry out hit-and-run attacks on cruisers operating alone. If your opponent is a single ship, relying on superiority in numbers will make your attack easier and more reliable.

However, subsequent consideration revealed that even if the four targets on the ecliptic were completed in the shortest possible distance, the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru would only make contact with Odette II after its docking with the control station. More precisely, if the Bentenmaru was alone, it would be able to return in time even if it launched a hit-and-run attack on four cruisers on patrol duty, but the Barbaroosa, which lacks maneuverability and acceleration, would not be able to make it in time.

Therefore, the planned trajectory of the two ships was changed and shortened. They cannot ignore any one of the patrol ships, because if even one patrol ship remains on the ecliptic plane, the rebel patrol capability will be maintained to that extent. Therefore, for the second and third patrol ships, the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru, which dispersed after the attack of the first ship, will each attack individually, and the fourth ship, Nanclaud, will be used as a regrouping point for another two-ship attack before rejoining the Odette II. This will reduce the time for the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru to navigate the ecliptic plane to nearly half of the scheduled time for each.

The Garveyron pursued Bentenmaru's trajectory instead of the Barbaroosa as Captain Kenjo had predicted. It would be difficult for a single cruiser to take on a battleship, but the Bentenmaru, whose prototype is a cruiser, would be an easy choice.

“Are they going to catch up?” On the bridge of the Bentenmaru, Marika asked the male mechanic in the radar/sensor seat. Sai, a young mechanic, is in place of Hyakume, normally in charge of radar/sensors but on loan to Silent Whisper, and Hikoza, a veteran from the Imperial fleet, is in place of Schnitzer, who is in charge of battle command on board the Odette II.

“It's okay.” Sai replied while displaying the necessary data on the main screen. “The ship's acceleration exceeds that of a Vesmos class mobile cruiser. The Garveyron’s captain made a mistake in selecting his target. If he had pursued the Barbaroosa instead of this ship, he might still have been able to catch up with her.”

“Even the Barbaroosa is fast enough, though not as fast as we are.”

Pirate ships require faster ‘legs’ than warships. Both the Bentenmaru and the Burbaroosa are active pirate ships that have been tuned up as much as their hulls and budgets allow to improve their high-speed performance.

“Besides, if your opponent is a battleship, the best you can do is injure them even if you can catch up, and since it's a simple one-on-one battle, if you get into a bad firefight, the battle will probably be decided by firepower and armor.”

“So what do we do?” Sandaime in charge of the engines asks.

“With our maximum acceleration, it is impossible for a Vesmos class to catch up with us no matter how hard they try. Should we pull away only after it has caught up a little more?”

“...It's a waste of time though.” Marika glanced at the chronometer in the captain's seat.

“In any case, the attack on the Nanclaud on the other side of Garnet A has to be timed with the Barbaroosa. The timing of meeting up can be adjusted as much as you like after the first battle with tge Gueskain.”

While mumbling, Marika put together the expected development of the battle. “Okay, speed up. There's no guarantee that the remaining three cruisers will be there when we arrive.”

“Roger.” Sandaime turned to the engine control panel. “Okay, I'll start increasing the output now.”

Soon, the distance between them and the pursuing Garveyron began to widen.

“Oh my…” Coorie was the first to notice the change in the Garveyron's course. “You're a quick study, captain. Garveyron, you've lost your pursuit trajectory.”

Marika looked down at the sub-display in the captain's seat. “Where!? Did they change their target to the Barbaroosa when they realized they couldn't catch up to us? Or did they join up with the main group?”

“Neither. Their trajectory barely brushes past Garnet A and merges with Nanclaud on the other side.” Coorie extended the projected trajectory of the pursuing Garveyron on the display.

“After we deal with Gueskain over here, do we expect them to ambush us as we head for Nanclaud, or do they put up a joint front with Nanclaud? With two cruisers against us, I'm not sure it will be as easy as it is now.”

“Not two ships, but maybe four.” Sai reported new information. “The Gueskain has started retreating in the direction of the Nanclaud. The Arctroi doesn’t appear to be moving yet, but rather than take on the battleship alone, they could retreat and intercept with four ships.”

“As expected, the rebel army is used to actual battles, so they can respond quickly.” Marika immediately looked at Gueskain 's predicted trajectory superimposed on the display. It seems that the cruisers on patrol duty saw that they would be easily destroyed by a single ship and switched their battle strategy to a combined intercept.

“If they abandon their current position, they won't be able to serve as a patrol ship, but just being in the airspace around here is quite a nuisance.” Marika watched the trajectory of the Garveyron gradually moving away from behind. The reason the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru left the Odette II's direct guard and went around attacking the patrol ship was to keep the Odette II's approach to control station as secret as possible.

The patrol function of one ship has already been lost, one of the remaining three ships has left its post, and the remaining one will probably start moving soon. The remaining one will be on the move in the near future. Since it cannot accelerate properly with its huge antennae deployed, it is safe to assume that it will lose its patrol function as soon as it starts to move.

“Once a cruiser is in combat mode, how long do you think it will take to return to its original patrol mode?”

After a pause, Coorie answered Marika’s unprovoked question. “I think it would take less than an hour to just deploy your own antenna. Once you start reconnecting the large antenna that you disconnected, it will take several hours. Of course, I didn't take into account the time it would take to return to their original position.”

Most military spacecraft have antennas and sensors that are expendable in combat, and can be quickly replaced and redeployed.

“Just deploying their own antenna would be useful enough for a patrol ship.”

Considering the Bentenmaru's radar performance, Marika looked at the fleet layout in the airspace around Garnet A. Even during combat maneuvers, the Bentenmaru can maintain the accuracy necessary for long-range artillery and torpedo attacks. Although rarely used because the ship is unable to perform combat maneuvers, but if she fully deploys her backup antenna, the accuracy of her patrol function will increase by an order of magnitude.

“The Arctroi has started moving.” Sai announced.

“Information from the Barbaroosa. They have also changed course, setting the final rendezvous point to the current location of Nanclaud.”

“We need to change the order of business.”

According to the data to date, the acceleration performance of the Garveyron, the Gueskain, and the Arctroi are about equal. The Bentenmaru's acceleration is higher than those and the Barbaroosa's is lower.

“The Gueskain is in front, the Garveyron is behind...If we start chasing the Gueskain now, will we be able to catch up with they before they meet up with the Nanclaud at the rear?”

“It's possible.” Sandaime replied. “If the Gueskain is assuming the Nanclaud's current position as the meeting point, even if they take the shortest trajectory, we will be able to catch up with them before they meet and link up. However…” In addition to several predicted trajectories drawn, Sandaime also changed the Arctroi's current location. “If the Nanclaud advances toward us, that will not be the case. If the Nanclaud, the Gueskain, and the Arctroi join forces before we catch up with the Gueskain, we will have to deal with three cruisers in front of us and one behind us at the same time.”

“That's not such a bad situation.” Marika grumbled. “The objective of this mission is to pull the rebel patrol ships out of position and punch a hole in the rebel patrol network. If the cruisers leave their current position and turn to intercept us, we will have achieved our immediate objective.”

“Our reconnaissance drones will be in range soon.” Hikoza's hoarse voice from the battle command seat was heard on the bridge.

“Ah, please take control.” Marika said, knowing that long-range precision shooting yields better results if the firing timing is left to the crew. “With our cannon, it may not be as easy as with the Barbaroosa's.”

“Not a problem.”

The Bentenmaru's main gun is not as large-caliber as the Barbaroosa’s. At long ranges, the penetration power decreases, and even if left alone, the beam spreads and the irradiation area increases.

“However, since the caliber is different from the Barbaroosa's cannon, I'll be using both main guns. The shooting data has been input. Get the spaceship setup for a straight shot.”

“Roger. Acceleration stopped.”

The Bentenmaru's propulsion, which had been rapidly accelerating until then, stopped. On the Bentenmaru’s foredeck, which had entered inertial navigation, the two triple-barreled main guns, which were already aimed correctly, fired out six beams.

The six beams, aimed based on calculations of all conditions including distance from the target, relative velocity, spatial conditions, and gravity propagation, cut through space almost as one.

“Okay, you can resume acceleration.”

“Before confirming the hit?” While saying that, Sandaime has already resumed the acceleration that was temporarily cut.

“It’s not necessary.” Hikoza leisurely reclined Schnitzer’s oversized seat. “It's long range, so waiting for a hit is a waste of time. If it hits, the redhead will let us know.”

“Damn those pirates, they just take someone else's equipment and destroy the antennas as they please!”

The reactions of the observation drones in the path of the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru, which had split into two groups, disappeared one after another.

The observation drones being destroyed are only those placed within the effective range of the paths of the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru, and they are not a large number in total. Even so, the long-range observation drones, which have virtually no armor and are large in area relative to their mass, are losing their functionality one after another from salvos fired from long distances.

“It's not just an observation aircraft, it's also equipped with a directional radiation system for deception, so it's not a cheap aircraft. Even so, although we have already told them our current location, it is still a great feat to fire precise shots without fail.”

Jackie passed the information on the lost aircraft, displayed on the observation network's management system, to the pirate ship's dedicated line.

“Even the cruiser fleet on patrol duty would be defeated if they remained silent, so they banded together to intercept them. As expected, only the rebel forces have been trained in actual battles, but their reactions are still slow. In a war, if you don't use as much force as you can at the right time, even the most winnable battles will be lost.”

Jackie looked for the shadow of the Odette II in the observation net. “If everything goes according to plan, they should be about half way to the control station. ...hmm, it looks like they’re well hidden.”

The Odette II's active stealth seems to be working smoothly. Now that one of the patrol ships stationed on her ecliptic plane has lost its functionality and two have left the scene, there is no sign of the Odette II, which should be sailing on the opposite side of Garnet A from the remaining Nanclaud.

“So, how will the main force respond to this situation?” Jackie enlarged the status of the rebel army's main force above the pole on the display.

“Oh, it's starting to move, as expected.” Jackie turned on the dedicated line's microphone switch. “Lunar Lion, Jackie to the pirates. I'm sure you can see them over there, but the main group has started moving.”

“*Lunar Lion from the Barbaroosa and Captain Kenjo. It was later than I expected.*” Captain Blackbeard responded. “*Judging from the movements of the cruiser on patrol duty on the front lines, I thought they were a little more familiar with actual combat.*”

“There are six major alliances in the region, so I have to think that it's better if we start moving soon.” Jackie transferred everything from the main unit's initial response to the predicted future trajectory to the pirate ship.

“Three battleships, eight cruisers, and a large mothership that lacks mobility seems to have stayed behind, but a strike fleet for anti-ship warfare, centered on sturdy starships for frontal combat, is on the move. …The number of ships has increased a little since I escaped.”

“*Are you sure about the direction?*” Captain Kenjo asked for confirmation. “*Is it correct that all ships have started moving to the current position of the Nanclaud?*”

“They can still make as many corrections as they like, but the direction is definitely in that direction. As you can see, it's the distance. No matter how fast you move, no matter if you let the fast spacecraft go ahead, you won't be able to make it in time to meet the Barbaroosa and the Nanclaud. But if we hold out, we can rush to cover them and intercept the returning pirate ship.”

“*I see. But if we were going to throw our weight behind this, we should have done it as soon as we started moving.*”

“I agree.”

“*And since we are short on forces, we can't afford to take advantage of the opponent's convenient openings. Sorry to have kept you waiting, red-haired general, it's your turn.*”

“Well, I thought it would turn out that way in a situation like this.” Jackie clapped his hands encouragingly. “So, what are your orders? What should I do?”

“*Just drag along the entire rebel fleet that's on the move, that’s fine.*” Kenjo said, sounding like he was about to burst into laughter. “*If possible, it would be nice to break off the rebel forces one by one and have them run around Garnet A, but it would probably be impossible to get make every ship leave the chain of command. I'll leave the appearance pattern up to you. Make decoys or whatever appear on your precious unmanned observation network and tear the rebel army apart.*”

“You say that so easily.” Jackie switched the control panel in front of him to manipulate data from the unmanned observation network. “There are a few problems.”

“*What?*”

“At present, the Garveyron, which you just attacked, is detecting the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru with its own equipment, not via the observation network. In this situation, no matter how many decoys you run, they will be able to tell the real ones from the fake ones in no time. If I were you, I would have the Garveyron track the Bentenmaru and have the Arctroi track the Barbaroosa.”

“*In that case, the path is clear. If we can work together with the Bentenmaru to stop the Garveyron and get out of the detection range of individual ships, then we can do whatever we want.*”

“Next question. You have only three ships in all. The rebels, on the other hand, have four cruisers on patrol, three battleships, and eight cruisers that have moved out from above the Pole, for a total of 15 ships. Since they know that only three real ships exist, the rebel army will definitely use a pursuit formation of two or more ships. Is it possible to accomplish your order of dismantling the fleet and dragging it around?”

“*What if we also called for reinforcements?*”

“Reinforcements!” Jackie managed to swallow the words ‘imperial fleet,’ which almost jumped out of his throat. “Did you call for reinforcements?”

“*That's right, reinforcements.*” Kenjo continued happily. “*Since this area is uninhabited airspace, they can do whatever they want, but even the Rebel Army should be prepared for reinforcements to come rushing in if something happens while doing various things within the territory of the Galactic Empire, right?*”

“…They made a lot of assumptions.” Jackie answered dumbly. “Of course, the most frightening thing is the imperial fleet that protects the peace and security of the galaxy. Uh, what, did you call me?”

“*Ah, I've been calling out to my fellow pirates, but I haven't heard from any of them yet because they're busy. However, if the unmanned observation network that you are so proud of for the Stellar Slayer can grasp the spatial situation of Garnet A, wouldn't it be possible to reproduce the pre- drive that looks like a spaceship is about to fly in?*”

Jackie's hands stopped. “...Hey, can I ask you something?”

“*We're in the middle of a battle, the situation is fluid. Make it quick.*”

“Are you delegating all of those ad-lib strategy changes and instructions to others?”

‘*Bahahaha,*’ came the sound of a bold laugh. “*I envy you if all your scenarios proceed as planned. Yes, that’s right. For the most part, I just follow events as they happen. Thanks to this, it is difficult to maintain my crew member’s trust.*”

In the case of a warship, the captain is decided by a letter of appointment and orders, but in the case of a pirate ship, this is not the case.

“I see. That's a big deal.”

“*Well, what do you think? Can the sensors on the drones reproduce the pre-drive phenomenon?*”

“Wait a minute. I'm going to run a simulation to see how large a pre-jump phenomenon can be detected by the drones.”

“*You have the data from when we jumped, right?*”

Jackie's hands, which had started moving again, stopped.

“*I wouldn't mind the Barbaroosa, the Bentenmaru, or even the Odette II, but considering the pattern, wouldn't it be easier to use something large like the Bentenmaru?*”

“...If I play back the observation pattern exactly as it is, I'll spoil it! Wait a moment. Now, by appropriately arranging my observed patterns of the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru, I will fabricate a pre-jump phenomenon that will look like other spacecraft!”

“*If possible, do it before the rebel army joins up. We and the Bentenmaru will stop the pursuing Garveyron.*”

“You're a real rough pirate, aren't you?” Jackie asked, moving his hands. “Hey, if we project too many pre-jump phenomena, the rebels might run away from this area, right?”

“*If that's the case, it's not too inconvenient.*”

“Damn it!”

“*However, I don't think the rebels will run away unless they are forced into a very unfavorable situation.*”

“Oh ho?” Jackie retrieved the data on the Bentenmaru's pre-jump phenomenon and compared it with other data from ships of the same size and output, look at the range of variation in the detected numbers, and create fake data using random numbers.

Jackie continued talking while he worked. “Why do you think so?”

“*The deployed fleet and the facilities they've expanded for the Stellar Slayer is getting too big. The rebel forces may not be aware that the longer the deployed fleet lingers, the more likely it is that their whereabouts will be detected. The later they arrive, the greater the risk of being chased by the imperial fleet in imperial territory, but the fact that the number of ships has been increasing steadily over this period means that they have no intention of running away. they're full of determination.*”

“Maybe they can't run anymore, and they can't retreat.”

There was a pause, like a sigh, before Kenjo answered. “*If so, that's a problem. It would be easier for us if they could escape. I don't know what people who don't have the luxury of being cornered will do when they get desperate. So, please limit the* pre-*jump phenomenon to the extent that it panics and confuses the rebel army.*”

“I’ll do my best to accommodate your order.” Jackie analyzed the fake data that he had quickly made up, adjusting it so that it can be queried in fine detail. “One last thing.”

“*What is it?*”

“Regardless of whether it is electronic interference or a decoy ghost, if a jump phenomenon occurs in a place that can only be detected by Garnet A's observation network, and it becomes known that it is a fake due to forged data, the rebels will know for sure that the pirates have intervened in the unmanned observation network. You'll never be able to use the same move again.”

“*That’s not much of a problem, either.*”

“What!?”

“*I know it's not a move I can use more than once. If we can use it this time, that's fine. We are not in a position to fight a long battle, and if it becomes one, then we'll have to consider other options. For now, all we can think about is the success of the task at hand.*”

“It took me a lot of trouble to get this network to do what you wanted.” Jackie, who created several pre- pre-jump phenomena in quick succession, decided to check whether the data could be identified as fake through a complete analysis.

“If the pre-jump phenomenon is okay, what should we do after that?”

“*What happens after that is obvious. After the pre-jump phenomenon, a spaceship appears. With this, you can make the other party have to work harder than having the Barbaroosa or the Bentenmaru clone themselves and have them confirm that they are fakes.*”

“Oh, I thought it would come to that. Which fleet should the emerging spaceship belong to? Would you like to see the Tau system defense fleet or the elite of the Imperial fleet?”

“*I'll take a licensed pirate.*” Kenjo said in a light-hearted voice. “*I'm sure the general has at least a list of active pirate ships with licenses and identification patterns that might come up for this job, right?*”

Jackie's hands stopped again. “Seriously, Captain Blackbeard doesn't make it easy for me.” His fingers started again. “Yeah, none of the data is necessarily up-to-date, but at least it's newer and more detailed than the patterns the rebels have. If you have any requests for the electronic ghost running around, I'll listen to it.”

Jackie called up the prepared data on pirate ships on the display. “Which pirate ship will you summon? Do you want the Margarita, the Glamorous Lydis, or the Mein Jugend Arcadia?”

“*The Arcadia is fine.*” The tension in Kenjo's voice clearly dropped. “*Use Glamorous Lydis and Admiral Hornblower, then Sinbad and the Karyobinga.*”

“Oh?” Both were fast transports and cruisers, and the Karyobinga, an experimental battleship, was a pirate ship roughly the same size as the Bentenmaru. “In other words, you called out to the pirate ships in the area.” Jackie searched for the latest information on each pirate ship as he ran the data he had through the computer to create electronic ghosts.

“*Because of our connections, I have reached out to all the people I work with in the same industry. But, if the data on the Bentenmaru's pre-jump phenomenon is slightly colored, it would be easier to use for spacecraft of similar size, right?*”

“Even though they look similar, the difference in mass is almost double...”

“*Well, do something about it. The Bentenmaru and I are going to have another battle with the Garveyron. I'm sure you can see what's going on over there, so when we're out of the Garveyron's direct detection range, you can start with the pre-jump phenomenon.*”

According to the battle records, the two pirate ships that attacked the Garveyron, which was on a patrol mission in the orbit of a planet outside the Garnet A’s ecliptic plane, only deprived it of its patrol function and moved on to their next prey. Deprived of her patrol functions, the Garveyron quickly moved into pursuit of pirate ships, as her cruiser functions remained largely undamaged.

The rebels had deployed four cruisers every 90 degrees on the ecliptic plane in outer planet orbit for patrol duty. After assaulting the first cruiser in a two-ship formation, the pirates now split into two groups. They each try to take on the Arctroi and the Gueskain, which are on either side of Garnet A, with a single ship.

Cruisers on patrol have limited mobility because their bulky antennas are extended and connected to external antennas. Deciding that they would only become targets as long as they were on patrol duty, the rebels ordered the the Arctroi and the Gueskain, their next targets, to fall back to Nanclaue, the most distant cruiser, and at the same time ordered the Garveyron, which was in pursuit of the Bentenmaru, to join them via the shortest possible distance.

The battle between one cruiser and one battleship is clear. On the other hand, if it's four cruisers versus one battleship and one cruiser, the outcome is also clear.

However, the pirates' primary objective was to stop the patrol mission of the cruisers, and once one patrol function was destroyed and the two patrol vessels left their duty stations, the objective was more than half accomplished.

The Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru, which had split into two groups and circled the Arctroi and the Gueskain, but the cruiser they were aiming for started retreating, and the Garveyron, which had been on a pursuit trajectory to the Bentenmaru, just barely grazed Garnet A and took a trajectory to join the Nanclaud.

With the Barbaroosa still at full speed and the Bentenmaru slowing somewhat to match their speed, the two pirate vessels approached the Garveyron, which was proceeding straight ahead, in a pincer attack from both sides. With pirate ships approaching from two directions, the Garveyron chose a trajectory that evacuated towards Garnet A's southern sky.

The pirate ships turned toward Garnet A’s northern sky without pursuing the fleeing the Garveyron. By that time, the main body of the rebel fleet, which had gathered above the pole, had begun its descent toward the ecliptic plane.

As the pirate ships moved, they gradually destroyed the huge observation network made up of drones placed in the surrounding airspace. However, the observation network of 256 drones deployed over a wide area could not be shaken by a slight loss.

Around the same time that the two pirate ships rejoined and began to ascend towards the northern sky, the observation network detected multiple pre-jump phenomena in outer planet orbits.

“Something's not right.” In the Silent Whisper's cockpit, Hyakume switches between displays one after another with a grimace on his face.

"Yeah." Nora, who was sitting in the operator's seat, answered reluctantly.

“At the same time that the pre-jump phenomenon was projected on the observation network, the rebel army's fleet configuration was greatly disrupted. The two pirate ships that attacked the patrol fleet on the ecliptic plane turned to the north sky, so the patrol fleet should have just returned to their original positions, but they instead they are chasing the pirate fleet. No matter how many unknowns, whose affiliations are unknown, have increased the rebels are in too much of a rush... Blackbeard's scenarios rarely go so well.”

“Is that what the Barbaroosa’s Captain Blackbeard’s friends think of him?” Hyakume stopped switching the display.

“No, it's not that bad, because fleet misalignments and ad hoc mission assignments are not that uncommon when a hodgepodge of ships gets into the fray. I've been looking for the Black Swan for a while now, but I can't see it.”

“The Black Swan.” Nora repeated the name of the old familiar pirate ship.

“I thought the name was faked with transponders and the hull was made up from scraps brought in from somewhere else.”

“If that's the case, that's fine, but it's also true that there was a battleship-sized spaceship called the Black Swan around here. However, in the rebel army's remaining fleet above the pole, I can't find anything else that seems to be the Black Swan or a spaceship disguised as that name.”

“Did they withdraw because they were exposed?” Nora shook her head as she thought of it.

“It can't be that easy. There's no way they'd build such a large spaceship just for the sake of false pretense, and then withdraw it even if their true identity was revealed...or maybe the entire Black Swan that we thought we saw right in front of our eyes was actually a non-existent, electronically created ghost ship.”

“I don't know, I haven't tried touching it in front of me, but using the Lunar Lion's cloaking device, which I've heard about, I think it might be possible to do something like that...” Hyakume looked around at the layered multiple displays around the cockpit, including the two-dimensional and three-dimensional ones. “If a spaceship is equipped with a device that makes it invisible, wouldn't it be possible to make it appear in any shape depending on how you use it?”

“Why don't you grab him and ask him directly?” Nora pointed to the Lunar Lion, whose name was listed on the private line as the fifth ship after the Barbaroosa, the Bentenmaru, the Odette II, and the Silent Whisper. “Isn't he on our side now?”

“Well, that's how it is supposed to be.” Hyakume started operating the control panel again. “If I were to ask the redhead that question right now, and he could answer it in no uncertain terms, would I be able to trust it?”

“Oh, aren’t we pirates?” Nora laughed happily.

“Pirates only believe what they have confirmed for themselves.” The two voices joined together.

“Even though our current position is far outward of Garnet A, even though we've been able to observe so many things so clearly, even without using an unmanned observation network, we can clearly see through to the Rebel fleet lingering over the Pole, but I just can't see the Black Swan, which is something that bothers me. It's not small either, and I don’t expect it to have any stealth. Well, I don't think it's just a shipwreck, since it's shown us tricks like disappearing in front of our eyes many times, but it's weird that we can't find the spaceship we’re looking for at the critical moment when the Odette II is about to dock at the control station.”

“The fact that it isn't caught on our radar or sensor, or displayed on the unmanned observation network...” Nora considered each system's blind spots and areas where the observation network was thin. “…Are you in the immediate vicinity of Garnet A or coupled to a larger spacecraft or station?”

“Well, she's that big and that battered. If I had the opportunity and time to spare, I'd probably do a lot of repainting and repairs, but could it be with the mother ship of the fleet?” Hyakume re-scanned the data that had been obtained under different sensing conditions.

“That mothership isn’t the kind of ship that carries around a floating dock, is it?” Nora called up data on the large mothership that arrived in the rebel fleet as a maintenance and supply depot. Although it can perform maintenance and repairs in space and can operate a certain number of carrier-based aircraft at once, its character is similar to that of a large transport ship in charge of resupply.

“Besides, with the rest of the fleet in full battle, how can they be expected to take the time to make repairs?”

“No...I found it.” Hyakume began rescanning specific airspace in line with the newly picked up data. “It was docked and the reaction from the station was so large that it was being ignored by the settings. The Black Swan is with the control station directly above the Garnet A’s pole.”

“Is that the control station?” The control station above Garnet A, which was finally captured by optical camera, appeared to be swaying like a haze, being roasted by a layer of high-temperature plasma called the corona from the surface of the red giant star. The images obtained are distributed to all ships for reference by the landing force.

“There's a thermal equilibrium shield, so it's not like you're directly exposed to Garnet A's radiation at that distance.” Lynn looked up from the control station, where she had managed to make up a discernible image by a lot of compensations and corrections.

“If you get close enough to dock, you will be within range of the station's thermal equilibrium shield, so you don't have to worry about heat.”

“Well, it's very close to the star though.” Ririka looked at the predicted trajectory for forced docking with the control station. “Even at its closest approach, the Odette II still has plenty of room in its thermal limit. I'm glad my it’s a red giant star. If it was an active main sequence star with prominences spouting all over the place, we’d have to worry about the sails evaporating before docking.”

“I'm also curious about the fact that it's directly above a red giant star.” Gruier said in a restrained voice. “Is a control station supposed to look like that?”

Although it is difficult to be certain due to the low resolution, the control station that appears just above the red giant star looks like a giant spider with countless legs outstretched.

“If it's been left alone for over a century, I wouldn't be surprised by what happened to it.” Ririka looked at the station, floating like a black island above the red plasma layer.

“The problem is that now that thing is alive and trying to do bad things using the red giant star under its feet. If the mechanism is alive and dockable as a station, I have no complaints.”

Ririka looked around the bridge, which felt quite small because it was filled with not only the usual bridge personnel, but also Barbaroosa's ground squadron commander, Bentenmaru's Schnitzer, and other captains. “Do you think you can clear the docking procedure to the control station?”

“Clearance was returned automatically.” Marii answered from the navigator's seat. “I think we can go with the key and data provided.”

“Well then, let's go.” Ririka stared at the control station just above the pole, magnified in the display. “This is the crux of the matter. If we get this close to Garnet A, we can emit a little infrared and they won't be able to find us. Sails and mast retracted, head to the station at maximum acceleration!”

“Roger!” Ai, in the helmsman's seat, readjusted her grip on the helm.

“Normal propulsion, transitioning to maximum acceleration.” Yayoi announces from the engineer's seat.

The Odette II began accelerating while stowing the sails and masts that had been deployed on three sides in preparation for docking. The yards were stowed in the mast while plasma propulsion flames were sprayed from the engine section, and then the nine masts were folded along the slender hull to begin acceleration directly above the red giant star.

Although it passes above the corona, the uppermost plasma atmosphere of a star, the resistance from the gas is greater than in planetary orbit. The Odette II, with all her masts stowed away and her hull shaken by the prominence of the erupting plasma, returns to the slender hull she had when she entered port, and closes the distance to the station.

As we approach, the control station's bizarre full extent becomes apparent. The station, which seems to have a thermal equilibrium shield to convert the radiation of the red giant star into energy, has a number of observation rods protruding from its lower part as antennas. The distorted shape of the station, which looked as if it had been hastily built during the war by adding necessary parts to a block structure, was unbalanced even compared to older space cities that had been built up over the years. Moreover, the entire structure is sooty black, as if it had been so from the beginning, or perhaps because it was burned by the red giant star over a long period of time.

You can tell that it's an active station because the hastily installed navigation lights are flashing at the four corners and at the top, but the overall appearance looks like an avant-garde sculpture in the shape of the sun or some burnt-out scrap metal.

“...It looks like a ghost castle.” Ririka spoke for everyone on the bridge.

“It looks like there's a tattered spaceship attached to it.”

“It’s the Black Swan.” Schnitzer answered, scanning the outline of the control station with the sensor system built into his armored spacesuit. Ririka raised her voice as she saw the huge body that was unsuitable for the Odette II's bridge, which was full of delicate machines and crew members.

“The Black Swan!? It’s disguised as a pirate ship that sunk a long time ago?”

“That's right. To be more precise, it's a spaceship that imitated the Black Swan's transponder to make it look like a shipwreck. I don't think it has finished its role though.”

A spacecraft with a working main engine would have its navigation lights flashing even while docked, but the almost all-black Black Swan appears to be dead in contact with its control station, which looks like a reef with observation rods sticking out like spider legs.

“...I don't think there's any point in asking since there are no experts.” Ririka muttered to no one in particular.

“Is that control station really alive? Is the Stellar Slayer, a monster from a previous era, just a name, with only the outside barely surviving?”

“…It’s alive.” Lynn reported. “In the visible light range, there are only navigation lights, but that station is connected to a powerful energy response comparable to that of a military ship, and a fairly thick communication network in both normal and hyperspace. It looks like a haunted house, but based on the energy and communication information, the station is alive and functioning.”

“Is it armed?” Ririka asked with a dissatisfied look on her face. “As the redhead said, the station is supposed to be used as a weapon in combat airspace, but there isn't a single weapon for self-defense?”

“Considering the energy reaction, it wouldn't be surprising if there was at least a set of anti-aircraft guns.”

Following Schnitzer, Lynn announced. “We can't detect any normal radar signatures, let alone fire control signatures. Well, if you want to use radar in such close proximity to a star, you'll have to bring something very powerful to make it practical.”

“At least you don't have to worry about getting shot until you get on board.” Ririka summarized only the convenient parts. “Okay, Ai, put the Odette II on the control station. There's a docking port open just on the other side where the Black Swan is berthing.”

“Roger that.”

“You can't expect any guidance, but is that okay?”

“It's okay.” Ai replied from the helm while imagining Odette II's posture approaching the control station. “I practiced unguided approach and forced docking on the Bentenmaru.”

“Unlike the Bentenmaru, the Odette II does not have an arm for forced docking.”

“There's a proper docking port on the station side, so it's okay.” Ai confirmed the Odette II's current position, speed, and attitude on the displays and monitors around the helmsman's seat.

“Now, begin final approach to the control station.” Ririka raised the microphone for onboard communication. “This is to inform the passengers on board. The ship will soon dock at its final destination. Please be prepared to disembark without forgetting anything!”

Communication with Odette II, which was supposed to be connected via a dedicated line, was cut off at the same time as the ship docked with the control station.

“The control station disappeared along with the Odette II!?” On the bridge of the Bentenmaru, Marika was asking Hyakume, who had reported the first news.

“*That's right. As you probably know from your observation network, the control station over the North Pole disappeared as soon as the Odette II docked.*” Hyakume gave only the plainly observable facts. “*Around this time, a strong jump phenomenon was measured on the observation network. I repeat, the control station, along with the Odette II, has disappeared from this star area. Probably waited for docking and jumped.*”

“That’s…” After being at a loss for words, Marika screamed. “It's impossible! There's no way you could jump from so close to such a big star!!”

“*The Stellar Slayer is a system that allows energy beams to jump from directly above a star.*” Hyakume continued in a controlled voice. “*If you can decipher the structure of space, see how it will affect your jump, and make adjustments, then jumping from close to the source of gravity is not an impossible feat. And the operation side probably has many years of observation data as well.*”

“So...where did they jump to?”

“*Tracking the control station!*” Jackie's voice came over the dedicated line. “*The jump must be to a frontier zone, and the Lunar Lion has a direct line to the Black Swan, so it can be tracked!*”

“*Redhead, wait!*” Captain Blackbeard shouted. “*Leave your destination data before you jump!*”

“All rebel ships are retreating into outer planet orbit.” Coorie reported. “They’re going to jump, no matter how you look at it.”

“They can escape.” After muttering, Marika spoke again. “Did they escape?”

The sub-display on the captain's seat displayed a short data set. Almost by instinct alone, Marika read the numbers and symbols displayed and realized that they were spatial coordinates for a point in the galaxy.

“Around here.” Coorie displayed a map of the entire galaxy on the main display. A red bright spot flashes in the frontier area near the tip of Orion's arm. “A frontier zone, the interstellar space of the Seven Star Federation.”

“*The Lunar lion jumped.*” Hyakume reported. “*All of the jump data has not been analyzed yet, but it seems consistent to presume that he jumped toward the last spatial coordinates he sent.*”

“Frontier zone, Seven Star Federation.” Marika mentioned the name of a frontier star district, which she had heard of as one of the rebel ship's affiliations. She looked up and saw a red bright spot continuing to blink in one corner of the spiral galaxy on the main display.

Marika closed her eyes and took a deep breath, the opened her eyes. “We're going after them. All ships, prepare to jump!”

Afterword (Asahi Novels edition)

Oh no, I've done it again!　Black, white, and I haven't even thought about the next color yet.

So, we present to you "Miniskirt Space Pirates 5: The Silver Rescue Ship". What a Star Trek: Next Generation cliffhanger. Young people probably don't know what that means.

American television series are usually contracted in six-month units called seasons. If it's popular, it will continue; if it's not, it'll be canceled. Even popular series can take a break for about half a year, and if a series is not as popular, we don't know if there will be a next season.

In such a situation, in order to somehow keep viewers interested in the next episode, producers sometimes use an old trick from the days when silent movies were shown every week. It ends the exact moment when the hero falls off a cliff, falls from a waterfall, or is about to be shot by a villain! It sounds good to say that it keeps the audience's interest, but it's more like a method of instigating, running away, and connecting to the next episode. I'm sorry.

In the next volume, what is the whereabouts of the Odette II which jumped with the ground forces and the station? What is Marika's plan to chase after her friends and mother who were taken along with the spaceship!? Dear redhead, what will happen next? What on earth are you planning to do?

One of the proverbs that I've learned many times as a writer is, ‘A bad idea is like taking a break.’ As a writer, I think about the story a lot. Thinking about future developments. When I come up with one idea, I try to think about whether it's really okay and whether there are other ways to develop it.

“I have no choice but to think about it as long as I have the energy. And energy is physical strength.” These are the words of Shinichi Hoshi, but this business is also a test of physical strength. No, it's true. I don't have much to say about muscle strength and stamina, but when the deadline approaches, I feel like the wrinkles in my brain are being stretched out.

Another thing I need to think about is the next volume. No, it's time. Once you've come up with an idea, you don't have to worry about it if you test it out and get satisfied with it before moving on, but if you run out of time, you end up moving forward without really knowing whether it's the right idea or not. Even bad ideas can be useful in convincing yourself, but it's also true that if you think too much, you'll stop.

The sixth volume, which is probably set in a remote area, is scheduled to be released soon. Oh, even though the new episodes of “ARIEL” are being written in series, I wish they didn't have so many gaps in between, making it look like The Empire Strikes Back.

Again, I don’t know the date. Sorry to everyone involved.

Sasamoto Yuichi

The casting of the main cast has been decided, and the "Moretsu ♡ Space Pirates" anime is steadily progressing toward the start of its broadcast in 2011. I am glad to see that director Tatsuo Sato is putting so much effort into writing the scenario at such a rapid pace.

Afterword (KADOKAWA version)

The Silver Rescue Ship after nine years.

As I said before, combat is a time-consuming process.

Since we are starting a space pirate story, we have to do space combat. That is what the author wants to do and what readers expect.

However, space combat is not something that happens easily. You won't be able to enter into a combat situation unless you define enemies and allies, consider the conflict situation, and develop a situation that can't be resolved through discussion or negotiation.

In the first place, combat is a last resort when opposing factions cannot come to a conclusion that satisfies both parties no matter how much they talk and negotiate, and it is a battle that is used as a last resort when opposing forces cannot come to a conclusion that satisfies both sides. It takes a lot of effort just to push a character who is supposed to behave rationally and intelligently to that point.

It would be a lot easier if the story were to just set up enemies and allies, and then just go on with the day-to-day life without fighting. I might get scolded by people from various quarters because the story doesn't progress, but it's okay to have volumes like that once in a while. Probably.

Even if you manage to get to the point where you just want to fight, you should think about the strength of both sides, the layout of the combat airspace, the situation, deploy your forces with the intention of both sides winning, and start the battle properly. In order to do this, it is impossible to draw a convincing space battle unless you explain various things such as military strength and detection range, and include individual circumstances.

The more the characters think and act rationally, and the more the world develops according to a coherent setting, the less likely battles will occur. That's right, combat is an extraordinary destructive action in that world, and what's more, allies and enemies alike can unleash their military power without any restrictions. It means that you are willing to rush into a situation where you can do as many insane and barbaric things as you want. In that case, neither enemy nor ally will open a battle unless they are in a situation where they can definitely win, and then both sides will have to create a situation that they think is advantageous. Since a battle involves large-scale destruction of enemy and ally, it would be easier, easier, and even cheaper for both sides to do so without such destruction, so they would devise various strategies and take action to do so.

If the character were one in which both friend and foe were willing to fight, and the first one to fire a shot before discussing it would win, it would be easy to start a battle, but this would probably shorten the life span of the character.

It is very hard to start and finish a battle, as you will learn when you try it.

So, why is there constant fighting in the real world?　Well, that's a scary thing to think about, so let's move on to the next topic.

For the record, we have included the afterwards as it appeared when it was first published.

When I was writing Silver Rescue Ship, Moretsu♡ Space Pirates, an anime about miniskirt space pirates, was in progress and was scheduled to air in November. I had heard that there was a plan to broadcast in high definition, in line with the complete transition to digital terrestrial broadcasting.

However, plans are just plans, and they are subject to change due to various circumstances. Broadcasting actually began in January 2012.

As the author of the original work, data such as the final draft of the scenario and storyboards arrived one after another at my home in the far northern lands. However, I was a lazy author who did not even check the data, partly because I had publicly stated that I would pass the project with an "all OK" rating. Because, you know, it's a lot of work.

What is the difference between a novel and a screenplay? Fortunately, Sasamoto not only writes animation scripts, but also audio drama scripts. What is the difference between a novel and a screenplay written for the same characters?

It may seem obvious, but the meaning is different depending on whether you read it, have it shown to you, or listen to it.

A novel is meant to be read, and when it becomes a book, it becomes a finished product.

A script is just one step in the process of creating a work in the form of video or audio data. In the case of anime, it is something that is shown in the end, and in the case of audio dramas, it is something that is heard.

Actually, I learned the basics of writing such a script before my debut. My teacher was Takeshi Shudo, famous for Minky Momo and Pokemon.

Shuto looked at the work of a young man who had attended the Scenario Research Institute with such enthusiasm that it would be a shame to dismiss it as polite. The three months I spent studying under Shuto were much more useful in creating the Sasamoto I am today than the two years I spent at the Scenario Research Institute.

When you read an anime script, you have to imagine what will happen next and develop the image in your mind, and even read the scenario for each episode to see if it is a foreshadowing for the next series structure.

Even storyboards are not easy to decipher. The storyboards for Moretsu♡Space Pirates were well-organized and easy to read, but even so, it was hard to read the pictures, dialogue, and explanations, and it was difficult to interpret the acting and expressions.

In that case, it is your duty as the original author to trust the staff, concentrate on your own work, and increase the number of books published to get your name out there before the main anime series starts.

As for the broadcast date, it's human nature to want to see it as soon as possible, but there is nothing the original author can do about it. I know that it would be better if they take their time to make it, and the time after it is completed and released to the world is definitely longer than the time spent waiting for it.

If I had lived in Tokyo, I might have been able to help out a little more. But, as I had declared that I would leave everything to him, I guess I had to leave it to him.

And then, the ungrateful apprentice contacted his mentor, who had helped him a long time ago, for the first time in a long while. Thanks to him, we decided to animate the original work.

The answer is still in the mail.

I'm very happy to hear that the original work will be adapted into an anime.

Even if you are not involved in the production of an anime I recommend that you at least show up for the recording sessions once in a while.

You may get smoked out of the studio, but you may discover something new.

At least the original author's enthusiasm can be conveyed.

I didn't say anything about the script or storyboards, but just watched the dubbing silently, smiling happily.

That alone will improve the quality of the work.

Please don't say anything, just smile.

Well, if you're talking about what an original author can do when making an anime, the best thing to do is to create an environment that makes it easy to work.

For the time being, things are going well enough that I believe that I have earned the trust of the director, so much so that when I say, “You don't check with the original author” he doesn't even ask me, ``Are you sure?'', so I have to maintain this status as long as possible.

The work on the forthcoming book is progressing smoothly and there is still time until the deadline. Problems only come when you're cornered, so after this, the galleys for volume 6 will await, and once you've done that, I'll have to write the afterword for volume 6, but I’m sure I’ll be able to handle it. Well, I’m sure I’ll be fine.

January 18, 2019

Sasamoto Yuichi

This book is a new version of ``Miniskirt Space Pirates 5: The Silver Rescue Ship'' published by Asahi Novels in November 2010 with additions and corrections and a changed 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 and other works. 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