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“We're going after them. All ships, prepare to jump!”

“*Wait!*” A deep voice from the Barbaroosa echoed on the Bentenmaru’s main bridge. “*Wait, wait, don't be in such a hurry.*”

“Why, Captain Kenjo?!” Marika rebutted, while making a list in her head of reasons why she should pursue them immediately.

“*The destination of the cruiser that jumped next is different.*”

“Eh?”

“*Of course, we cannot read an exact flight plan from a jump trail, but with the current observation network, we can estimate the direction and distance. The control station and Lunar Lion's jumps are consistent with the data left by the redhead, but how accurate they are is another matter.*”

If a FTL jump takes place right in front of your eyes, you will be able to observe detailed data including energy reactions, gravitational anomalies, and spatial distortions. The power used in the jump can be determined from the energy reaction, and the scale and direction can be calculated from the gravitational anomaly and spatial distortion. If you know the spacecraft's mass and dimensions, you can generate fairly accurate prediction data from data observed during the jump.

However, just as observed data contains errors, predictions are calculated with a certain degree of margin. The larger the mass of the spacecraft and the larger the energy response, the larger the cumulative errors. For short-distance jumps by small ships, it is possible to calculate direction and distance with sufficient accuracy for practical use, but predictions become more uncertain as the jump distance increases and the spacecraft's mass increases.

“*Even now, the Arctroi that has been transferred to outer space is jumping, but the destinations of the two ships are different.*”

“So, what the rebel army is currently doing is a retreat, not a pursuit?”

“*If taken at face value, they are retreating to their home systems, not chasing after our training sailboat, which jumped with the control station. Well, the Odette II is an unarmed training sailboat, so if they wanted to overwhelm it with brute force, a modestly equipped cruiser would suffice, but then they would at least try to stall our remaining pirate ships.*” There was a slight pause in Kenjo's voice. “*What do you think? Are there any ships that look like they might hit us?*”

“All rebel ships are on their way to leaving Garnet A.” Coorie responded by integrating data from Bentenmaru's radar/sensors and the network of unmanned observation aircraft that are still sending detailed data. “Even taking into account the respective circumstances of where they are, not a single ship is on a close trajectory to the Barbaroosa or the Bentenmaru.”

“There are no ships heading towards either the Bentenmaru or the Barbaroosa.” Marika relayed the summarized patrol information.

“*In other words, all the rebel ships are running away with their tails between their legs. In this situation, it would be dangerous to accept that redhead's data at face value and jump to deep space that isn’t on the Empire’s maps. After all, the destination is a frontier region.*” There was a pause to check the data at hand. “*We cannot expect protection or support from the Imperial Fleet.*”

Order and security within Imperial territory is guaranteed by the Galactic Empire. However, this does not apply to frontier areas that are not part of the Empire's territory.

Nominally, the 7th Fleet of the Galactic Empire is in charge of patrolling and guarding the frontier areas, and imperial ships can request security and escort. However, it was the 6th Fleet, which is in charge of the star sector in question, that had been arranged to rush to Garnet A to provide cover, and it would be virtually impossible for an imperial fleet to deploy on a large scale in a place that is not occupied by the empire.

“*So, what do you think? Are communications with the Odette II still not restored?*”

“Not yet.”

Faster-than-light communication between spacecraft that are separated by light years cannot be achieved unless their positions are confirmed. Currently, FTL communication cannot be established without a signal from the Odette II.

“*I called out to the coordinates of the jump point left by the red-haired general, but the communication line was not connected. Both the Odette II and the Lunar Lion must have our location, so they should be able to connect from the other side.*”

“It's not the kind of place you can call by phone.” Coorie superimposes the Galactic Telegraph and Telephone Corporation (GT&T) operating area on the star map. “If you're inside the Empire, you can connect by phone even in empty interstellar space, but even if you're outside the Empire's territory and have a roaming contract with a third party, you can't call them in a place like that where there are no relay stations.”

“*That's why we should wait for the call from the other side first. That's when we start searching.*”

“*I guess it's my job to search.*” The Silent Whisper’s Hyakume joined the conversation. “*I'll take on the job of the search team. Fortunately, Silent Whisper has a faster-than-light engine that allows it to jump with great precision. Its mass is smaller than the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru, so it can jump exactly to the data’s coordinates.*”

“As soon as I know where they are, we'll jump.” Marika, who had been lifting her hips from the captain's seat, sank into the seat. “For now, concentrate on where each of the rebel ships you can see is jumping to. If the operation is still going on, the Odette II’s destination is probably the place where the most spaceships are jumping to.”

“Wait for contact and observe where to jump.” Coorie summarized the immediate policy.

“*In the meantime, we need to make plans to bring the FTL booster for the Odette II.*”

Marika gasped at the sound of Kenjo's voice. The Odette II is a Category II sub-lightspeed spaceship without a FTL engine. Regardless of where it is currently located, if someone wanted to take Odette II back to the Cetus constellation, they would have to connect a FTL booster just as they did when coming here. And the dedicated FTL booster remains disconnected and in outer planet orbit.

“*What do you think, Captain Marika?*” Kenjo called out leisurely. “*We don't have the operating data for the Odette II’s booster. Can you manage it there?*”

“I'll figure something out.”

Of course, there is no detailed data on the Odette II’s booster on the Bentenmaru. However, the FTL booster should have the same data backed up as the Odette II's main computer, and Marika herself knows how to handle the Odette II. When the time comes, she should be able to obtain technical materials similar to those given to the Odette II.

“*It would be troublesome if someone with a sharp eye destroyed just the FTL booster. The Bentenmaru should secure the FTL booster, which should be wandering around the outer planet, so that they can take it with them. Silent Whisper, please return my XO before you jump. Now, let's wait until either the pirate girl on the training sail ship, our ground forces, or the red-haired general contacts us.*”

“Do you know the current location of the Odette II's FTL booster?”

“I've got it figured out.” Luca answered from the navigator’s seat while moving her hands.

“It detached at the Odette II’s first touchdown point and stayed there. If we can re-start the main engine and get it under control, we should be able to make it jump by itself.”

“Then, the Bentenmaru will go to the outer planet orbit to capture the FTL booster.”

“*Ah, please do.*”

“Silent Whisper, have the Barbaroosa escort XO Nora to the ship. You proceed to…” Marika looked around the airspace around Garnet A, where the rebel army had disappeared in the blink of an eye. “Are you still waiting?”

“*What?　No, I have to go somewhere.*” In the communication monitor, Captain Blackbeard held up a finger in the direction of Asatoshi. “*I think I should go to Fort North 25 and report the current situation to the Galactic Empire's 6th Fleet, which is waiting for to be dispatched. After all, one training sailing ship, and possibly two pirate ships, have already flown into a frontier area outside of the Empire's domain. Even if we can't expect support, it's better to have an excuse for when we get back.*”

Fort North 25 is a large Imperial supply arsenal. Marika recalled the faces of the Sixth Fleet staff and intelligence inspectors she had met at a meeting before the operation at Garnet A began.

“I'm sorry for making things difficult for you.” Marika obediently bowed to Captain Blackbeard. Kenjo laughed out loud, showing teeth that looked like they could eat a person.

“*If you're worried about me, you should be worried about the Odette II, which got jumped, not me. Next time you see me, we'll be on the frontier, so take care of things over here.*” Kenjo gave a salute from the communications monitor. As if on cue, the Barbaroosa took a course to an outer planet orbit and began to move.

“Okay, Bentenmaru, set course for the FTL booster.” Marika instructed. “We don't know when we'll hear from the Odette II, so let's hurry up and prepare the FTL booster for launch.”

“Odette II, returning to normal space!” Marii announced from the navigator's seat. “Now checking our current location.”

The space surrounding the Odette II is severely disturbed, perhaps because she was forced to jump with such a large mass from the vicinity of a high-gravity source.

“Hurry with the confirmation!” Ririka give orders in rapid succession. “Odette II, hull check! Check to see if the current leap caused any damage to the hull structure or functionality. Keep communications open, listen carefully, and stay on the line with the control station. What are they saying?”

“The communication line is still unresponsive!” Lynn tries various methods, one after another, to somehow sneak into the control station's line.

“Docking bridge is clear.” Gruier conveyed. “Both the docking bridge and the control station side are pressurized at one atmosphere. No harmful components.”

“No abnormalities in the hull!” Lynn reported.

“Structure, propulsion, control system, all normal!”

“No problems with the sailing system!” “No problems with the communication system.” “Radar is working.” “All sensor systems operating normally!”

“I’ve found our current position! We’re at 03 degrees 46 minutes 54 seconds galactic longitude, 12 degrees 24 minutes 30 seconds galactic latitude, in the interstellar space of the Seven Star Federation of the Frontier zone!” While reading out the numbers, Marii plotted their current location in red on the all-sky map of the galaxy shown on the display.

“Outside the Empire's territory?” Ririka mumbled briefly. “Are there any spaceships around?”

On the monitor in the captain's seat immediately after the jump, there was no information on spacecraft that should be in the surrounding airspace. Information obtained by carefully analyzing the unstable spatial situation is displayed one after another.

“...There's no spaceships nearby...?”

There is a control station much larger than the Odette II right next to it, and the Black Swan is docked beyond it. Odette II's radar and sensors, which are supposed to improve their effective radius and accuracy over time, are unable to find other spacecraft, although the information is not perfect due to the large blind spot.

“I'm sure some kind of pre-jump phenomenon will appear soon, so keep scanning!” Ririka twisted her head, thinking about the possibility that there were other spaceships in blind spots that were not caught by the Odette II's radar/sensor system. “There's no way they won’t ambush us.”

The Odette II has no onboard armament. If a superluminal leap was made at the same time the ship docked, the ambush force that was supposed to be at their destination would show up right away and threaten the Odette II or call for negotiations.

Ririka connected the line to the cargo bay where the landing force was supposed to be waiting.

“Landing force from the bridge, Captain Cayenne, Schnitzer, this is Ririka. Our current position is in the frontier zone, interstellar space of the Seven Star Federation, with no enemy in sight around us!” The same information should be flowing to the information console in the cargo bay as well as the data lines connected to the landing party's personal equipment.

“*This is Cayenne.*” Captain Cayenne, the commander of the Barbaroosa’s ground forces and the commander of the landing force, responded. “*I started to gather information about the inside as soon as we dock at the control station, but I'm getting nothing here either. There is an energy signature, and the air is packed, so I'm assuming it's a working station, but I don't know if the jump was made by the Black Swan's main engine, or if the station is equipped with a faster-than-light engine.*”

“The control station, at least, was aware that the Odette II was coming to dock. At this point, there are no signs of enemies around.”

“*And there are no communications calling for surrender.*” Cayenne’s rusty bass contained the smile of a veteran warrior. “*I'm sorry, but I'm trained not to waste my time here waiting to see what happens. Especially if this is a frontier zone outside the Empire's map. The more time you give the enemy, the more prepared he will be, and the more reinforcements will arrive. The landing force invades the control station as originally planned. The mission is not only to take over the station, but also to investigate the internal situation.*”

“Does Schnitzer share your opinion?”

“It’s the same.” Schnitzer answered simply.

“Got it. The connection has already been confirmed. I'll leave the timing to you, please begin your entry into the station.”

“*Understood. The landing force will now begin entering the control station.*”

“What about FTL communications?” Ririka glanced at Gruier, who had asked the question. Since the ship was caught in an unexpected jump and thrown a long distance, the FTL communication line that had been set up was forcibly cut off.

“Recover it.” Ririka immediately directed. “This is enemy territory. There's no need to block the radio and keep our current location secret now. Let the pirates know where we are and reassure them.”

“Roger that.” Even with normal electromagnetic communication transmitted at the speed of light, depending on the frequency band, it may not be received unless the target is precisely aimed. FTL communication via hyperspace cannot maintain communication lines unless the current location of the other party is accurately determined. Gruier reconfirmed the last known positions of the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa on her communication device and began setting up a FTL line.

“*Odette II from Lunar Lion.*” Along with a ferocious noise, a hoarse voice flowed onto the Odette II's bridge. “*It's an emergency, so excuse my forced intrusion.*”

“Jackie!” Ririka raised her voice sharply. “Where are you!?”

“*I’m right next to you.*” Jackie simply replied to Ririka, who had intended to have the bridge crew find the Lunar Lion's current location. “*This is normal communication. If you can make it in time, hold off on the FTL transmission for a moment.*”

“What’s the reason?” Ririka asked, raising her hand to Gruier. “We docked and were suddenly thrown straight into the middle of enemy territory. If there's a reason why we're not allowed to contact our allies, let's hear it.”

“*That's exactly why. With normal communications, your current location can only be transmitted at the speed of light, but if you set up a FTL line, at that very moment, your exact current location will reach not only your fellow pirates, but the rebels as well.*”

“I can’t find the Lunar Lion.” Lynn reported regretfully. “Considering the time lag in normal communications, they should be within a 100,000 km radius, but there is no response on radar or sensors…”

“Isn't the Lunar Lion equipped with some nasty stealth features?” Ririka asked. “Unless Jackie feels like it, it's impossible to find the Lunar Lion that's hiding from us, right?”

“*Right now, you should be scanning the surrounding airspace using all your equipment. Can you spot any enemy spaceships in the airspace as far as your sensors can reach?*”

“At yet, we have not detected any.” There is no need to keep the Odette II's radar/sensor performance secret from the Lunar Lion, which would have the same information. Ririka informed Jackie of the current situation. “Including the Lunar Lion, I mean.”

“*Oh, sorry.*” Laughter mingled with the response. “*This area is not safe airspace for me either, so I’m taking precautions. With the control station and the Black Swan together, you can't actively hide, but as you can see, the rebels don't know your exact location, at least for now. However, although this region is in interstellar space, it is within the territory of the Seven Star Federation. If you set up a FTL line here, the rebels will know your exact current location.*”

“Isn't it just a matter of time?” After touchdown, the surrounding airspace will stabilize over time. While reconfirming Odette II's current position with the latest carefully examined observation data, Ririka cut back to Jackie. “It was a massive leap. If they keep that in mind, they will have an idea of where we will appear, even if it is only a short distance away. If they concentrate their survey ships in that area, it will only be a matter of time before they find us.”

“*But at least we have time before the rebels rush in.*” Jackie's voice was calm. “*No matter how good you are at active stealth, after being jumped to such a remote area there is no way the Odette II can escape from the rebels without a FTL booster.*”

“Reinforcements will be coming.” Once again, Ririka raised her hand to Gruier, making sure not to open the FTL line yet. “At present, our exact current position is known. If we notify them of our current location, both the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa will jump immediately.”

“*But that's it*” There's no hint of mockery in Jackie's voice. “*This is the frontier. The rebels can concentrate their forces as much as they like, but you, no, we can't do that. Garnet A is inside the Empire's territory, so not only the Star System Army and the Defense Fleet, but also the Empire's regular fleet can jump as much as they want, but when it comes to the frontiers outside the Empire's territory, it’s pirate ships and...what else?*”

“Being at a disadvantage in terms of strength is nothing new.” Ririka said in a voice that didn't give the slightest hint of anxiety. “Besides, our goal isn't to destroy the rebel army. As long as I can crush the Stellar Slayer, that's fine.”

“*I know. It's easy. If we destroy the control station, we will be able to achieve our immediate objective. But if that happens, you won't be left alone this time.*”

“We? Who are you talking about?” Ririka asked, trying to confirm.

“*You, the yacht crew aboard the Odette II and you, Captain Ririka.*”

Ririka looked around at the faces of the bridge crew.

“*Once the control station is destroyed, the rebels will focus their efforts on seizing the parts needed to rebuild the Stellar Slayer. Since you guys are not willing to obediently hand over the training sailing ship to the rebels, I can see that a battle will ensue.*”

“You’re sure of that?”

“*That's also a battle I don't want to think about too much. Currently, the Odette II's only military strength is the ground squadron to occupy the station. With this, you can only fight hand-to-hand combat.*”

“Isn't that a pirate-like way of fighting?”

“*Then you can't win.*” Jackie said in an admonishing tone. “*If it turns into hand-to-hand combat, the non-combatants in the yacht club would surely be harmed. Even if the first ship could be subdued, the second ship would probably shift to naval gunfire without going through the trouble of docking.*”

“By then, reinforcements will have arrived.”

“*The force ratio is too unbalanced to rely on. Sure, you guys would be able to fight against the rebel forces trained in actual combat in the frontier, but that would only postpone the end. Captain Ririka can't even imagine such a thing, right?*”

Ririka did not answer and let Jackie speak.

“*Remember, the most important component to activate the Stellar Slayer is not the rebuildable control station or the observation network around the red giant star. It's the monolithic crystals for sighting, the Odette II’s bowsprit. And it's not going to break that easily, no matter what they do. The rebels can slowly salvage the necessary parts even after burning the entire crew of the training ship, which is not capable of FTL speed. So, it is not much of an inconvenience to destroy the training ship with all its non-combatants.*”

“You're telling me you've got a better idea?” Ririka glanced at the communication monitor, where the image was still cut off. If you can see facial expressions, you can obtain information other than words and tone of voice.

“*Now, there is still time until the rebel army rushes in and surrounds the Odette II. I can use that time to put you in a safe situation.*”

“That's a very condescending way of saying it. Fine, if you have a plan, tell me.”

“*Well, I'd like to thank you for listening. I won't let you lose anything, so listen carefully.*”

“Please be brief.” Ririka glanced at the current situation on the displays and monitors around the captain's seat.

“*Undock from the control station right now and go to the Black Swan's side.*”

“The Black Swan? To that fake shipwreck?”

“*No, the ship's hull is real. I will explain in detail later. As you might have guessed, the Black Swan is a fake shipwreck, and is actually a plant ship with a powerful anti-gravity engine inside. The structure has been remodeled without regard to the original form, but it is simply a plant ship with the necessary parts pieced together and covered with the hull of the former Black Swan.*”

“...So?” The Odette II's sensors have yet to detect any response from spacecraft flying into the surrounding space.

“*There is an enclosed floating dock built into the bow section. The dimensions have been confirmed, so the folded Odette II should fit. I'll open it now.*”

“Small-scale energy reaction on the Black Swan!” Lynn exclaimed. “A change in shape has been confirmed in the outer shell of the Black Swan! ...The bow is open!?”

“*Get inside the Black Swan. It should be easy for you guys to dock at the station at that speed.*”

“And after that?”

“*As long as the training sailboat enters the Black Swan, you can escape anywhere. I told you, it's a converted plant ship. It is equipped with an anti-gravity engine and a faster-than-light engine with enough power to blind pursuers.*”

“I see, that's how you intended to secure our spaceship.” Muttering, Ririka continued. “Oh, I'm sorry. My landing force has already entered the station.”

“*What!?*”

“I just received a call that they have captured the main control.”

Jackie couldn't react right away. “*...What is that?!*”

“*Repeat, Odette II Bridge from Schnitzer.*” The channel that Ririka switched to was played on the bridge. “*The landing force succeeded in taking control of the control station's central command center. There are only unarmed civilian personnel. Zero damage, the control station is currently under our control.*”

“Thank you for your hard work, Schnitzer. I'm sorry for repeating this, but I'd like to ask you how they managed to jump with two docked spaceships, and see if they can do it again. Can you hear me, Jackie?”

“*Ah, perfect.*”

“As you have heard, the control station is currently under our control. I assume the situation has changed. Are there any changes to your plan?”

“*...You’ve bought yourself some time.*” I heard a tongue clicking.

“Oh, I was just talking to you.” Ririka replied with a smile on her face. “There didn't seem to be anything urgent about it other than not contacting anyone outside, and since we couldn't see what was going on inside the control station, it would be natural to investigate. I didn't expect our ground troops to work this fast.”

“*It's too early! My schedule is totally messed up.*”

“I'm currently asking my ground squadron, who have taken control of the central command center, to find out how the control station jumped.”

Information came pouring into the open line from the station. Lynn screamed as she selected the information she needed and displayed it on an empty display. The overall structure of the control station, with the observation antenna extended, was shown on the display in the captain's seat. Ririka touched and rotated the structural diagram of the control station on the flat display.

“There is no main engine inside that looks like a FTL engine. So, it was the Black Swan that jumped the Odette II with the control station, right?”

There was a brief pause before a response came back. “*Ah, yes, that's right. The control station is not supposed to have a FTL engine, but the Black Swan is equipped with a main engine with a high output that allows it to jump even if its dead weight increases by an order of magnitude.*”

“Is the Black Swan now under your control?” Ririka casually confirmed.

“*Ah, that's right. It's not perfect, but the Black Swan is now ready to move from here.*”

“Well, if you're giving instructions to undock and enter the Black Swan, that means the Black Swan is now under your control, right?” Ririka let out a slight sigh. “Captain Cayenne of the Bentenmaru, are you ready for the next instructions from bridge?”

“*You're here promptly. What's your next order?*”

“I think it's almost time to go to the central control room, so could you please hold down the Black Swan, which is docked on the other side of the station?”

The data flowing from the command room only contains the bare minimum of information regarding the Black Swan, which is fixed to the docking block.

“So, where were the controls for the Black Swan when the control station jumped from Garnet A?” There was no immediate response. Ririka repeated it again, slowly. “Who, exactly, jumped the Black Swan after confirming the docking of the Odette II with the control station?”

“*While the Odette II was secretly sailing to the control station, control of the Black Swan would have been in the hands of the rebels.*” Jackie answered. “*I don’t know if it was controlled by the control station or one of rebel ships. If you wish, I think I can identify it by examining the logs of the Black Swan.*”

“Well, then, we'll do it slowly later, when we have more time.” With a sigh, Ririka cut him off. “Now that we have control of the Black Swan, could you please return the entire Odette II, docked with the station, to its original location?”

“*That’s...*” Over the comm, Jackie sounded crestfallen.

“This is a frontier area outside the Galactic Empire, where neither imperial law nor imperial fleet support can be expected.” Ririka told Jackie, who should have been aware of the whole situation. “Even if the rebels are waiting for us, it would be advantageous for us to return to our original airspace. If you are in control of the Black Swan, would you please return the control station and Odette II to their original location now?”

“*I can't.*” Jackie answered succinctly.

“Why?”

“*There are two reasons. The converted plant ship, the Black Swan, is not designed to be able to make continuous jumps. Although the mass increase due to Odette II's docking is not that great, the total mass including the control station is close to the limit that the Black Swan can jump at once. The main engine is currently on cooldown and it is impossible to make the next jump immediately.*”

That was the answer Ririka had expected. “What's the other one?”

“*As you know, the original coordinates of the control station are directly above Garnet A. You're not unaware of the various limitations associated with a FTL jump.*”

“Jumping near a huge gravity source is dangerous becausethe spatial distortion caused by gravity increases errors. That’s common sense. But…” Ririka added, listening carefully to Jackie's response. “The Black Swan jumped out of that dangerous airspace. So, the reverse is also possible, right?”

“*Jumping close to the coordinates of a massive gravity source is even more error prone than the reverse case. Are there any of you who need such a lecture now?*”

“Then it doesn't have to be directly above Garnet A. Well, with maximum concession, anywhere within the territory of the Galactic Empire would be fine. The shortest distance would be less than a hundred light years away.”

“*Because of the first reason, an immediate jump is not possible.*”

“How long do we have to wait before we can go?”

“*Since it was originally a factory ship, it has more power than other spaceships, but it is difficult to handle. Since the control station and Odette II were docked and jumped without thinking about the future or adjusting the balance, it will take some time to readjust and replenish energy for the next jump.*”

“*Control Station Central Command Center to the Bentenmaru’s Bridge.*”[[1]](#footnote-1) A call came in from Captain Cayenne. “*We seized the line to the Black Swan. I checked the ship's data, and unless the data is spoofed, the Black Swan is most likely operating unmanned.*”

“Please do an internal investigation just to be sure.” Ririka quickly informed them. “Also, please connect the Black Swan’s line to the Odette II, even if it goes through the central control room. Lynn, take over control of the Black Swan.”

“From here?” Lynn, at the electronic warfare table, looked around the bridge. “A wrecked ship where I don't even understand the system and probably isn't even registered as an Imperial ship?”

“I don't care what you do.” Ririka pointed firmly at Lynn. “Do whatever you can. If that redhead who isn't even connected to the Black Swan is in control of the Black Swan, he could probably hijack it and do whatever he wants.”

“Roger.” Lynn headed to the electronic battle table and furiously pounded on HAL-bou and the console, which were still spread out.

“Gruier, fix the Black Swan's line via the central command center over here. I want as thick a line as possible, so connect as many lines as you can. If you have empty hands, come over here. We can never have enough hands.”

“*If you have no other questions, please hurry and escape to the Black Swan.*” Jackie spoke to the communication line, which had been quiet for a while, in a voice that lacked any sense of urgency.

“Oh, didn't the schedule change?”

“*That's true, but I thought it would be easier if we could proceed as planned in time...*”

“Pre-jump phenomenon detected!” Marii, in the navigator's seat, spoke up. “Large mass, large ship!”

“*Oh, we're not going to make it.*” Jackie's voice was laced with self-mockery. “I wanted to get you all out of here safely, if possible, but I don't think I can do that anymore.”

“It's not the Barbaroosa or the Bentenmaru.” Seeing that neither the Bentenmaru nor the Barbaroosa's name was among the predictive data displayed in a list from the observed patterns, Ririka asked Jackie. “Rebels?”

In the dark interstellar space, illuminated only by starlight, a new spaceship was taking shape.

“*No, it's not. I would have preferred not to tell you if I could, but let me introduce you. That's the Scylla.* *Chimera’s Scylla*.”

A large spaceship touches down, swirling the interstellar matter, at a distance that even a cruiser's main gun can reach. In checking the observed pre-drive phenomenon data, Odette II's computer quickly returned the result that there was no corresponding ship.

“*The class is a fast battleship, but the ship type is a pirate ship. Even in remote areas, there aren't many spaceships that call themselves pirate ships, but the Scylla is one of the few exceptions. I'll confess, that's my sponsor that I didn't want you to meet.*”

“Release all sensors and collect as much data as possible.” Ririka instructed. “However, no active observations from us! Be quiet so they don't know we're moving.”

Ririka returned to communications. “Finally, the sponsor who hired you has arrived.” After saying that, Ririka realized. “...Pirates?　Wasn't your boss a rebel?”

“*From the Empire's point of view, aren't they all the same?　Yes, the major interstellar powers and alliances on the frontier are cooperating in this work, but it was the people of the Pirate Guild who brought together people with different positions and interests to participate in the operation.*”

“Pirate guild?” Ririka asked in an astonished voice. “Does it still exist?”

“*There were pirates with privateer licenses in the empire's territory, and they were constantly communicating not only vertically but also horizontally, but did you think that the pirates who were chased away to the frontier would simply perish? Well, it seems like they're doing a lot more than just their old-fashioned pirate business.*”

A sharp-angled spaceship materialized from hyperspace to normal space, with interstellar particles that had converted to energy clinging to it like lightning.

“*Even if you have never heard of the pirate ship Scylla, you have probably heard of the pirate Muller, also known as the Crimson Pirate. She is not a license holder like you, but a descendant of a real pirate who once fought against the Empire in the Hundred Years War.*”

“Optical observation, maximum magnification.”

Marii transferred images from the observation team, which was aiming high-magnification optical observation equipment at the center of the predrive phenomenon, onto the bridge. The main screen and several sub-screens projected the silhouette of a slender, sharp-angled ship colored with organic curves against a swaying starry sky. Illuminated by starlight, the spaceship was a bright red that could be seen even without direct starlight.

“Straight line distance 20,000 km, no response from transponder.”

“A real pirate...” Ririka murmured at the sight of the sharply angled ship's shadow on the main screen. The bridge buzzed.

“*This may be my last advice to you. I recommend that you do not send out any messages for a while and just listen quietly to what is being said. I have to talk to the pirate Muller, who is also a senior officer of the guild.*”

“Lunar lion confirmed!” A freshman in the radar seat raised her voice. “It suddenly appeared at a distance of 5,000 km!”

With a sniff, Ririka cut off the transmission, skipping any response. “Just keep your ears open for communications. Then, check to see if there are any materials on the pirate ship Scylla, the Pirate Guild, or the pirate Muller.” While giving instructions, Ririka ran her fingers over the console of the captain's seat and confirmed that there were no other lines connected to the control station's central command room.

“Bridge calling Captain Cayenne, did you hear that?”

“*This is the central command room, Cayenne. Yeah, I heard that.*” The ground forces commander's voice coming from the control station had a jovial rhythm to it. “*I never expected that your colleague would be my enemy.*”

“The Crimson Pirate is a colleague...” Ririka murmured and smiled. “My opponent is a big name in the pirate guild and has had a bounty even before I got my pirate license. I’m not lacking for an opponent. Do you think you can take the Black Swan?”

“*Schnitzer is on his way to the Black Swan and should be arriving soon. If it's an unmanned ship, you can't complain if the boarding bridge isn't connected, but it seems like that area is connected.*”

“Tell them to secure the physical line when they arrive on the Black Swan.” Lynn, in the electronic warfare seat, said while busily tapping on HAL-bou’s keyboard. “As it is now, if the Black Swan's side cuts the line, that's the end of it.”

“Captain Cayenne, did you hear that? Since the boss of that con man is in the neighborhood, I don't want to send out any transmissions from here, even if it's just a weak, short range radio signal it leaks out the window.”

“*Physical line secured. I just sent out a messenger. So, Jackie, are you going to tell us your story with the pirate Muller?*”

“You said the pirate Muller…” Ririka asked a question. “Do you know them?”

“*Only in name, but she is an old pirate whose name appears here and there in battle records from the time of the Hundred Years' War.*”

“Pirate Muller is in our data.” Yayoi, in the engineer's seat, raised her voice. “Putting it on the main screen!”

On the main screen of the bridge, a page that looked like it was copied directly from an old encyclopedia appeared. A female captain with sparkling silver hair, looking as if she had been cut out of a souvenir photo, gazed at us with cold eyes. “The data is dated 50 years ago.”

“*Lunar Lion from Scylla.*” A voice that sounded like the ringing of a bell drifted across the bridge. Ririka ran her eyes over the communication panel and saw the same silver-haired face appear on the communication monitor.

“A long-lived species?”

“*This is Captain Muller Grant. Jackie Fahrenheit, thank you for your work.*”

“*Yes, this is the Luna Lion.*” On the sub-monitor, Jackie's grinning face appeared through the dingy lens against the jumbled cockpit. Muller Grant, with long flowing silver hair, frowned openly at his thin features. “*Hello, it is a great honor for Jackie to receive this message from the pirate Captain Myura herself.*”

“*I think I heard that the inside of the ship will be cleaned up by the time this job is finished.*”

Muller looked around the Luna Lion's cockpit with large eyes framed by dark eyeliner. The loosely connected white crystals of the earrings that appeared and disappeared from beneath her silver hair made a sparkling sound.

“*As you can see, it has been cleaned up so that it looks different from before.*” Jackie pulled away from the camera, pulled back the seat and extended one hand into the cockpit, accompanied by a flashy sound effect. “*I had to go to the Tau System while making various preparations for Garnet A, and during that time I did a lot of cleaning since the Lunar Lion's first flight, which was already a lot of work.*”

“*I think we need to take our time and talk about it.*” With a furrowed brow, Muller Grant shakes her head. An elaborate necklace like plate mail moves smoothly. “*If you don't mind, I can lend you my special forces.*”

“*Joking, joking, that’s all.*” Jackie waved his hands in panic. “*If Muller's special forces were sent in, my ship would be wiped out of this universe without a speck of dust left behind. I'm planning on having a more peaceful voyage, so please don't worry.*”

A person with long hair and a person in a black shirt

Description automatically generated

“Radar waves incoming” Ai spoke in a nervous voice. “Targeting scans for us and the control station.”

“Let it go.” Ririka saw Lynn at the electronic warfare table, scolding Gruier and the other yacht club members as they continued their work. “We don’t want our ship to be seen now. Be careful not to show my movements.”

“*I see you brought the White Swan.*” Muller, standing on the almost pitch-black bridge, illuminated by the camera lights for communication and the display in her hand, said without moving her gaze.

“*Hey, I would have been able to bring it to you a long time ago, but due to various unforeseen circumstances, it was delayed. Instead, not only the monomolecular crystal you ordered, but also the main body are intact and in mint condition, ready for use right away.*”

“*I'm not interested in outdated sailing ships.*” Muller shook her head slightly. “*As long as you have the monomolecular crystal, it will be all I need.*”

“The control station is, well, consider it an added bonus!” Jackie continued, as if he hadn't heard. “*Unfortunately, we were not able to bring you to Garnet A, but there is a recent century's worth of observational data in the station. Now all we need is a simulation analysis and we will be able to use Stellar Slayer on any red giant star!*”

“When we approached that con man about taking the Stellar Slayer, he already had a buyer in mind.” Gruier said without looking up as she manipulated the console of the electronic warfare table beside Lynn.

“*The amount of delay will be calculated and deducted according to the contract.*” Muller nodded slightly, shaking the crimson teardrop-shaped jewel hanging between her eyebrows from her circlet. “*Confirmed. The White Swan and control station and the Black Swan. Who has the controls now?*”

“*The Black Swan is now under our control.*” In the display, Jackie held up the palms of his spotless white gloves. “*Once the name change is confirmed, we'll hand over control of the Black Swan to you.*”

“I can't take it!” Lynn, at her HAL-bou, yelled with a ferocious force as she stretched out one hand on the electronic battle table and tapped the touch display with her fingertips. “What solid protection! It's not using any difficult code or nasty encryption, but I can't break it!”

“A commander doesn't whine!” Ririka snapped. “Don't worry, we still have time and resources , so just relax and do it.”

“*As usual.*” Muller gave a small shrug on the communications monitor.

“*The checking account is already opened at First Imperial Bank. As specified, it's in the name of a shell company in a core star system.*”

Muller twirled her long fingertips with thin nail decorations through the display as if throwing them. “*Did you receive it?*”

“I sent you the account name and key code via data transmission.” Ririka muttered to Jackie, who took his eyes off the communication monitor.

“*Hey, I'll check the balance.*” Jackie tapped the sub-console with an outstretched hand and returned to the communications monitor with a satisfied look on his face. “*I'm responsible for being late, but it's tough to be exactly on time, so there’s no bonus.*”

“*How hard do you think it was to form a coalition on the frontier?*” Muller smiled bewitchingly, red eyes framed by dark eyeliner squinting slightly. “*My costs are also increasing. I may have to raise the estimated price.*”

“*I'll leave that to your sales staff. If you send me a full pass, I'll give you control of the Black Swan.*”

“*That's fine. I will send you a full pass with a time-limited release. How about one minute from now in standard time?*”

“*Good. I'll set the timer to be released in one minute and send it at the same time.*”

“It's like exchanging hostages for ransom.” Ririka's comment made several members of the bridge crew laugh.

“*Odette II from the control station, a message from Schnitzer, the communication line has been physically secured.*” Captain Cayenne's voice reached Lynn.

“Thank goodness, you made it in time. Marii, steal the data sent from the Lunar Lion!”

“Can I get in? Will it be okay?”

“*Now, one, two, three.*” At the same time as Jackie's voice, a short data exchange took place between the Lunar Lion and the Scylla.

“Did you get it!?” Lynn asked, expecting to intercept the control key from the Lunar Lion.

“No good!” Marii answered. “Both used directional communication for data exchange, and no signal was detected.”

“Even if you can intercept it, it's probably useless since it's probably encrypted.” Ririka shook her head in a relaxed posture. “It's a passkey exchanged by pirates and con artists, and it should take centuries just to unravel it. If there is any chance at all.”

“Now is when control of the Black Swan transfers from the Lunar Lion to Crimson.” Lynn suddenly stopped typing on HAL-bou. “Thirty seconds left.”

“*Receiving confirmation. We've also confirmed the match with the allotment.*”

“*Same here. As soon as Passkey is released, I'll rewrite it.*”

“*Be my guest.*” Muller said with a cold expression, her chin slightly pulled back. “*By the way, do you have another job lined up?*”

“*I don't know, it's not like it's decided.*” Jackie looked away from the communications monitor as he leisurely tapped away at the console. “*I can take a breather after this job, but you know, I'm a workaholic and if I take a break, I'll die.*”

“*Where are you going next?*”

“*Once it’s unlocked, I'll run away to the other side of the galaxy.*” Jackie glances at the sub-monitor. “*The big job with the pirate Muller is finished. If I don't run away quickly, I don't know what kind of trouble I'll get as a result.*”

“I know what you'll do if you take control of the Black Swan.” Ririka's voice was low, even though she knew in her head that the other person would not hear her even if she spoke normally. “Use the energy available now to make a short-distance triple jump. If Jackie's explanation is correct, you shouldn't be able to jump long distances like returning to the Empire's territory, so check the amount of energy and divide it into three jumps.”

“Roger.” Lynn wiped the sweat from her forehead.

“If we wait until the crimson pirate ship approaches, we can accumulate enough energy for the Black Swan.” Gruier suggests while still moving her hands. “Wouldn't we be able to gain more jump distance by drawing the enemy in until the very last moment?”

“I don't see her as a naive opponent where we would gain an advantage by buying time.” Ririka stared at the communications monitor showing the silver-haired female pirate. “Besides, it is useless to gain distance against a super-lightspeed spaceship. Rather than that, it is more confusing to use a number of jumps even over short distances. Is it about time?”

“*Unlocked.*” Jackie said happily.

“I have it!” Lynn shouted. Ririka almost jumped out of the captain's seat. “Really?”

“There is no time to check, we will jump immediately!　Marii, the destination for the short jump is somewhere as empty as possible.”

“Here!” Lynn quickly entered the numerical data sent from the navigator's seat into the Black Swan's FTL engine control system through HAL-bou's keyboard.

“Skip all pre-checks and jump!”

“Go!”

Without waiting for Ririka's instructions, Lynn issued the command. The main engine of the Black Swan enters FTL jump mode. The Black Swan jumped, along with the control station and the Odette II, which was still docked.

“You lost.” An intelligence inspector dispatched from the Galactic Empire's 6th Fleet headquarters summed up the situation simply.

“I was beaten.” Captain Kenjo Kurihara, sitting alone at the end of a highly polished jet-black round table, does not change his expression. “At Garnet A, the Odette II, which has the monomolecular crystal mast that is essential to Stellar Slayer's aiming system, as well as the central control station that serves as the core of the Stellar Slayer's operation, were taken. This must be judged as a loss as a result of the operation.”

“As for the facts, as stated in the report, I have nothing to add at this point.” Kenjo says casually. “How you interpret that is of course up to you, the Imperial Fleet.”

“If you just want to convey the results of your interpretation, that can be done over the comms.” The intelligence inspector responded in a completely emotionless voice. “The reason I went to the trouble of asking Captain Kenjo to visit you is to hear your excuses that are not in your report. Does you have something to say?”

“As expected, it's very helpful to have a long relationship with someone and be able to skip a lot of steps.” Kenjo looked around at the faces of the Sixth Fleet's staff lined up on the other side of the jet-black round table. More than half of them are 3D images that aren’t there in person, but even so, not a single person was present on his behalf without showing their face. “No one objected to the plan that the rebels would set up a control station at Garnet A for the Stellar Slayer operational experiment, and seize Odette II's monomolecular crystal mast, which is necessary for the aiming system.”

Kenjo looked around at the faces of the staff members. “However, the insurgents unexpectedly took the Odette II before they could overrun it, and withdrew their entire force from Garnet A, including the central control station. This is a development that we did not expect.”

“I'll admit it.” The intelligence inspector answered without hesitation. “Stellar Slayer is an immature system in the early stages of development. Our investigation has not confirmed that the Rebels intended the Stellar Slayer to operate as a long-range energy transfer system, as originally conceived, rather than simply as a supernova bomb.”

“Well, I don't claim that our knowing about it before the operation started would have made any difference in the subsequent developments.” Kenjo keeps an eye on the staff members, some of whom are familiar to him. “The biggest mistake was not realizing that the rebel army's goal was to seize the Odette II with its crew. And in that respect, we have been fooled by the rebel forces who achieved their goal.”

Kenjo spread his hands in disappointment. “As I noted in my report, the damage we inflicted on the rebels who had come all the way into Imperial territory was negligible. We only destroyed a few observation aircraft in the unmanned observation network deployed around Garnet A and a few deployed patrol antennas. In contrast, our losses at this point are the Odette II and the control system of Stellar Slayer, which was supposed to be in our hands. Counting our gains and losses, it’s our loss.”

“That's not all.” The inspector points out smoothly. “All of the Stellar Slayer's core systems have now been taken out of Imperial territory and are in the hands of the rebels. Even without the essential red giant star, it would be possible for the rebel army to analyze the Stellar Slayer. As a result, if a Stellar Slayer is built in a star system somewhere in the Frontier zone, another secret weapon will be added to the rebel's list.”

“Well, I don't think I'd feel like taking the entire control station and the Odette II unless I wanted to do a slow analysis of the Stellar Slayer.” Kenjo admitted.

“There is no objection to that point either. That's why the pirates, who were on a mission, went out of their way to visit the Sixth Fleet, not for an excuse, but to discuss the future.”

Kenjo leaned forward. “As you know, the Odette II is not currently within the territory of the Galactic Empire. She was taken to a remote area, and her exact current location is unknown. And it wasn't just the spaceship that was taken out. The entire crew was also taken away, and their circumstances are unknown. If we can get the Odette II back in our hands, at least the rebels will be unable to advance their research on the Stellar Slayer any further.”

“Bring back the Odette II, you say?” The inspector repeated Kenjo's words to confirm them.

“That's right.” Kenjo nodded emphatically. “I don't think it's that far off from the analysis that if we back down as things stand now, we'll be in a losing battle, and even more likely to lose in the future. Unfortunately, my companion ship was taken with it, along with its crew. It would be no good if the pirates were pirated along with their spaceships.”

“As the 6th Fleet, we cannot promise the same cooperation as before.” There was no change in the inspector's tone, as usual. “You are telling me that the Odette II was jumped in the interstellar space of the frontier zone, the Seven Star Federation. That is not our Sixth Fleet's airspace, nor is it even part of the Empire's territory.”

“I am aware of that.” Kenjo nods, looking like he's not sure what to say now. “However, rather than ending this operation with a loss, it would be more convenient for us to continue doing what we can to bring the Odette II back into our hands.”

“That is...” The inspector's words trailed off for a breath. “Are you talking about the Imperial Sixth Fleet? Or do you mean the Galactic Empire?”

“Both.” Kenjo looked around the round table with a wry smile. “Incidentally, I recognize that this is a job that we must do, both as Imperial subjects and as pirates with privateer licenses.”

“The current score is overwhelmingly in favor of the rebels, and extremely disadvantageous for us, the 6th Fleet, the Galactic Empire, and you pirates.” The inspector scrolled through the report on the display in his hand and looked up at Kenjo. “You think you can turn it around from here?”

“It's true that we're at a disadvantage, but I don't think it's settled yet.” Kenjo deliberately broke off his words. “It would be a different story if the Empire decided to end the operation now, prepared to endure the disadvantages ahead.”

“Can you win?

After nodding, Kenjo opened his mouth. “The Sixth Fleet may not be able to sneak into the frontier zone, but there is no legal problem for us pirates to go out to the frontier zone to rescue the Odette II.”

“I know it's foolish to ask such a question to a pirate, but I have to confirm this from my standpoint, so please hear me out. If so, what chance of success do you expect?”

“Do you think pirates calculate their success rate before starting work?” Kenjo responded with the well-used cliché. “When pirates start work, all they think about is the results they can get. You probably don't know that this is the strength of pirates, who are not bound by political circumstances or economic considerations, right?”

“And if you want to stop pirates, you have to do it with force.” The inspector general also used a cliché. “However, regardless of whether it is a report from a pirate, such phrases cannot be used in official documents circulating within the Imperial Fleet.”

“I'll leave the wording to you. If you need a number for the success rate of operations, then yes, please use a number calculated from our performance to date.” Captain Blackbeard gave an ostentatious wink to the assembled staff members. “I'm sure the numbers are very good.”

“Forty-six percent.”

“What?” Kenjo almost fell off his chair at the number the inspector answered without hesitation. “Not even half? That's funny, according to my account, that should be at least 90%.” Scratching his head, Kenjo sat back in his chair. “Well, if you want a convincing number in your report, well, just write in 86%.”

“If you don't mind, I'd like to hear your rationale for that.”

“I'd like to say that it's just a figure that I made up, but the truth is, it's not. As of now, the Odette II, which was jumped to the frontier zone, has not yet fallen into the hands of the rebel forces and is still alive and well. Of the rebel forces gathered at Garnet A, the number of ships that have jumped to the relevant star sector of the Seven Star Federation is less than 10% of the total, and that includes the control station, and none of them have left the same jump data as the Odette II. It may be possible that the Odette II jumped right into the middle of the enemy's large fleet, but that ship has not only a crew, but also had a ground squadron with experience in actual combat who are pirates as their main occupation. And the person in charge is Captain Ririka.” There were some voices of admiration from some of the staff members. Kenjo pretended not to notice and continued. “We believe that our friends aboard the Odette II have not given up yet. If that is the case, we are not ready to give up on them. The situation is not looking good, but if we can turn things around from here, it can't be a bad thing for us either.”

Kenjo leaned heavily into the round table. “So, this is actually the main topic, but in order to ensure the success of the strategy, I’d like to ask you a few questions. Will you listen to me?”

“Go on.” The inspector said. “We do not believe that a pirate with the reputation of Captain Blackbeard would come here without a plan. We will make a conclusion after listening to what he has to say.”

“Thank you. Actually, our pirate ship, the Bentenmaru, has already jumped to the frontier in pursuit of the Odette II. Therefore…”

“*You jumped… right?*”

“And here we go again, with another quick jump.”

Realizing his poor performance, Jackie commanded the coordinates for the next jump to the console.

“We are in a great hurry.”

Muller Grant is not the kind of pirate who makes promises before making a move. She targets the Lunar Lion, irradiates her with powerful fire control radar, and launches a quick attack via communication lines. Pretending not to notice, Jackie turned his head back to the communications monitor.

“Do you already have a buyer in mind?”

“*I have a lot of inquiries.*” Muller looks around slowly. “*I’ve had data requests not only from the frontier nations that provided ships for this operation, but also from the Empire's military industry.*”

“What on earth are you doing behind the scenes?” After completing all the settings for the FTL jump, Jackie looked back at Muller's face. Chimera of Scylla is trying to precisely measure the Lunar Lion's current location and take control of it through the communication line. “Well then, it's time to indulge.”

“*Oh, you're in such a hurry. If I could, I would like you to work with me on my next job.*”

“Is this the job I was asked to do by the pirate Muller?” Jackie shuddered. “If I had known, I would have run away, but I am too scared to accept such an offer. Now, if you'll excuse me.”

Chimera of Scylla's energy response rapidly increased. Jackie commanded a FTL jump.

“That was dangerous.” In the Lunar Lion's cockpit, after jumping through hyperdimensional space, Jackie played back the recording of the radar signals and electronic attack that had just been received from Scylla. “They were able to see our position and set their sights on us, which was within our expectations, but they attacked with more than ten steps at once. If it wasn't my spaceship, they could have easily taken over the controls.”

Records of almost every conceivable attack, from rudimentary cracking to speed-oriented electronic jamming, from hijacking the controls of the main engine to inducing errors in data sensors, are listed and displayed in three-dimensional detail. “No, repelling an electronic attack and losing control is better than being hit by a direct hit from naval gunfire and evaporating without leaving any debris behind.”

After saying that, Jackie frowned. “No, there's no way the Crimson Pirate will let things end so easily. Muller is a pirate who shows no mercy, even though the only thing she can use is the honor of the dead, it is only natural that the entire spaceship should be roasted and burned, and then the questioning should take place later.”

Jackie shook his head, feeling a chill in the cockpit. “I can't do it, I can't do it. The secret to living a long and healthy life is to fly to the other side of the galaxy and stay out of a 30 light-year radius of the Pirate Guild.”

Jackie looked at the display, which still showed the data obtained in normal space just before the leap. The last observation data from the Black Swan, which had jumped with the entire control station with the Odette II docked, was still being displayed. “A short-distance jump using the remaining energy? Will I be able to successfully escape from the pirate Muller?”

After muttering, Jackie smiled bitterly and shook his head. “So, I can't complain that I'm being chased now, since I’ve been playing with my fellow pirates. For the time being, I'll just have to make small jumps to cover my tracks.”

“The main engine is losing power! Yayoi, come here!”

“What? We're in hyperspace!? If the main engine loses power in a place like this, we don't know where we'll end up!” Yayoi jumped from the engineer's seat to the electronic warfare seat.

“Look there, it shows the data that we’ve extracted from the Black Swan's engine control.”

Yayoi screamed when she saw the display Lynn pointed to. “What is this!? Didn't you charge enough energy to jump before jumping!?”

Ninety percent of the energy required for FTL travel is released at the beginning of the jump. Although an enormous amount of energy is required to leap a three-dimensional spacecraft into hyperspace, which is not governed by the physical laws of normal space, it does not require that much energy during the jump.

“The main engine was on cooldown, but the FTL engine had enough energy to make the jump, so I decided to divide it into three separate jumps and set the jump distance.”

“It's broken!” Yayoi declared and reached for the console.

“Um…” Yayoi's hand stopped at the console layout, which looked nothing like the engineer's seat.

“What do you want me to do?” Lynn said while busy moving her hands.

“Apparently it was originally set up for unmanned operation, so I think I can do most of the engine operations from here, but I don't know how to do what I need to do!”

“Increase the output of the auxiliary equipment!” Yayoi guessed the layout of the engines around the main engine from the schematic diagram shown on the display and gave instructions.

“And Captain Ririka!” Yayoi exclaimed, turning her back to the captain's seat.

“What is it?”

“It doesn't matter whether they’re from the Barbaroosa or the Bentenmaru, if there are any people in the ground squadron who have experience in dealing with engines, please call them as soon as possible! I have no idea how to adjust such an old spaceship, a remote-controlled one at that!”

“An old ship can’t be fully automatic, can it? All right, wait a minute.” Ririka grabbed the headset from the captain's seat and opened all channels to the ground troops aboard the station. “This is the bridge, the ship is currently cruising through hyperspace. If any of you are familiar with FTL engines or have experience working in the engine department, please come to the bridge as soon as possible.”

“Boss!” Yayoi turned to the captain's seat with a gasp. “It’s an emergency!?”

“Repeat. If you are familiar with FTL engines or have experience working in the engine department, please come to the bridge as soon as possible.” Ririka removed her mouth from the headset's microphone. “Since it's an emergency situation, I thought it would be better to hurry.”

“What's going on?” Schnitzer was the first to appear on the bridge, with a quickness that did not match his huge body.

“The Black Swan's engine is a mess.” Ririka concisely summarized the situation in which Lynn and the yacht club members were struggling. “We need your help.”

“Now, I've managed to increase the power output of the auxiliaries to keep our position.” Yayoi explained to Marii in the navigator's seat while asking about the current hyperspace situation.

“Well, the main engine is probably in tatters and isn't turning properly, and the numbers for the FTL engine are also unreliable!”

“How could you jump under such circumstances?” Schnitzer looked back at Ririka when he saw the operational status of the Black Swan's engine, which was displayed in time on the sub-display of the electronic battle table. “Moreover, you operated the engine remotely? That was reckless.”

“I couldn't think of any other way to get out of that situation.” Ririka, seated in the captain's seat, gave a light shrug. “Should I make an emergency stop and return to normal space?”

“No, braking from this situation will only eat up more energy. How much energy is left in the capacitor that can be used immediately?”

“There should be 70% left of the amount that was there before the first leap, but if the indicators are out of whack, you can't rely on those numbers either.”

After listening to Lynn's explanation, Schnitzer reached out his giant hand to the console. “I'm going to return the reserve energy to the auxiliaries to stabilize the attitude. When jumping, 90% of the stored energy is used at the start of the jump. As long as it doesn't stall, the ship will return to the real world from hyperspace even if you leave it alone.”

“We work in the Barbaroosa's engineering department, and you're telling me there's something wrong with the FTL engine? What’s going on, what happened?” Several ground troops, who had just removed their armored spacesuits and heavy combat uniforms, jumped onto the bridge.

“The Black Swan's engine room is in a bad way.” Schnitzer further summarized the situation. “Ririka, I'll take command.”

“I’m giving you full authority.”

“Stabilize our posture even if you use up our reserve energy. The Odette II was docked at the control station and jumped without having enough energy, so her posture in hyperspace is about to collapse. Connect the FTL engine and auxiliary equipment in series and make it your top priority to return to the world.” Schnitzer's thick fingers delicately run over the control panel as he explains quickly.

“We may not have enough energy left to do the triple jump, but do you care?”

“I said I'm giving you full authority.” Ririka answered leisurely. “It's a bit troubling if things go different than planned, but if I can't do it, I'll just have to make do without. For now, just think about getting back to the world safely.”

“Roger that. It's okay, we can even use the attitude control on the station side for stabilization.”

“Just avoid a crash landing.” Ririka said.

“The damage is scary, and the spatial abnormality of touchdown is too large, so you'll know where you land in no time.”

“Release all engine limiters and safety devices on the Black Swan’s side.” Schnitzer instructed. “What we will be doing now is non-standard operation. We'll have to be pretty reckless, so please release all limiters and safety devices to prevent the command from being stopped by the engine control.”

“All engine control prohibitions are canceled.” Lynn, who had already penetrated deep into the control system of the Black Swan, summed up all the prohibitions of the higher-ranking commands and suspended it temporarily. “It's full of shortcuts to unknown destinations and incomprehensible scripts. What's going on with the controls on the Black Swan?”

“I guess they made it up by putting together scraps just for this operation.” Schnitzer replied while operating the Black Swan's engine controls from Lynn's electronic console.

“Even with such a sloppy configuration, it's possible to fly it as a spaceship. Stabilize the operation of the superluminal engine by directly connecting the auxiliary engine's output to the main engine while keeping it fully open. Put in as much coolant as you can!”

“Hey, hey, the coolant tank is almost empty.” A ground soldier in an armored space suit who followed Schnitzer to the electronic warfare table shouted in dismay.

“You don't have to trust the numerical display, it doesn't matter, just throw some coolant at it.”

“The main engine is bypassed and the auxiliary engine is directly connected to the FT: engine. All limiters and safety devices have been removed. Pray that the machine will do what you tell it to do.”

Thanks to the large number of people with experience working in the engine department, the Black Swan was able to successfully return to normal space, with the Odette II docked at the control station.

“Confirm our current location!” Ririka skipped the routine instructions. “Marii, what was the first destination you set up?”

“I set up an interstellar space that was as empty as possible, with safety as the first priority.”

The spatial disruption is worse than a normal touchdown.

“It should be far away from the defense zone of any planet in the shipping lane, but I think it’s probably way off…”

“It's hard to declare a successful touchdown.” Leaving the observation of the current position to the bridge personnel, Schnitzer gave his findings. “Since the ship touched down while drifting without fully correcting its posture that was disturbed during the leap, the pre-drive phenomenon that it scattered at the appearance point must have been at least an order of magnitude larger than usual. Depending on the density of the enemy's observation network, they will catch up with us before long.”

“Fortunately, at least the Odette II is unharmed.” Ririka looked up after confirming that all ships reported no abnormalities. “Is the next leap still impossible?”

“If you don't want to risk your life, it's better to stop.” Schnitzer looked at a display showing the Black Swan's engine controls, which had red warning signs on almost every system. “I recommend maintenance and adjustment.”

“Under the circumstances, I would say so.” Ririka sighed. “But, as you know, we don't have time to do maintenance and adjustments. If the Black Swan were to be separated from the station, the mass it would have to jump would be drastically reduced, which would reduce the burden on the engine, but would that still be no good?”

“It's the same.” Schnitzer shook his head. “The engine of the Black Swan is in no condition to be used safely. Unless you are prepared to leap into trouble, I am against such a suicidal act.”

“That makes sense.” Ririka pondered with a difficult look on her face.

“Pre-drive phenomenon confirmed!” Gruier spoke up.

“They're here already!?” Ririka scanned the data from observation equipment that had captured spatial anomalies propagating at FTL speeds. “Isn't it too soon?”

“It's a long way away, but there's no doubt about it. However…” As observational data is collected, the computer automatically narrows down the list of spacecraft likely to touch down. “…No applicable information in the registered data!?”

“Another newcomer!?”

“Transponder acquired.” Gruier reported in a relaxed voice. “Kings Transfer's large transport, Tunic Tudor 60? We've got a signal identifying it as a heavy lift carrier.”

“Current location has been found!” Marii displayed a star map on the main screen. “Galactic longitude 04 degrees 09 minutes and 45 seconds, galactic latitude 12 degrees 51 minutes and 50 seconds.” The star map was superimposed with the symbol of a relay station and the thick band of a trade route.

“Wow, in the safe airspace of the interstellar Scholar route, with the free trade city of Meiya right in front of us!”

“Aren’t we in the middle of the shipping lane!?”

Even in an age where ships travel the shortest distance to their destinations, routes still exist in the infinite expanse of the universe. Shipping routes have developed to connect relay stations and trading planets located at strategic points of transportation, and even if not under the control of the Galactic Empire, major shipping routes are equipped with navigational aids.

Meiya was a space city as old as the Galactic Empire itself. When it was first built in Mesaiya, a spectral G-type system with no inhabitable planets of its own, it was a fortress that monitored the overlapping spheres of influence of four independent star systems and the Federation.

As time passed, the former fortress developed into a transportation hub and grew to the size of a small artificial planet.

Free trade cities maintain their ports with the same political power as independent star systems and alliances. The source of this power can be a military company based at the port, a stationed star system military force in the surrounding star system, purely political power or financial power, or a combination of the above.

“Well, how bad of a port is Meiya?” The Odette II is equipped with only a limited amount of data. Hoping for at least some basic knowledge, Ririka searched the Encyclopedia, a database that is newer only in terms of the date and time it was updated.

“It is the best free trade city in the frontier area.” Captain Cayenne said as she looked at the route map on the main screen. “It's safe, and the facilities and contractors are reliable. It is one of the few independent free trade cities outside the Empire where warships of the Imperial Fleet can enter without disguising their military status.”

“Even the Imperial Fleet can enter the port?” Ririka rolled her eyes and smiled. Even though not all frontiers and warring sides are open, the Empire and the frontiers are on a quasi-perilous war footing. In a star region where imperial expansionism is looming, there are not many ports where vessels belonging to the imperial fleet can enter without disguising their identities.

“It's a perfect fit. If you want to hide a tree, hide a tree in the forest; if you want to hide a ship, hide a ship in the harbor. I don't know how many pursuers will be attracted to the Black Swan, but from such a station, we can contact the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa with impunity.”

Ririka checked the control system of the free trade city Meiya in the encyclopedia. Meiya, which orbits its home star in the Mesaiya star system where several routes intersect, controls the surrounding airspace and precisely controls the flow of spacecraft. However, it does not control the interstellar shipping lanes.

“Captain Cayenne, I'm sorry to ask you to do so much work that is not your main job, but can you please get on board the Black Swan ASAP and somehow make the engine work so that it can make just one more FTL jump?”

“Didn't Schnitzer say he was against FTL jumps?” Captain Cayenne looked at Schnitzer, who had left the electronic warfare table that was remotely controlling the Black Swan. “And you still want me to do it?”

“Listen to Schnitzer, too. The only thing you have to jump is the Black Swan. As long as you jump from here, I don't care where you end up. If possible, I'd like the autopilot to jump after that, but depending on the situation, I don't expect it to go that far.”

“You want to jump only the Black Swan?” Captain Cayenne asked for confirmation, and Ririka nodded.

“Yes. The control station will be abandoned here. I'm sorry, but the security personnel you have taken hostage should be locked up in some suitable place so that they cannot be disturbed and cannot read the situation. The Black Swan will jump as soon as it is ready. If you jump before they catch up to us, even if your timing is a little off, you can still serve as a decoy by disappearing right in front of our pursuers.”

“What about us?”

“We will undock from the control station and take the shipping route to the free trade city of Meiya.” Ririka entered the main screen and raised her hand at the space city where the departure route was displayed. “If it's a free trade city, there should be no combat activity allowed within the control zone. At this distance, even this ship, which can't go FTL, can reach the port in just over half a day. Then we can do whatever we want.”

Ririka looked around the bridge and lowered her voice. “We are free to contact our friends and call for an escort. If you take the Scholar route, there are regular ships going to and from Imperial territory, so if it takes too long, we can send our crew home first.”

“I honestly wanted to go home, but I understand.” Replying in the same low voice, Cayenne saluted Ririka. “I understand the situation. The ground forces will now board the Black Swan and make emergency repairs to the engine.”

“Hurry up. As soon as you are ready, we will undock from the control station and rendezvous with the Black Swan.”

Although some of them returned to the Odette II, the majority of the ground troops, who were scattered around the control stations, quickly followed orders given to them.

The ten or so rebel maintenance personnel who were left inside the control station were put to sleep with hypnotic gas and confined in a storeroom so that they would not interfere with our movements. All the ground troops with free hands move to the Black Swan, undocked from the control station, and begin first aid on the engine.

The Odette II also disconnected from the control station and rendezvoused with the Black Swan. The ground squadron, which had begun emergency repairs on the Black Swan, entered a new course from the Black Swan's temporarily installed bridge and after completing the extremely sloppy measures that prioritized time, they left the Black Swan.

Although it was a safe zone, the airspace was close to the shipping lane, so the Odette II caught a number of pre-jump phenomena while working. All of them were from spacecraft from remote areas that differed from the previously observed data, but the pre-jump phenomenon caught after the ground squadron began evacuating the Black Swan matched one recorded in the logs for the first time.

“Confirmation of pre-jump phenomenon.” Gruier's calm voice echoed on the main bridge. “Observational data matches the pattern of Chimera of Scylla.”

“They’re finally here.” Ririka opened the channel directly connected to the ground squadron aboard the Black Swan. “Odette II Bridge to all ground forces! Chimera of Scylla is coming in for touchdown. After this communication, the ship will initiate a radio blackout and active stealth against the Chimera of Scylla. As planned, launch the Black Swan as soon as everyone has left, regardless of our movements!”

“The Black Swan's ground forces have already started evacuating.” Lynn informed.

“I wonder if they'll be okay, even an armored spacesuit with radar-absorbing paint may be brighter than our Odette II in active stealth, depending on their sensors.”

“Don't worry about it.” Ririka looks at images obtained from the optical observation equipment. “The Black Swan has started moving. If it continues to jump at maximum acceleration, the infrared reaction of the propellant and the space-time quake will cause a huge disturbance in the space around here.”

The Chimera of Scylla touched down in normal space at a safe distance from the Scholar route, the main interstellar route. The Odette II turned its bow to minimize its frontal projected area relative to the coordinates of the Chimera of Scylla's appearance, and assumed a stealth posture.

Immediately after returning to normal space, before the radar/sensor system of the Chimera of Scylla was restored, the Black Swan, from which the last ground crew member had escaped, began to accelerate greatly using normal propulsion. Without a transponder and ignoring the direction of navigation, even though it was in a safety zone, it spouted sublight plasma flames and increasing its speed as if fleeing from the Chimera of Scylla.

Without waiting for the spatial anomaly caused by its own touchdown to subside, Chimera of Scylla emitted sharp radar waves in all directions, and a moment later they focused on the fleeing Black Swan.

“They took the bait!” Lynn shouted as she saw the Chimera of Scylla's exploration ability narrowed down to the accelerating Black Swan.

“Normally, they would target the station with its big reaction, but only a famous pirate could immediately notice the moving Black Swan.” Ririka watches Chimera of Scylla's movements as if they were someone else's business.

“Radar is shifting to fire control.” Lynn reported as she saw the long-range wide-area radar switched to a high-power, fine-grained frequency for fire control. “...They’re shooting!”

Without waiting for the tremors in the surrounding space to subside, Chimera of Scylla fired its three triple-barreled large-caliber main guns.

“It's okay, naval gunfire at this moment can only be used as a threat.” Not only is it long-range, but it is also inaccurate to shoot while the distortion in the surrounding space has not yet been released. As Ririka expected, all of Scylla's naval gunfire missed the Black Swan, which was accelerating at full speed, without even getting close. “But they're trying to guess.” Ririka murmured as she watched the large-diameter beam on the display, swallowed up by space with almost no dispersion after a long range.

“No warning at all.” Gruier, who had been listening with her communication channel open, reported. “They’re a determined opponent.”

“They’re a difficult opponent.” Ririka said as she watched Scylla's movements as she set a course for the Black Swan, starting accelerating pursuit without waiting for the surrounding space to calm down.

“If they don't warn you, it means they don't want to negotiate, and if they shoot at you right away, it means they don't think it will hurt them even if we get hurt a little. If they get it wrong, there is a possibility that it will be completely destroyed, but they know that the essential monomolecular crystal mast will not break no matter what they do.”

Scylla set a course to pursue the Black Swan, and as she passed the control station, she bombarded it with sharp radar waves, probably to check the current situation.

“They are almost at the closest point of approach.”

Ai changes her attitude so that the projected area of the Odette II is minimized in relation to the approaching Scylla. Careless use of the thrusters would scatter the infrared response, so the only way to use them is to change the direction of operation of the inertial control system at the bow and stern.

“Do you think we can escape?”

“If the reputation that electronic warfare in frontier areas lags behind that in Imperial territory is true, then there is no need to worry about being caught on such a crude radar.” Lynn replied while finely manipulating the electronic warfare table.

“Crude?”

“It's quite sloppy and sketchy. The reason why their radar is focused only on the objective, such as the station or the Black Swan, instead of emitting omnidirectional radiation, is because they are using powerful radar for combat near the shipping lanes. It seems like they want to avoid unnecessary firing as much as possible.”

“They’re using it like a searchlight. Does that mean that they are only using passive sensors to deal with directions where they're not firing radar?”

“Sometimes short radar pulses can be detected. However, it's not as accurate as the Galactic Empire's radars, and maybe it's because it's located so close to a free trade city, but it doesn't seem like it's interfering with electronics at all.”

“Is electronic warfare in the frontier areas really behind that in the core?”

“As far as I can see, I think so. But if that redhead, that con man’s electronic warfare skills are at a level that isn’t that rare on the frontier…” Lynn's shoulders shook in horror.

“I hear that the frontier is a place rich in talent.” Ririka watched the graceful silhouette of the crimson pirate ship as it accelerated past the closest approach, heading towards the Black Swan. “Well, in that sense, even the Cetus constellation is a remote place.”

“Scylla's radar is focused on the Black Swan.”

Although it had passed through a major wave of spatial anomalies immediately after touchdown, the radar accuracy of the Chimera of Scylla while accelerating at full speed was significantly inferior to that of the inertial navigation. Long-range gunfire would result in a fatal loss of accuracy, but the Chimera of Scylla was still preparing to fire a second salvo.

“Is it likely to be a hit?”

“It is true that the Scylla is faster than the Black Swan's full acceleration, but the Scylla is trying to catch up to the Black Swan from behind.” Lynn displayed the location of the Chimera of Scylla and the Black Swan on the main screen for the rest of the bridge crew to see. “The distance is still far enough away, and the Black Swan's normal propulsion jets will blur their aim, and I don't think Scylla will be able to shoot with precision while accelerating like this, so unless it's a fluke, it's probably fine.”

Lynn looked at the timer in the corner of the display. The Black Swan is currently in a complete radio blackout, with no data communication with the outside world. It is cruising automatically according to the set program. “Besides, it should be jumping soon.”

Thinking that it would be troublesome if the superluminal jump was canceled for some reason, Ririka thought about the strategy she should take in that case. Her mouth speaks the opposite of what she considered possible. “Even though it was an emergency fix, the ground troops took care of it properly, so don't worry.”

“It’s the scheduled jump time.”

At the same time as the timer for the Black Swan's jump reached zero, the crimson pirate ship in the optical observation image fired a second salvo. The large-caliber beams of the nine gun barrage, which cut through space while maintaining perfect parallelism, spread unnaturally in the far distance.

“Did it jump?”

“Probably.” Lynn, who was clinging to the electronic battle table, finally took her eyes off the console and stretched.

“A large-scale spatial anomaly was observed at the planned jump point. From that state, did it target the surrounding space?” Lynn muttered as she watched the direction of the Chimera of Scylla, which did not slow down its acceleration.

“Even though the Black Swan was simply accelerating in a straight line without evasive maneuvers, it is too early to judge a series of attacks without checking the situation immediately after touchdown.”

“Take a good look. That's the enemy we have to deal with. A long-lived Methuselah pirate…” Ririka looked around the bridge. “Hurry up and recover the ground troops. Not everyone has returned yet.”

“*Bridge from Cayenne!*” The message came via the ship's communication. “All ground forces have been withdrawn from the station.”

“Has everyone come back?”

“*Our motto is to operate secretly and act quickly.*” During a radio blackout, communication between individual spacesuits in space is also restricted. Captain Cayenne appeared on the communications monitor from the port deck, gave a finger-tip salute with only the composite visor of her helmet raised. “*So there is no reason to stay in this airspace anymore. When it's convenient for you, start moving.*”

“Roger.” Ririka saw the movement of Chimera of Scylla, which had its target jump right in front of her. Immediately after the Black Swan's jump, Chimera of Scylla stopped accelerating and is now proceeding to the jump coordinates using inertial navigation. There is no doubt that they are collecting as much data as it can by releasing all their sensors for tracking purposes. “I wonder if it'll jump.”

Although the distance between them is increasing and the chance of being discovered by the Chimera of Scylla, which does not actively search for enemies, during active stealth navigation is low, the Odette II cannot move carelessly. Not only the Odette II but also the detached control station are still in the current airspace, and it is unclear whether Chimera of Scylla will continue to pursue the Black Swan or whether they will prioritize surveying and confirming the current airspace.

“Chimera of Scylla is also hitting the control station with radar.” Gruier said. “Once they see it, they'll notice that Odette II isn't docked at the control station. If Jackie's business partner is the Chimera of Scylla and he has given them enough information about the Black Swan, we can expect them to conclude that the Odette II fled with the Black Swan.”

“The question is, how much information?” Ririka crossed her arms and thought. “Jackie tried to hide this ship on the Black Swan before the Chimera of Scylla came out. I don't know if he was really trying to hide us or to secure the Odette II, and what if the exact engine data of the Black Swan was given to Methuselah, Muller’s long-lived species?”

“Jackie doesn't seem like the diligent type.”

“Even if men aren't more diligent, it's common for women to be more meticulous.”

Ririka looked around the bridge, which had become strangely quiet, and noticed that the crew's eyes were focused on her. “If there's anything I can hope for, it's that the redhead won't live up to those expectations at all, but if Scylla knows about the tragic state of the Black Swan's engine, it's a bit troublesome.”

The Chimera of Scylla approaches the point where the Black Swan jumped, still navigating inertially.

“It seems to be in FTL communications with someone.” There was no response from normal communications. Gruier, who is monitoring the situation on the Chimera of Scylla, which is running every possible sensor on the spatial situation immediately after the jump, reported. “There is a weak hyperspace response.”

“Now, who are you communicating with?” Ririka murmured. “If that pirate ship is the leader, as Jackie says, did they send their subordinate ships to where the Black Swan jumped, or did they call them here?”

“Here?” Gruier asked.

“Yes. Remember, their goal is to get the Stellar Slayer. To do that, they need the Odette II and the control station. They can either leave the station here, investigate it themselves, or leave it to someone else. They will spend a lot of time investigating a station that might be booby-trapped right next to a busy shipping lane, so then they won't have time to chase after the Black Swan that jumped. Since it jumped right in front of them, they would be able to observe highly reliable data, so if there is a ship that can be sent to the high jump destination, you can either let it track them, or you can go after it yourself.”

“It looks like they’re going to jump.” Gruel announced.

The light of the Chimera of Scylla's normal propulsion, which was so far away that its position could barely be determined by optical observation equipment, wavered. The crimson pirate ship disappeared into hyperspace with a massive surge of gravity waves that could even reach the Odette II, which was sailing in active stealth.

“Chimera of Scylla jump confirmed.”

“Don't let your guard down!” Ririka raised her voice at Gruel's report. “All crews in normal sailing configuration!” Ririka continued, looking at each of the crew members on the rustling bridge. “Course, free trade city Meiya! Maybe one of Scylla's fellow pirate ships or rebel vessels will jump in soon. We need to leave no wake before we enter the shipping lane, no conventional propulsion, just solar sails, and head for the lane. Can you do that?”

“With the star Mesaiya this close, we’ll be fine.” Ai regained her grip on the helm. “All masts deployed, all sails spread!”

“Once we enter the shipping lane, we can mobilize normal propulsion and began normal navigation. Then prepare to enter the free trade city tomorrow morning.”

“What about the transponder?” Gruier asked Ririka.

“In order to navigate within the shipping lanes according to regulations, ships are also required to transmit transponder signals. If you send out a transponder with an identification signal from the training sailing ship Odette II…”

“Don't do anything that will cause all our hard disguise work to go to waste!” Ririka interrupted any further explanation of the situation. “I'm sure you have plenty of data for a disguise, just pick something safe that doesn't seem to stand out.”

“Roger that.” Gruier began searching the data bank for transponder data for camouflage. The ship name and ship type data used in transponders are normally managed in such a way that they cannot be easily tampered with. However, a mountain of transponder data for disguise was stored in the databanks of the Odette II.

A few hours later, the sailing transport ship White Swan on the Scholar route sent an application for permission to enter the central port of the free trade city of Meiya.

A black rectangular object with white text

Description automatically generated

“Touchdown.” As soon as Kane announced this, the Bentenmaru returned to normal space.

“Confirm current location.”

Luca, in the navigator's seat, passed the current position data to the captain's seat as soon as she returned.

“Scholar route, Mesaiya 0 comma 8. As planned, error conversion is not necessary, right?”

“Huh, you were able to confirm our current location!?” Marika, seated in the captain's seat, raised her voice. “Even though it's just after touchdown and the waves haven't even settled yet?”

“Because it's on the Scholar route.” Luca's voice contains a smile. “The main route is famous for its navigation support facilities, which are as good as the Empire's main routes. Here, you can go from one end to the other and back, even if you can't navigate and don't know celestial navigation.”

“That much…” During the explanation, the actual observed current position data was also displayed at the captain's seat. There is almost no jump error. Marika looked at the star Mesaiya displayed on the main display. A G-type star with the same spectrum as Tau floats in the distance. “If you're on the main route, it doesn't make much difference whether you're in imperial territory or on the frontier.”

Hyakume popped up a list of transponders of spacecraft sailing in the vicinity. “See, as per the rules, every spacecraft flying the route has its transponder enabled, transmitting the ship's name and vector. Well, there are some suspicious ones in the mix, but at any rate, I don't see any spaceships that seem like they're going to pick a fight with us.”

Hyakume took the trouble to turn his seat around and face the captain's seat. “So, you know, the captain can loosen up a bit.”

“But…” Marika reviewed the display at the captain's seat with a nervous look on her face. “This is my first time in frontier space, so I wonder where and what's going on.”

Marika noticed Hyakume’s list of spaceships sailing around the Bentenmaru, dozens of ships in a radius of 1 million kilometers. Since they were on the route to the Free Trade City, they flew in an orderly manner, with two-thirds of them heading in the same direction and the remaining one-third going in the opposite direction.

Marika sorted the spaceships on the list by home port. The majority of the spaceships were not of imperial registry, but of frontier registry.

“As you can see, there are only a few warships.” Hyakume turned to the console and further sorted the list for the captain's seat. There are only two warships belonging to the Frontier Star District, one is a small cruiser and the other seems to be a training ship. “There's no one anywhere firing off glaring combat radar. Isn't it relaxing?”

“But, how many spaceships within sight have disguised transponders?” When Marika saw the types of ships that could be disguising their transponder, her shoulders shook. “We're pretending to be a transport ship, right? Even though it's not uncommon for spaceships to be armed for self-defense in remote areas, I wonder how many of the visible spaceships are transmitting reliable transponder signals, and how many are disguised ambushes.”

Marika held her stomach over her captain's uniform. “My stomach hurts.”

“The situation is not so urgent that you can't just pop up around the Free Trade City, so don't worry.”

After confirming that there were no abnormalities in all the of the Bentenmaru’s systems after touching down, Kane put the Bentenmaru on route while keeping it from moving faster than a normally operated transport ship. “We will soon be in the control airspace of Meiya. When that happens, we will be in a completely safe zone. No one would dare to attack us unless they were prepared to turn all the spaceships flying around against them.”

“Who guarantees that safety?” Marika pouted her lips. “Even if there is a defense force for each star system, there is no Imperial fleet. Even Meiya doesn't have a huge fleet, so who can guarantee the safety of their self-established controlled airspace?”

“Free trade cities are like oases in the desert.” Kane shifted the Bentenmaru to cruise mode as it entered the shipping lane. “It would be a different story if there was a nearby star or relay point that could replace it, but even within the galaxy, a supply base is irreplaceable. Meiya has not only a large port with an air shield, but also a fully covered pressurized dock that can accommodate even large ships, so it can not only supply, but also maintain and even build new ships if it wants to. And because it is a free trade city, taxes are minimal and people and materials are cheap. Well, it can't be completely free, since there are certain necessary expenses once you enter the port, but still, the annual tax that you have to pay is quite low.”

Marika nodded as she remembered balancing the Bentenmaru's operating expenses.

“That's why.”

As if the explanation had been completed, Kane moved on to checking the Bentenmaru's autopilot. After thinking for a moment, Marika timidly opened her mouth.

“Economic reasons?　Because Meiya can provide various services cheaper than anywhere else?”

“It's not just cheap. It's safe and reliable. On the frontier, these two things aren't as widespread as in the Empire. Of course, there are many stations that claim to be free trade cities and offer cheaper services than Meiya. However, it is only through the morals and cooperation of the users that a free trade city of this scale can operate at a such a reasonable price.”

“Hmm.” With an unconvinced look on her face, Marika looked at the list of other spaceships that were on the same route as Bentenmaru, heading to Meiya. “So you are saying that spacecraft belonging to the Empire can safely enter?”

“Well, of course that's not all.” Hyakume took over. “Meiya’s security fleet is not much more than a nominal presence. Instead, they are strictly orbital control and surveillance, and sanctions are recommended for dangerous behavior, with bounties. Do you know what that means?”

Marika tilted her head with a puzzled look on her face. “Are there any bounty hunters roaming around?”

“No spacecraft would have that much free time, but if they didn't heed the warnings of orbital control, ships would become bounty hunters on the spot.”

“Huh?”

“It is the frontier, after all. Unlike in Imperial territory, many of the transports in the area are armed. Meiya’s bounty is famously high and well-paid, and you can be sure that if a bounty were to be placed on your head for dangerous activities, every starship in the neighborhood would be turned against you.”

“Amazing.” After muttering, Marika looked around the Bentenmaru’s bridge. “Don't we have to worry about transponder fraud?” After a moment of silence, the bridge crew burst into laughter. “What? What? There's no need to laugh so hard.”

“Sorry, sorry. If there was a bounty for faking a transponder, half of the spaceships flying around here would be attacked.” Kane says with a laugh as he lowers the helmsman's seat and bends his body in half. “For transponders, the vector display is more important than the ship name or type, so no one will be check it unless there is something wrong with that.”

“Even so…” Marika looked at the display showing their disguised transponder. Sarasvati 32 is a medium-sized transport ship belonging to the Cetus Constellation Aerospace Corporation. Although the shipping company does exist, the name Sarasvati 32 is only used occasionally. Even though the ship has a privateer's license, they may have some trouble getting around as the ‘pirate ship Bentenmaru’, so this is one of the many pseudonyms that have been prepared for the ship.

“Don't be so jumpy.” Kane put his seat back in place and took control of the helm. “We’re almost in the control area. Transport ship Sarasvati 32, request entry to Meiya Central Port.”

“…Roger.”

Just to be sure, Marika, in the captain's seat, checked on the display to make sure that the fields on the application form for entering the port were filled out, and sent it to the Meiya Control Station.

The reply seemed to be automated and came back immediately. As requested, entry to Central Port, the central port of the free trade city of Meiya, is permitted, and at the same time an approach route is shown.

“Hmmm…” Kane, who was in the helmsman's seat, checked the instructed approach route from the Bentenmaru side. “The speed of the reaction is as fast as the best in the Empire. The fact that it is completely automated and saves on labor costs is also a plus. Well, Captain, we have been granted permission to enter Central Port as requested.”

“Go ahead.” Marika is looking at the free trade city that has appeared as a large symbol on the route map. “The Odette II should be waiting for us there.”

As they approached, the free trade city Meiya began to show its full appearance, with a large number of spaceships floating around it.

Whether it's a large station with a closed port or a space city, not all spacecraft that come to port pass through an air shield and berth at a pressurized pier. Container ships can be loaded and unloaded at open container docks, and food, propellant, and spare parts can be easily delivered by carrier ships.

If they enter the port, they occupy expensive pressurized space and are charged high fees.

With the exception of some special cargo and passenger ships that require loading and unloading under pressure, most transport ships occupy anchorage airspace near ports, and use their own ferries, shared shuttles, and supply ships.

Numerous spaceships are moored in the anchorage airspace, which was set up to avoid the entry and departure orbits of the port. Built in and around the huge space city, lit up with lights, illuminating the spacecraft and their flashing anti-collision lights. The Free Trade Port, Meiya, stood comfortably in the center of the space, letting the light of its wide-open harbor leak out into outer space.

For a free trade city, port facilities are the cornerstone of business. Most of Meiya's outer wall is devoted to port facilities, and the Central Port is located around the perimeter.

Approaching Meiya, the Bentenmaru followed the pre-designated approach route, descending toward Meiya’s south pole, then ascending and prepared to enter Central Port. Central Port, Meiya's largest port facility, has a unified entry route on its south pole side and exit route on the north pole side, with the anchorage airspace set towards the equator so it does not interfere with the entry and exit routes.

“It's big.” Marika muttered to herself as Meiya began to show a complex structure with many additions and additions as she approached. It is much larger than the Sea of the Morningstar relay station that she is usually accustomed to seeing.

“Oh, I see.” Kane leaves the control of the spaceship to the guidance from the port and monitors its movements. “Is this the captain's first time in such a large port? There aren’t many space cities of this size in the Empire. There are no inhabitable planets in this system, and they lost two rocky planets to build this one.”

Planets are the most important sources of resources in a star system.

“Even though it's not filled with anything, it's large enough to generate gravity due to its own mass. Ok, final permission to enter has been granted.” A high-speed passenger ship that seems to be on a frontier route is moving ahead. Marika confirmed her entry clearance sent from the air traffic control station. The original request for the designated pier remains unchanged.

“First of all, let’s get through the first gate, right?”

Keeping a safe distance from the high-speed passenger ship ahead, the Bentenmaru approaches the central port of the free trade city of Meiya, illuminated by cocktail rays. Beyond the wide-open air shield, the central port with countless piers lined up in parallel comes into view.

“Wow.” Marika, in the captain's seat, couldn't help but raise her voice as she saw the huge port, the size of which she had never seen before. Central Port, built to surround the equator, is a harbor with numerous piers lined up in parallel in the direction of the poles. The length of each pier is large enough to moor five spacecraft in series, each about the size of the Bentenmaru. Most of the piers have a variety of different styles of spaceships moored there, and there are very few piers that are completely unused.

Service ships and robot ships of all sizes, and if you look closely, you can see live crew members flying around in the weightless port pressurized by the air shield illuminated by bright lights.

“If I cause a commotion inside, I wonder if it will cause trouble for all these spaceships.” Marika mumbled.

“Well, if you do something careless, they will beat you up even if there is no bounty on your head.”

“It's at least equipped with an isolation barrier to prevent sudden accidents and disasters.”

Kane adjusted the Bentenmaru's course according to the approach route superimposed on the display. Marika fixed her eyes on a bright red silhouette that stood out among the various large and small spaceships moored to the pier.

“That's the Crimson Pirate... Chimera of Scylla.” Marika tapped the console to query Meiya's control station for data on the spacecraft in port. The high-speed battleship moored at Pier 268A, in a pier numbered 360 degrees clockwise with the North Pole facing up, had, to her surprise, entered the port as a pirate ship.

“Captain Muller Grant, huh?” Marika checked to see if there were any other ships in port claiming to be pirate ships. At the moment, there are no other pirate ships in the port or in the spaceships stationed offshore. Instead, Marika looked at the list of types displayed, which seemed to be as many as she could think of, and laughed. “Well, there are many different kinds of spaceships.”

A sudden thought occurred to Marika, and she sorted the list by type. To her surprise, there were four spaceships that were in the port as sailing transport ships, but only one ship was docked at the central port. At Pier 269C, next to the crimson pirate ship, a slender training sailboat with its mast folded is moored in the middle of the pier, which is alphabetized in order from the departure side. From Bentenmaru's vantage point, there is no service ship, no maintenance robot, and no crew in sight.

The pier requested for the Benten Maru's entry application was pier 270, and dock A, which is the shortest distance to the air shield on the departure side. The pier has mooring space on both sides, and although a research vessel and a factory ship are moored on the right side, there is not a single spaceship on the left side.

At the end of the pier on the departure side, part of a long linear light embedded in the dock wall is blinking to indicate the berthing position.

“That's very thorough, isn't it?”

There are no service ships flying in other airspace on the Bentenmaru's approach path. By making a slight correction to the course that was slightly shifted by the airflow of the circulation mechanism when it went under the air shield, Kane pulls the spaceship over to Pier 270, where the docking arm is widened to match the size of the Bentenmaru, which had been applied for in advance.

Marika operated an external monitor camera to closely check the Odette II, which was still moored at Pier 269. "Well, it's shaped like a ship.”

Since it was not possible to use powerful radar in the harbor, Coorie identified the moored Odette II by passive sensors and passed the rough data to the captain's seat. “I tried knocking, but all I got was an automatic answering machine. The environment inside the ship is probably maintained because the cable is connected to supply external energy, but it seems like there's really no one there.”

“That’s the story.” Marika switched to a wide angle view of a slender, sail-mounted spacecraft with its mast folded up, moored at a deserted pier. “Upon entering port, the spacecraft will be emptied and left unmanned. If there is no opponent, no matter what the pirates do, there will be no damage.”

“I'm putting us down.” With almost no shocks and smooth sailing, Kane brought the Bentenmaru to rest in its fixed position at Pier 270. A docking arm connects to a locking point on the ship's hull, securing the spacecraft. The distinctive sound of the docking arm clamping down on the hull echoed on the bridge.

“Okay, docking is complete.” Kane took his hands off the helm and lowered the helmsman's seat back.

“The engine is stopped, but the cable connection from the port is out of the standard for automatic connection, so I'll go out and do it manually.” Sandaime rises from the engineer's seat. “After confirming the cable connection, a report on the completion of berthing operations will be submitted to the control station.”

In pressurized, delicate, closed ports, moored spacecraft typically shut down their engines and receive energy from outside.

“Well, what else should I do...” Marika called up the action plan she had listed on the display again. “For now, let's go do what the reason for entering the port is in order to create an alibi.”

Kane got up from the helmsman's seat. “Was it to procure spare parts, food, and recruit crew?”

“Yeah.” Marika got out of the captain's seat with a worried look on her face. The brightly lit port on the bridge monitor was not so different from the port of the Sea of the Morningstar relay station that she was used to going to. Marika looked at the monitor on the port side, which was not berthed.

Beyond the Odette II, who was sitting on the pier next to her, she could see a spaceship with a crimson hull colored in vivid curves and her turret. The battleship-class triple turrets are facing forward without any elevation angle on the gun barrels.

“Well, I can't get any work done by just sitting around, so I have to go!” Marika said to herself and headed towards the bridge door.

“Don't forget to check the energy in your handgun!” At the suggestion of Kane, who had jumped to the exit earlier, Marika held the empty holster of her captain's uniform. The large beam gun, a prop during business hours, is still plugged in behind the captain's seat because it is out of the way for bridge duty, and the small beam gun for self-defense is still not carried at all times.

“Which one?”

“Both the small one and the big one.” Kane pointed to the large beam gun behind the captain's seat.

“Isn't it prohibited to bring it in?” It is not uncommon for autonomous space cities to prohibit the carrying of any weapons or ammunition for safety reasons.

“It's not forbidden here.” Kane pulled the slender beam gun he was accustomed to using out of his boot. As a pilot, wearing a holster around your waist can be inconvenient.

“Well, that doesn't mean everyone carries one, but it doesn't hurt to be prepared if you are a stranger aboard a spaceship. Make sure the power is set to the lowest setting. If you accidentally damage public equipment, the bill will follow you to the ends of the universe.”

The station's air flowed into the ship as the port side door was opened.

“Ah…” Marika couldn't help but take a deep breath as she sensed the smell of the sea, which could only be smelled in a large-scale closed circulation system, amidst the unique smell of the pressurized atmosphere of a spaceport, mixed with the pungent odor of propellants and metallic odors. “Wow, that's some pretty good air.”

“Free trade cities have an entrance fee.” Kane, who looked around carefully from the hatch that was opened just in case, let out a strange voice. “Oh.”

“Welcome to Meiya.”

Marika was taken aback by the familiar voice and popped her head out from beside Kain. An open-seat air cart was floating in the space right next to the Bentenmaru, which was fixed to the pier with a gantry crane. Gruier, wearing work clothes, is smiling and waving from the passenger seat of a cargo truck that can be used in both gravity and zero-gravity environments that can be seen at any port.

“It would have been a little easier if you had come half a day earlier.”

“Ririka!”

Ririka, who was in the center driver's seat and holding the steering wheel, raised her hand lightly and then put her index finger under her mouth as Marika raised her voice. “It's in a pressurized environment. If you can listen with a good listening scope, you can hear conversations from across the port. It's best not to say a careless word out here.”

Marika turned her head in all directions with a horrified look on her face. Although she could not see the entire area of the Central Port, which curves loosely along the equatorial portion of Meiya, she could see any number of spaceships docked a few piers away and service ships and commuters flying through the port area.

“Roger.”

“Get in.” Ririka pointed to the empty cart. “If you're flying, you don't have to worry about being eavesdropped on.”

“Yes, I'm sorry to bother you.”

Kane jumped from Bentenmaru first. He landed dexterously by hooking his toes on the hand grips of the cargo bed.

“Well then, please go to the gate for now.”

“Oh, wait.” Marika hurriedly followed Kane. She landed on the back of the truck, too, and they moved to the vacant passenger seats on either side of the driver's seat.

A group of people in a car

Description automatically generated

“You got it?” Kane put his hand on the roll bar behind the driver's seat.

“I’m good.”

“Okay, I’m flying.” Without waiting for Marika to pull out her seatbelt, Ririka started the air transport. Marika, who is used to Ririka's rough driving, quickly fastens her seatbelt, but contrary to her expectations, the air transport’s flight through the weightless area is calm.

Ririka glanced sideways at Marika, who looked suspicious, and then returned her eyes to the road ahead. “It's okay, it's safe. This is not the time for a pirate ship captain with a princess on board to have an accident in the harbor area.”

“Two captains!” Kane, propping himself up on the roll bar, mumbled surreptitiously. Marika looks across the driver's seat at Gruier, who is settled in the passenger seat, and then turns her attention back to her mother.

“Why are you walking around with Gruier?”

“She’s the biggest bomb in our house. There's no telling what kind of terrible things she'll come up with and do if you accidentally release her into a remote area like this.”

Marika looked at Gruier, who was facing forward with a clear expression, and laughed.

“Is the royal family from the Empire's territory going on a rampage against pirates in a frontier area?”

Kane, in the back of the truck, looked around. “Speaking of which, how much does the Serenity Royal family know about this?”

“I don't want to know.” “I don't know.” Ririka and Gruier answered at the same time. Gruier added her explanation while looking straight ahead. “The Stellar Royal family only knows the superficial fact that I am accompanying the yacht club on a practice cruise. Of course, I told my sister the truth in order to get her to cooperate.”

Marika looked at her mother, whose expression did not change, then looked at Kane in the back of the truck. Kane shrugged lightly. “At least the two princesses of the Serenity Royal family are aware of the situation.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“Every place has some secrets!”

At Gruier's matter-of-fact statement, Marika looked at Kane, who once again nodded in agreement. It’s not funny. Marika changed the subject. “Um, how is everyone?”

“Disgusted.”

Marika and Kane burst into laughter at the same time in response to the immediate, flat answer.

“It's been three days since we were sent to the frontier, and it's only been two days since we left the Odette II when we entered Meiya’s port, I never thought that the yacht club members at Marika's place were so adaptable, let alone the pirates’ ground forces. I don't know what on earth they eat to be so energetic.”

“It's a big deal for Captain Ririka to say that much.”

“I’m glad to see you're doing well.” Marika was relieved and looked forward. The air transport, which had been flying in a slow straight line observing the port speed limit, entered a tunnel leading to a residential area. In a one-way tunnel that changes from a weightless zone to an artificial gravity zone, the roar of the air transport that generates thrust to support its own weight becomes noticeably louder.

“Is it all right now?” The air transport descended and landed in the travel lane in the tunnel and shifted to ground travel. Marika looked behind her to make sure there were no cars following them.

“Maybe.” Ririka looked around the one-way freeway. “If economic activity were to stop due to an accident, the losses would be huge, so the transportation system here puts safety first, and in reality there is almost no freedom.”

Ririka took her hand off the steering wheel of the air transport, which could also control three-dimensional motion. The air transport in the travel lane makes slight adjustments to its course without slowing down. Then, Marika asked.

“So, since you took the trouble to let the Bentenmaru enter the port near the Odette II, does that mean that at least you don’t have the option of leaving the Odette II behind?”

“We already talked about that before we came into port.” Ririka looked at Gruier's profile, which was still facing forward. “Since there is a regular shipping route from Meiya, we can safely return to Sea of the Morningstar in peaceful Imperial territory as long as we leave Odette II behind. However, we all agreed that we would not win if we did not return on the Odette II.”

“Ririka too?”

At Marika's question, Ririka glanced at her daughter and returned her gaze to the front.

“If she were the yacht club advisor, she would probably have deported everyone even if it meant paralyzing them.” Ririka shook her head, mocking herself.

“Gruier?” Leaning forward, Marika looked into Gruier's face across the driver's seat. “How in the world did you trick Ririka?”

“I don't think it's very polite to say I’ve tricked someone.” Gruier smiles. “I have only explained to you in detail the pros and cons of doing what we here can do, and of running away without even trying. Thank you for your understanding.”

Kane, in the back of the truck, surreptitiously pointed to Gruier in the passenger seat. “If you're talking about what the most dangerous item is, I'm sure I'll know in advance.”

“That's why I keep it close to me like this.”

Ririka put her hands back on the steering wheel and changed lanes to the uptown route. The three-dimensional structure of the space city Meiya is divided into uptown on the north pole side, midtown in the center, and downtown on the south pole side where industrial facilities are concentrated when viewed from the central port. The air transport entered the tube route heading uptown.

The number of large cargos and trailers that had been on the route before decreased, and the number of shiny, polished luxury cars and tank-like limousines increased. Marika checked the destination on the bulletin board, which was also placed on the tubeway.

“Are you on the wrong road?”

“The road is not complicated enough to make a mistake.” Ririka replied. Marika tilted her head.

“But when you say Uptown, isn't it usually the most expensive place at the station?”

“That’s right.” The exit of the tubeway came into view. “This place is amazing.”

The tubeway opened into uptown. In the wide open space, the smell of the air had changed noticeably.

“Wow.” Marika let out a sound of astonishment rather than admiration at the scenery that spread before her eyes.

In a space city that values efficiency above all else in order to maintain a limited space as a viable place, a huge space simply filled with air becomes a status in itself. Meiya's Uptown was a gigantic space with a three-dimensional city and natural forest attached to the inside of a gigantic bowl-shaped structure with a radius of over ten kilometers.

Even when driving on an uncovered freeway, the atmosphere has a subtle scent reminiscent of the surface of a natural planet. Marika's eyes widened when she saw that there were even clouds forming on the ceiling dome, which resembled a blue sky because of the huge space where artificial gravity worked.

“What is this place?”

“It's a place created in the night of Mesaiya, where there are no inhabitable planets.” Ririka uttered the same catchphrase she had seen in her preliminary research. Marika looked up at the ceiling, which looked like a real sky, even though she knew she was inside a space city.

“This is such a luxurious space city... Meiya, are both midtown and downtown built like this?”

“How can any free trade port survive with such extravagant and inefficient operations?”

Because gravity is controlled, the inside of the hemispherical Uptown is not as steep as it seems. Ririka steered the air transport towards the central area, where ultra-modern high-rise buildings stood.

“I'm sure the industrial district downtown has some large spaces because of the shipbuilding, but the midtown commercial district is probably just a normal built-in block structure.”

“…somehow makes me feel like I was hiding out in a downtown junkyard.”

Most of the buildings coexist with colorful plants. If you want to increase the efficiency of a closed system, it is much faster to increase the number of biochemical units than to arrange natural vegetation, so having as much greenery as on the ground is nothing but status. Furthermore, the cost of land is naturally high in areas where maintenance costs are higher than usual.

Marika gazes at the classical architecture, which seems to be a religious facility, and the magnificent palatial architecture which seems to be an outpost of an independent star system, with suspicious eyes.

“Also, why are we here?” With that question in mind, Marika looked at Gruier’s profile, who was sitting in the passenger seat across from the driver's seat.

“We are strangers here.” Gruier said smoothly, turning to Marika. “If you want to ensure your safety in a place where you don't really understand the structure of the city or the dynamics of the place, this is the best way to do it.”

Although she could not predict what kind of strategy Gruier had devised for this purpose, Marika suddenly felt helpless.

“It seems to be the safest and most reliable security measure.” Ririka diverted the cargo from the main route to the interchange. She stops the cargo at a large gate decorated with large, showy tropical plants.

Gruier showed the ID card she had taken out from the pocket of her work uniform to the guard, who was not a robot but a real man in a neat uniform.

“Palace Hotel!?” Marika raised her voice when she saw the Galactic Standard Language logo engraved on the huge monument next to the gate. This is the first time she’s seen it in person, but it is a top-class hotel brand owned by the Imperial capital and used by royalty, high-ranking bureaucrats, and executives.

“Don't be too loud.” Ririka said as she also took out her ID card from the pocket of her work clothes and showed it to the guard. “It's easy to say that a high-end hotel where the identity of the messenger is clear is safer than a cheap hotel in midtown where anyone can walk in, or a downtown junkyard where you don't know what's hidden.”

Seeing Marika in the passenger seat and Kane in the cargo area, who raised one hand in greeting, the guard retreated into the booth and opened the huge stone gate. The gate, which appeared to be a huge stone structure covered with ivy, was a shield-protected, multiple-armored automatic gate.

Beyond the gates that opened to the left and right was a garden lined with neatly arranged garden trees arranged in a geometric pattern. Beyond the curving garden route, a gigantic structure resembling a glass stalactite column that reaches up to the ceiling dome stands tall.

Ririka confidently drove the air transport, which was likely to be routed to the back door without any questions asked, to the front entrance with a huge driveway, and raised her hand to the doorman. The doorman, a real man in his uniform, made sure everyone had gotten out of the cargo, then bowed, got into the driver's seat, and headed to the parking lot.

“Wow.” Marika looked away from the uniformed doormen and parking drivers, whose jobs are now robot jobs even in the Empire's luxury hotels, and turned to the main entrance, where a large overhanging roof blocked the sunlight from the overhead dome.

“It is much cheaper to stay here than to take a regular flight back to Sea of the Morningstar with everyone!” Gruier, dressed in work clothes, walks out on a bright red carpet where she sinks down to her ankles. “Moreover, we are in an important point in time with a big job ahead of us. We should not spare any safety that money can buy.”

“But that doesn't mean we have to do this.” Marika looked up at the entranceway, which looked like an abstract sculpture made of giant pieces of black glass, and summoned her courage to follow Gruier.

“What's wrong with all this?”

“So far, things are going well.”

Giant black glass automatic doors open in sequence to create an entrance. Gruier breezes into the lobby, which features a giant chandelier like a supernova, an artificial pond, and even a river. Marika, who almost stopped at the sight before her, followed Gruier, looking only at her back and trying not let her vision wander.

“Hey, you're late, aren't you?”

“President!”

What we arrived at via a private elevator was a huge suite with an entire dedicated floor. It's a huge room that looks more like an auditorium than a school classroom, with luxurious furniture that you only see in movies, and yacht club members in uniforms scattered here and there. Even though the entire Odette II crew is in the expansive room, it doesn't feel crowded.

President Lynn was attached to a huge information system that occupied an entire wall with a headset. As if the operation console on the spaciously arranged desk was not enough, not only her favorite computer, HAL-bou with its wires routed through it, but also an old standard recorder and a display with exposed circuit boards were placed in a messy manner.

“Ah, Professor Kane!”

“Welcome, would you like a drink?” Kane was caught by a member of the yacht club and was taken to a counter bar in the corner without even a moment's greeting.

“Well then, I'll go for a while, Captain, thank you very much.”

“...Is that okay?” Marika asked Ririka as she waved to the other club members who came running up to her.

“I've had all the liquor and drug-related inventory removed when I entered this room.” Ririka looked at Kane, who seemed to be heading towards the counter bar. “However, there are no age restrictions or drug regulations here, so I wouldn't know if they were brought in from outside.”

“You haven't checked?” Marika asked in a whisper, and Ririka shook her head smiling.

“I expect him to realize that he has a big job ahead of him.”

“Anyway, I'm glad everyone is safe.” Marika looked around at the yacht club members in the room again. She feels like something is missing. Marika immediately noticed the crew members who were not here. “Um, what about Schnitzer and the other members of the ground forces?”

The intercom chimed. A first-year student confirms the presence of guests on the intercom next to the entrance and unlocks the door. “Captain Cayenne and Mr. Schnitzer are here.”

“Of course we've quarantined those thugs.” Ririka winked at Marika.

Gruier adds “They are on the same floor, but they have separate elevators.”

Marika looked around the huge suite, and then looked again at Gruier's face. “By any chance, are you taking another room like this!?”

“I said it doesn't need to be this big.”

Gruier sighed with a troubled look on her face. Marika felt she didn't have to ask, but she did.

“What about payment?”

“Don't worry, there is a secret fund for times like this.”

“Secret fund?” Marika looked around the suite with dismay. “Isn't the reason why Gruier’s royal family is in such a difficult financial situation is because they keep doing things like this?”

“You don’t hesitate to make necessary expenditures, do you?” Gruier nodded, still looking like a child. “In this universe, money can buy only the cheapest things, and experiences and connections are not easily bought.”

“I think maybe Gruier’s family has been doing this sort of thing for a long time.” Ririka said in an even quieter voice. “I wonder if that royal family still exists because they let their family members gain experience like this?”

Marika looked over Gruier's face with a startled look. With a clear face and pretending not to hear her, Gruier nodded agreeably.

“It took more time than I expected.” Captain Cayenne and Schnitzer entered the room. They can't afford to wear armored spacesuits in a top-class hotel, so they both changed into flashy resort wear that looks like they've got it from a boutique, but no matter how you look at it, they look like the protagonist and villain of a martial arts show.

“…Ah, it looks good on you, doesn’t it?” Marika, trying to hold back her laughter, commented on the effort to dress appropriately for a high-class hotel.

“What about other ground forces?” Marika raised her voice as she saw Kane raising one hand from the counter bar and greeting Captain Cayenne and Schnitzer. “I can't believe everyone is drinking!”

“No, no.” Captain Cayenne waved her hand. “When the Bentenmaru's arrival schedule appeared, our operational schedule had also been decided. At least in the Barbaroosa's ground forces, there are no daredevils who would drink or do drugs before a mission.”

Cayenne pointed in the direction of the door. “The rest of us are also resting on this floor.”

“I wish I was.”

After seeing Schnitzer, Marika looked at the information system on the wall where Lynn was sitting. The full depth of the 3D display is used to display a large amount of numerical information and lists. “So, what's the situation?”

“Chimera of Scylla, which entered the port first, is starting to move.” Lynn flicked the console and switched one of the displays. A monitor camera in the central port showed the Odette II moored at the pier. “As I informed you, as soon as we entered the port, we emptied the Odette II, locked the system, and fled. Thanks to that, we have been able to survive without any human casualties up until now.”

Marika looked around the huge suite where the yacht club members were hanging out. “Well, I think it was the safest and most reliable option at that point, but leaving the targeted ship empty just because it was the most reliable free trade port in the middle of nowhere?”

“It's not like we didn't think about it, right?” When Lynn told her, Marika reluctantly nodded. “The Odette II's military strength, apart from the temporary ground squadron, it is essentially electronic warfare, so no matter how you look at it, there is no way she can compete with the local pirates, who should be familiar with the geography and structure. So, as a safety measure, I thought that the surest way to minimize damage was to empty the Odette II, but I never thought they'd actually do that.”

“When we first arrived at the port, we were hopeful that maybe the pirate ship Chimera of Scylla wouldn't catch up with us.” Lynn switched the central port monitor camera to show a crimson battleship docked at the next pier. “I had planned to use the Black Swan as a decoy and drag it all the way into the Empire's territory, but perhaps the Black Swan had gone awry, or perhaps it had noticed something along the way, but it came earlier than I expected. It would have been much easier if the Bentenmaru had arrived at the port earlier than that red pirate ship, or at least at the same time.”

“It couldn't be helped. There were a lot of things to do, like taking over the Odette II's FTL booster.”

“So, what is Scylla doing?” Ririka nudged Lynn to go on. “Did someone rob the Odette II while she was in port?”

“There's a smarter way to do it.” Lynn brought up several sub-monitors on the huge display. “Even before the Scylla's arrival in port, we can confirm physical and electronic contacts, probably at the hands of the pirate Muller, with the Odette II, or more precisely, with the Odette II disguised as the White Swan. Not to mention data inquiries from the control station, sales of maintenance and supply services while in port, and several activities that appear to be reconnaissance activities disguised as service ships or robots. It is difficult to determine which of these are normal business activities in this port and which are the work of the pirate Muller, but it is impossible to deny that a pirate guild that holds so much influence in the frontier area would not be involved in this port as well.”

“The Pirate Guild isn't our only enemy.” Ririka looks around at several displays. “The Federation of Frontier Star Districts and independent star systems. There are also many consulates and embassies of the Frontier Alliance Forces that participated in the expeditionary force to Garnet A here.”

“Well, it's normal to think that they have their hands in this area as well.” Lynn made a list of service ships that appeared near Pier 269 and their access to the unmanned Odette II. “Regular contact with Odette II continues, presumably to keep an eye on her. I have reported this to Captain Ririka, but I am still receiving calls every 10 minutes in the name of the port authority or the ambassadors stationed in the frontier star system.”

“There's no way I can keep up with them.” Ririka waved her hand in annoyance. “They probably don't think they can negotiate with us anyway, and if you're just gathering information, it's a waste of time and effort.”

“So, this is the main point.” Lynn switched between several sub-monitors showing images on the huge display that took up an entire wall. “We have just received a change in the registration and movement information for the Odette II at the Port Control Center, which Captain Ririka had instructed us to monitor.”

“Oh, you came after all?”

Seeing her mother's happy face, Marika looked back at the list of sub-monitors with a strange expression on her face. “What do you mean?”

“The pirates and rebels in the frontier star zones are dying to get their hands on the Odette II’s bowsprit.” Lynn said, tapping the console with a rhythmic tempo. “What would you do if it was dangled in front of you with no one on board?”

After being told this, Marika tried to think from the enemy's perspective. “Check to see if it's a trap, then try to get the Odette II.”

“Right.” Lynn displayed the document data submitted to the port office on the monitor. It was a notification of departure for the sailing transport ship White Swan belonging to East Galactic High Speed Transport, which is registered at the Saratoga Transfer Point of the Galactic Empire.

“I think they probably forged the ID data from the port entry permit and flight plan of my ship, which was supposed to be without its owner, but my ship will be taken out in the near future.”

“By whom?” Marika looked around at the yacht club members who had gathered in the suite.

“By the crew of the Swan, of course. Moved to the downtown dock for minor repairs. We've already made reservations for the dock, so we're working quickly.”

After thinking for a moment, Marika reviewed the submitted data. “You mean, that pirate Muller of Chimera of Scylla?”

“We don't know how many traps they have and how many nets they have spread in this port, so we don't monitor Scylla's communication status while it is in port.”

With a sigh, Lynn looked around at the huge information system filled with displays. “Empire-compliant systems and protocols helped. If they had used proprietary standards, we wouldn't have been able to do whatever we wanted.”

“Still, we haven't launched an electronic attack on the enemy battleship.” Marika looked back at Lynn's face.

“Are they really that troublesome?”

“One thing is that we don't know what they're up to.” Lynn stopped her busy hands and nodded. “I don't have any experience fighting pirates, so I don't know what kind of tactics pirates in the frontier might use. Also, the only person who seems to be able to measure the strength of the enemy is that red-haired swindler.”

“...Jackie?” Jackie's whereabouts are unknown since he jumped from the Seven Star Federation star system.

“I don't like to think of her as the standard frontier wizard, but she's the one who hired that redhead to do it for her. I wouldn't be surprised if she had the same kind of skills as Jackie.”

“That may be an overestimate of enemy strength, though.” Ririka looked around at the monitors on the wall. “The opponent is a long-lived Methuselah pirate. Have you ever heard of the difference between the long-lived Methuselah and short-lived species?” Ririka looked at her daughter and at the gathered Odette II crew. “Outside of their lifespan, of course.”

The yacht club members buzzed. After making sure no one spoke up, Gruier raised her hand. “Are you saying that many Methuselah are ordinary people, but many short timers are geniuses?”

“Yes.” Ririka looked around at the faces of the club members once again. “Life expectancy varies depending on race, environment, and applicable medical technology, but generally speaking, those who live more than twice the average life expectancy are called ‘Methuselahs’ and those who live less than half the average life expectancy are called ‘short-timers’. And, as a general rule, Methuselahs with a long life expectancy are long-tempered and laid-back, while short-timers with a short life expectancy are short-tempered and impatient. Since what a person can do in a lifetime is the same whether it is long or short, it is said that Methuselahs live long and thin, while short-timers live short and thick, but that is the generally the case. Captain Cayenne, is your Nora also a Methuselah?”

“Yes.” Cayenne crossed her arms. “Although I don’t have any relationships with other Methuselahs, the Barbaroosa’s XO Nora is a Methuselah. No one knows her exact age, but there is no doubt that my XO is older than the Barbaroosa itself. Maybe five times as old as the captain.”

A quiet buzz spreads throughout the suite. Ririka turned her attention to Gruier. “Gruier probably knows some Methuselahs, right?”

Gruier nodded. “My chief chamberlain, Yotof, is a Methuselah. He is not famous, but he is friends with some of the Methuselahs who are associated with the royal family of Serenity.”

“Then you must know a lot. Methuselah is not a single species, but there are very few of them. If you don't tell anyone, they won't know you're a Methuselah. Also, they are passive because they have lived for many years and there is no need to rush, and because of their long lifespans, they are not so blessed with physical prowess. Were the Methuselahs you knew like that?”

“No.” Gruier shook her head. “I think it's true that there aren't that many. Perhaps because they have lived for so long and are able to meet up with their own kind whenever they want, they don't seem to have much interaction with them. However, Yotof and the other Methuselahs are modest but not passive, and when it comes to physical prowess...”

Gruier pondered a bit, choosing her words. “I once heard a captain of the Royal Guards say that Yotof was capable of fighting a war by himself. Yotof would be able to start or stop a war by force.”

“I’m sure Serenity's chamberlain is a special sample.” Ririka smiled bitterly. “Well, if Methuselahs were really as passive and self-involved as people say, they wouldn't be in the pirate business. But I have a sample of pirates besides Muller. Captain Cayenne, what do you think? How would you fight against XO Nora if she were your enemy?”

“She’s last person in the galaxy I would want to fight.” Cayenne laughed and shook her head. “Experience is an asset that you can take with you anywhere, always useful, and you don't have to worry about losing it, whether it's in battle or anything else, but a Methuselah's experience is literally an order of magnitude different from ours. Nora seems to be treated like a child among her people, but by the time she started her current job, not only myself but also my grandfather would not have been in this world yet. I would like you to tell me how I can win against such an opponent.”

“If the one with more experience always wins, then children can't beat adults, and old people should be the strongest.” Lynn, at the control console, turned to Cayenne. “But there are many examples in this universe where children have won against adults.”

“Oh, you're right.” Cayenne is listening to Lynn’s story with an amused look on her face. “It is true that we do not have the experience or strength of the pirate Muller. However, I don't think Muller has ever fought electronic warfare against the latest equipment from the core, nor has she ever been a hub airport controller like Captain Ririka.”

Cayenne looked at Ririka as if seeking comment. Ririka raised her hands. “That's very encouraging. I’m grateful to everyone that my daughter is a member of a club blessed with such talented people.”

“Because there are people worse than me.” Marika looked at Gruier and Lynn, who were both looking away. “So how do we get the Odette II back?”

A group of cartoon characters

Description automatically generated

There is no night in Meiya. While the Galactic Standard Time has a distinction between day and night, and many spacecraft operate accordingly, Meiya, a free trade port, never sleeps. In Meiya, the Galactic Standard Time is just a number that tells the time, and there is no nighttime setting in either the city or the port area.

Pier 269 of the Central Port continues its activities, and service ships have begun to gather around the central wharf C, where a single sailing spaceship with its masts folded is moored.

“You’re going to tow it with a tugboat?” Kane said as he watched the space ship's undocking operations, which had begun at the adjacent pier, via an outboard camera. The bridge of the Bentenmaru, which is located deep within the hull to prevent damage during battle, has no windows that allow a direct view of the outside. “It's quite a bold move to take the Odette II out of the station and not have any personnel inside.”

“Lynn went to great lengths to set up all kinds of traps.” Marika, seated in the captain's seat, looked at the scene around Pier 269, where the relocation work had begun, with a disappointed look on her face. “The ground forces also came out and set a lot of booby traps, it would be a shame if it all went to waste.”

“The enemy doesn't need the Odette II as a spaceship.” In the helmsman's seat, Kane leaned back against the back of a seat that reclined comfortably. “Once the monomolecular crystal components are available, the rest of the structure is of no use. Well, these days, sailing spaceships that take time to travel normally, let alone superluminal speeds, can only be sold at scrap prices.”

“Well, it takes a bit of effort to move it.” Marika looked at the slender spaceship docked at the pier with its mast folded tightly. “Running on sails saves propellant, and everyone has to think about various things and move it together, so it's a good spacecraft for learning.”

“It's perfect for letting newcomers gain experience, but the fact that it takes so much time to get it working is probably fatal in today's world.”

“What's wrong with that?”

“A transport ship is a spaceship that prioritizes efficiency, but it doesn't have a good payload, and if you carry a full crew, it will just cost you a lot of money. Sailing spaceships are from a previous era, so it takes time and money to learn the system, and if they can't reach superluminal speeds, in today's world they can only be used between planets. Do you me want to continue?”

“Okay, that's enough.” Marika checked the small work boat that was attached to Odette II with a bored expression on her face. Modern spacecraft are usually equipped with high-precision observation equipment and thrusters that can be controlled at slow speeds. Tugboats are rarely used even when entering and departing from closed stations. However, in order to move unpowered large containers, plant ships, small stations, or spacecraft that have lost power, many work ships are equipped with a main engine with extra power.

A large workboat is not needed to move a light-mass sailing spacecraft. A small tugboat equipped with multiple work arms approaches the bow and stern of the Odette II's slender hull, with its masts folded.

“We're going to use a tugboat to pull the training ship from the port to the dock.” Sandaime, in the engineer's seat, said. “If you are planning to put the training ship in the dock and then immediately begin undocking, wouldn't you be planning on not allowing anyone inside the training ship from the beginning to the end?”

“No matter what, I think I'll check inside the Odette II to see what’s going on before starting working at the dock.” Marika tilted her head. “As it stands, there is a possibility that there is a time bomb planted inside the training ship.”

“If the destination is the dock, I'm sure they'll check that much.” Kane ran his fingers over the console. “If the objective is just to get the bowsprit of the White Swan, it would be faster to take the ship out of the controlled airspace and destroy it. All that they needed are unbreakable monomolecular crystal parts. If it were me, I'd destroy it into pieces so I wouldn't have to worry about traps, and then collect only the necessary parts.”

“Before that, I think I'd check to see if the parts I'm looking for are actually in the Odette II.” Coorie said. “Chimera of Scylla has requested an emergency departure. She has the highest priority. Even though she is idle, she is a very wealthy pirate.”

An additional fee will be required in order to skip the normal ranking and get priority departure. The amount varies depending on priorities and congestion. Marika looked at the information Coorie forwarded to her. Chimera of Scylla has submitted an emergency departure request to the air traffic control station for which she is prepared to pay the maximum additional fee, and judging from the congestion at the surrounding piers, permission should be granted soon.

“She bought time for extra money.” In front of Marika's eyes, the permit application was switched to approved and the departure time was filled in.

“I'll wait for you to leave first, huh?” Marika looked at the crimson space battleship that was sitting on the pier next to her on the display. According to official information from the Air Traffic Control Bureau, the Chimera of Scylla at Pier 268 has already disconnected from the port and started operating its main engine, completing preparations for launch.

“If we were to leave the port at this moment, it would be right at the time to be in the control airspace while the Odette II is in the process of being moved.”

“That's the timing.” Coorie also rewrote the flight plan for the Chimera of Scylla. “After leaving port, we will remain offshore in an anchorage area near Meiya. From the position we're applying for, we’ll be able to constantly monitor the dock reserved downtown.”

“I don't think we'll be able to just suddenly stop a suspicious ship approaching.” Marika confirmed the relationship between Chimera of Scylla's new mooring airspace and Meiya's position, which has been applied for in the flight plan.

“If such a brightly colored and famous pirate ship were stationed right next to such a prosperous space city, it would definitely stand out.”

“I'm sure that's what they're aiming for, but what should we do?”

Marika saw the work status of the tugboat attached to the Odette II. A work boat with a large amount of excess thrust is secured to the Odette II by a working robotic arm. “If I apply for departure now without requesting priority, when will I be able to depart?”

“Unless there are a lot of ships in port trying to leave, maybe an hour after submitting, or sooner if it's moved up.”

“I guess that's just the right time.” Marika reconfirmed the scheduled departure time of the Odette II, which is in port under the name of the White Swan. It has not been changed. “So, let's leave too. Application for departure, I don't need priority, so I'll just use the regular application.”

“Roger.” Coorie transmitted a pre-prepared application for departure to the port control station. The automatic response of acceptance was returned immediately, with a slight delay, indicating an estimated departure time of fifty-five minutes later.

“That's a good placement.” The Bentenmaru did not intend to stay long in Meiya, so there was no need to expand their stores in such a way that it would take time to leave the port. The propellant supply and foodstuffs had already been loaded, and the ship was ready to leave the port immediately after cutting the energy transmission cable supplied from the pier. “Well then, prepare to depart.”

“Scylla has left the pier.” After hearing Kane's report, Marika switched the screen to the surveillance camera footage provided by the control station. The gantry arm that fixed the smart red spaceship that was docked at Pier 268 was released, and Chimera of Scylla, using her own thrusters, slowly began to leave the pier.

“Autopilot?” Marika frowned slightly at the smooth movements, which seemed to be coordinated with the pier.

“That's right.” Kane nodded as he watched several images from different angles showing the Chimera of Scylla leaving the pier. “Unlike ours, the Chimera of Scylla is a 20-year-old ship in active service. They've probably been updated with the latest port facilities and navigational aids. Look at that disdain for slow steering.”

The Chimera of Scylla fired her thrusters on the opposite side of the pier to kill her motion. At first, the thruster light blinked like a flash, but as the horizontal axis speed slowed down, it rapidly dimmed and disappeared. “Fine-tuning the thrusters while navigating in a bay is a specialty of modern autopilots. At that rate, I wouldn't be surprised if it could autopilot the ship into anchored airspace.”

“I thought I would be able to observe Scylla’s movements from nearby.” Marika pouted, looking bored. “No matter what I do, you won’t let me see your hands, will you?”

“Well, unless there is an emergency, movement inside the port is only useful for reference purposes in anti-ship combat.” Kane, in the helm seat, clapped his hands together. “What do we do? The Port Authority's cameras will be able to see our departure. Should we be prepared to be warned and put on a spectacular performance?”

“Don't do it.” Marika waved her hand downward from the captain's seat. “When you're about to make a scene, you don't have to do something that will attract the attention of the port authority, even though you've been so quiet so far.”

Chimera of Scylla fired its thrusters gently, floated away from the pier, and began to move towards the departure side of Central Port. Using safe, slow propulsion, the speed is less than 80% of the specified speed, the ship slowly begins to move forward, pointing its bow toward the jet-black space that extends beyond the air shield.

“Can we get data that might be useful?” Marika asked Coorie, who is settled in the electronic warfare seat. Although they are in port, so active sensing is not possible, the Bentenmaru is following the Chimera of Scylla, which has opened all of its passive sensors and is on the move.

“I can only collect superficial data.” Coorie responded leisurely as usual. “According to the regulations, the main engine is prohibited inside the air shield and only the auxiliary engines are allowed, so I don't think they would want to expose their hand in such a confined space. If we go out and get ready for battle, we'll probably start the main engine and make various preparations, so we might be able to get a little better data, but if we're in port, we won't be able to detect it.”

“If you're moving to the anchorage area, you won't even need to start the main engine.” Marika checked the flight plan of the Chimera of Scylla, which was hoping to anchor in the airspace just a stone's throw away from Central Port. It was a short flight moving away from the pier to an offshore anchorage area.

“However, the other side should have seen our departure application, and they should also know our true identity.” Although the transponder is disguised, the Bentenmaru entered the Central Port of Meiya without altering in appearance or using camouflage. “Since we’re following you immediately, you should be at least ready for battle. Otherwise, you'd be an easy opponent.”

“Let's hope Hyakume can get us some data from the outside.” Coorie quickly scrolled through the observation data for Chimera of Scylla, which was nothing of note. “I think we can get a lot more data from Silent Whisper just by having Scylla start their main engine.”

“I hope we're dealing with it right.” Marika watched the smart crimson battleship begin to move towards the air shield on the departure side. “But if you don’t deal with me, it will make my job easier, so wouldn’t it be better that way?”

“It seems like you do your work carefully.”

The structural strength of Odette II, an old-fashioned sailing spacecraft, is quite delicate compared to the standards of modern spacecraft. Even though it is folded up, the bow is also equipped with thin antennas and sensors, so if it is used to secure the ship, you could damage the hull or the equipment.

The tugboats, attached one forward and two aft, continued the securing process by deploying their many robotic arms, relying on the jacking points and center-of-gravity markings that are standard for galactic spacecraft. A robot arm with multiple joints holds the slender hull, which is fixed to a gantry arm on the pier, without damaging it.

“I thought the Scylla pirates would do the work themselves, borrowing names and equipment from the contractors.” Kane pulls out data on the company responsible for moving Odette II from the control station's files. The names of the three service ships and their crews are easily found. “This is a real job. Not the work of a rough-and-tumble pirate who only has business with parts he doesn't have to worry about damaging.”

“I think she's just wary of traps and doesn't want to get her hands dirty.” Marika looked at the back of the Chimera of Scylla, which was about to reach the air shield. Neither the main engine, showing its huge jets, nor the four auxiliary engines around it have yet ignited. “Even though the Odette II is currently unmanned and unpowered, she hasn't gone inside to check. She's just trying to get it to a place where she can work, thankfully it's empty. If that's the case, don't you think she uses these companies so that she doesn't suffer any damage even if they fall into a clumsy trap?”

“Something typical of a wealthy pirate.” Coorie said as she tracked the Chimera of Scylla out of the air shield. “The ship is new, well maintained, and fully crewed. I've been looking into Pirate Muller's recent activities, and I don't see any indication that she's struggling to make ends meet. It makes me jealous.”

“Humph.” Marika was deep in thought. “I wonder if pirates can make money in the frontier?”

“That's how industrious they are and how many bad things they do.” Kane said, as if it were obvious. “If you can pay well, you can buy trust. The profit and loss accounts on the frontier are more severe than those in the core, and if you want to look good while doing pirate business in such a place, of course, you will use many different faces.”

“Right now, she's a well-behaved pirate who follows the rules and makes port in a free trade city.”

Even the Bentenmaru, an authorized pirate with a privateer's license, also acts in accordance with the laws of navigation within the territory of the Empire.

“Yes, it's a basic principle of a business like ours to keep our image as clean as possible.”

The hull of the Chimera of Scylla passed through the air shield. With the thrusters of each part of the ship firing on autopilot, the crimson battleship disappeared from the space visible through the air shield in the direction of the station's outer perimeter.

“Only a transponder and a modest radar.” Since the Bentenmaru remains moored to the pier, its ability to detect spacecraft outside the air shield is not very high. Coorie said as she adjusted the sensitivity of the sensors. “If nothing happens, they may be trying to get to the anchored airspace without using the main engine.”

“I don't think the pirates are that unprepared, though.” Without using the main engine, a combat ship cannot fire its onboard guns or even use its powerful radar for combat. “But, if you don't use the main engine until the end, you can claim that you have no intention of fighting...Is the pirate Muller really that kind-hearted?”

“No way.” Suddenly, Coorie leaned over the electronic warfare console and began to move her hands. “There's no way such peaceful pirates could do business in this remote area with the same face for many years.”

“What happened?” Marika looked down at the battle status display in the captain's seat, seeing that Coorie appear to have started an attack somewhere via the network.

“Our sailing permit has been postponed.”

“What?” The scheduled time for permission to leave port suddenly projected a figure that was delayed several hours. Marika raised her voice. “After all, we got permission before, right?”

“Has the control station been captured by pirates, or has it been hacked somehow from outside? Wait a minute, I'll do something about it now. I'm glad I hacked the control station network.”

“When did you...” Marika looked at the electronic warfare display. It seems that she is sneaking into the control station via somewhere without using the official line, entering the electronic brain that controls port entry and departure, and rewriting it, but the screen switches too quickly for her to understand what is being done.

“It's okay, it's just that they put us back in the departure order. With such a tight schedule, if the departure order is being manipulated as they please, I'll know right away.”

“It’s okay?”

“I'm glad we didn't have to go through the official procedures to change our permit, because if we really have a tight departure schedule, it would be difficult to make arrangements.” Coorie said as she rearranged the schedule in the control station's electronic brain so as not to disrupt it as much as possible. “It looks like they're getting into the control station from inside the station as well. Well, if you're a pirate who's even an executive in a guild, there's bound to be plenty of hideouts at the port.”

“Can you handle it?”

“I'm working on it. I'm not the one who rewrote the schedule, but I'm making it look like it got caught in the control station's anti-fraud program, so I hope they'll give up at this point... I guess they won't give up after all.”

“It's a little early, but cut the cable from the pier.” Marika gave instructions. “Even if we can't leave the port right away, the ship's internal energy will sustain us for a while. Even if the other party launches an electronic attack on us without worrying about what they're pretending to be, if there's no physical line, they'll have no choice but to attack us wirelessly.”

“It's cut.” Sandaime replied.

Energy and communication lines must be connected until just before departure, so the Bentenmaru looks connected to the pier, but the physical connection with the Meiya side has already been severed and a dummy is connected.

“So how does Coorie get into Meiya's control station now?”

“It's connected to a public network in addition to the official communication line.” Coorie answered in the middle of electronic warfare. “The communication infrastructure here is as solid as that in the core, which is a big help. ...Hmm, can you at least give up on the schedule revision?”

Before Marika's eyes, the scheduled departure time returned to the original number. Coorie does not rest her hands. “Hmmm, if I'm too aggressive with them, they'll know that I'm messing with the control station too...what should I do?”

“In our current state, can we directly attack the person who is blocking us?” With Coorie, it’s quicker to communicate your wishes directly. Marika asked, not fully understanding her attack and defense forms. “Is it possible to attack from here and silence the opponent?”

“I think we can, but they'll know that we're messing with the network, too.”

“If the other side's strategy is to delay our departure time, I think they will know that they are fighting against us as soon as they are unable to do so. In the first place, we announced from the beginning that we would be leaving at a similar time. Okay, let’s do it. It's a little early, but the battle begins!”

While watching the service ship's connection to the Odette II from the sidelines, the Bentenmaru defended itself against the air traffic control station's persistent attacks to rewrite the departure schedule. Coorie detected repeated attacks on the control station and temporarily disabled the server downtown.

“I feel like the air traffic control station has intentionally set up a simple system.” Coorie’s complaints became unstoppable, as attacks on the control station via a different route and even a direct attack on a dummy computer masquerading as the Bentenmaru were launched from the pier's communication lines. “It appears that they have set up a system that is deliberately loose, allowing for some degree of intentional manipulation from the outside. I can't believe that a control station that operates at such a large scale has such lax security, even if the system is in a remote area.”

“That may be one of the secrets to Meiya's prosperity.” Kane leisurely reclines in the helmsman's seat, occasionally checking the scheduled departure time. “A free trade city with order and security on the surface, but with plenty of options behind the scenes will gather a lot of people.”

“I’m certain a lot of work gets done because of the looseness of the system.” Kane looked at the departure schedule, which sometimes had minor changes. “The White Swan has docked with the tugboat. It’s unmoored and is about to depart.”

“Are there any changes to the work schedule?”

Not all flight schedules for service ships flying around the port are made public. If you access the control station, you can check the current positions of all the service ships and robot ships that will be operating around Meiya, but you won't know what kind of work they are doing or what their plans are.

The only way to confirm the White Swan's movement schedule is to see if there are any changes to the numbers submitted to the air traffic control station for applications for spacecraft entry and exit.

“No changes at present.” Kane replied. “This is a company that you can trust because of its accurate schedules and work.”

“So, if the Odette II goes as planned, what should we do?” Marika looked at the Bentenmaru's scheduled departure time, which was much earlier than originally planned. As a result of the continued back and forth of delays and rewrites of the departure schedule, the Bentenmaru's scheduled departure time ended up being just after the Odette II's departure.

“If I attack the control station from here, I can change the time, but I don't know if I can go back to the original schedule.” Coorie said. “And if we try to adjust the time to what we want, they will try to change it again.”

“All right.” Marika nodded. “Let's leave Central Port on schedule. Once the spacecraft leaves the pier, the control station cannot stop it unless an emergency occurs.”

The Odette II, which was moored at Pier 269C under the name The White Swan, was docked with three service ships and undocked at the scheduled time. Although it is treated as a broken ship that cannot navigate on its own, it heads out of the port at a speed not much different from that of an ordinary spaceship that can navigate normally.

“Is it okay?” Marika looked worried as she watched the Odette II pass through the air shield and head into outer space. “That spaceship is light and fragile, so it will break easily if it’s thrown around a little roughly.”

“It's a spaceship that even survived as a pirate ship, so it won't break down easily.” Kane moved the helmsman's seat forward. “Well, it's earlier than planned, but we’re leaving too.”

Although there was a possibility that the schedule would be changed just before the scheduled departure time, the final departure confirmation submitted by the Bentenmaru was easily passed through to the air traffic control station. After confirming that all ships were ready for departure, Marika gave the command. “Let's go. Bentenmaru, depart”

“Aye Aye sir, Bentenmaru is leaving port.” The gantry arm on the pier side opens to release the captive ship. With a light jet of side thrusters, Kane released the Bentenmaru from the pier and began to move the Bentenmaru at a slight forward speed.

“Silent Whisper, incoming call from Hyakume.” Coorie relayed a report from Silent Whisper, which is connected to the Bentenmaru only by data communication. “The Chimera of Scylla, moving into anchored airspace, has started its main engine. Their speed remains slow.”

“It’s only the main engine that started?” Marika checked the data sent by the Silent Whisper, which is waiting outside the port. Once outside the port, the ship is allowed to operate normal navigation radar and sensors that do not interfere with the electronics of other vessels. “…isn’t it?”

The Silent Whisper's passive sensors detected that the Scylla, having exited the central port, was firing up not only normal navigational radars but also high-power radars used in combat. “As expected, we haven't been able to get energy signatures around the armament, but it looks like they're up for the challenge.”

Coorie briefly summarized the information coming from the Silent Whisper. The Silent Whisper's current location is in anchored airspace, and although the ships are clustered together, it is still within close combat distance, so there is a lot of information to be gained.

“I wonder if we can do limited electronic warfare now?”

“What is the level of electronic warfare in the frontier?”

“We have no reliable data.” Coorie keeps an eye on the data coming from the Silent Whisper. “Electronic warfare is not integrated into the general style of space combat like it is in Imperial territory, and it's not like the Imperial fleet has raised the bar in electronic warfare. Everyone uses radar to search for enemies, but from there on, it's a case-by-case decision as to whether you can get away with just primitive electronic jamming or warfare-like network cracking. No matter how advanced our electronic warfare capabilities are, it's not uncommon in remote areas for the enemy's systems to not be networked.”

“Aha.” Marika learned that Coorie had done at least minimal research on electronic warfare on the frontier. “So, what about Chimera of Scylla's electronic warfare data?”

“That's what pirate ships in the frontier do.” The tone of Coorie's voice changed. “It's a world where you can't expect official records, so there's no reliable information out there.”

“Since we're talking about Coorie, I guess you've estimated Scylla's strength as an electronic warfare opponent?”

“I think they'd be a good match.” A few voices of admiration leaked out from the bridge of the Bentenmaru at Coorie's evaluation, which Marika had never heard before.

“That much?”

“You can tell a lot just by looking at the equipment of the ships at anchor. The Chimera of Scylla is probably a battleship of the same mass as the Barbaroosa, but with thicker armor and more offensive power. Then there was the antenna equipment, which was more plentiful than necessary if you include what was stowed away. I couldn't find any credible battle records beyond the rumors about the pirate Muller, but I don't think it would be an easy opponent.”

“I wonder if there is such a thing as an easy opponent in this universe.” Marika murmured secretly.

“Bentenmaru entering outer space.” Kane announced the Bentenmaru's passage through the air shield. The Bentenmaru advances from the port area, which is filled with one atmosphere of pressurized air, into the vacuum of space.

“On course for the Chimera of Scylla.” Kane, who was at the helm, said while taking a departure trajectory closer to Meiya from Central Port. “It's perfectly aligned with the main gun's axis. If you shoot now, the rest will be easy.”

The Chimera of Scylla, heading from Central Port to anchored airspace, is on a trajectory that quickly diverges from Meiya. In contrast, the Bentenmaru is on a sailing trajectory back to the Scholar route, and the distance from Scylla, which left earlier, is not so far because both are maintaining a low speed.

“The Odette II...” Daring to say it out loud, Marika confirmed the current location of the Odette II, which had left the port between the Bentenmaru and Chimera of Scylla. The Odette II, currently being moved to the downtown maintenance area, will be moving closer Meiya while being held by its bow and two stern tugs. The speed is quite fast for a short distance in the immediate vicinity of a huge structure.

“I’m used to it.” Marika murmured at the speed at which the Odette II was moving, which seemed to be 30% faster than predicted. “Is everything okay?”

“I don't think it will be much of a problem.” Coorie said. “The Odette II will soon be in the airspace where the operation is scheduled to start.”

“Main engine started, prepare for combat!” Without Marika's instructions, Sandaime had already begun the procedure to start the Bentenmaru's main engine. Marika repeated the plan for what was to come in her head once again.

“Pay attention to the movements of Scylla and the control station. You never know how they will react.”

“I'm ready.” Coorie, in the electronic warfare seat, said, keeping her eyes on the display.

“I don't think we'll be able to conduct electronic warfare that requires power in the neighborhood of Meiya anyway.” Marika confirmed the current location of the Odette II, which had exited the central port into space and was crawling along the surface structure of Meiya to the maintenance area.

“Is it about time?”

A high-pitched SOS warning sounded on the bridge.

“The timing is perfect.” The Odette II, calling itself the White Swan, is transmitting a distress signal common to the entire galaxy. The monotonous distress call soon turned into a call indicating a hijacking. “I wonder if the president controlled the Odette II directly instead of using a timer.”

The air traffic control station reacted quickly to the distress signal that echoed loudly in the area surrounding Meiya. Instead of an automatic response, an operator directly calls the three service ships transporting the White Swan and tries to confirm the latest status.

However, calls to the service ship directly by name went unanswered. Only automatic distress calls and hijack notifications are repeated, and it is impossible to contact the service ship operating the White Swan, which appears to be operating normally from the outside.

“The Odette II's contact electronic jamming is working fine.” Coorie reported. “I was wondering under what circumstances would a system that broadcasts noise onto the surface of a ship and disrupt the communications of other spaceships in contact with it be useful?”

“The president said that it would be easier than trying to electronically jam just the nearby spacecraft so that it wouldn't affect the surrounding area.” Marika put her captain's cap back on and put the headset on her ear. “Now, let's talk to the control station.”

While opening an emergency line to Meiya’s Control, Marika repeated mouthed the Bentenmaru’s current name, just in case. “Sarasvati 32 to Meiya air traffic control. Sarasvati 32 is currently on its departure trajectory, and we have caught the White Swan’s distress signal, which is currently in motion. Sarasvati 32 is in the closest position to the White Swan. We are on our way to rescue the White Swan, and request permission to change our departure trajectory.”

“*Meiya Control to Sarasvati 32, thanks for the offer of help.*” The response came back in clear standard language. “*Wait a minute, stand by for status quo. We have also received an offer of help from the White Phoenix group, a construction company working outboard on the west wall of the downtown area, earlier than Sarasvati 32.*”

Marika desperately held back her outburst at the mention of the construction company's name, which she hadn't heard of beforehand.

“Chimera of Scylla's traffic has jumped.” Coorie reported. “Should I call the service ship and then turn it over to the control station?”

“I won't accept that. The Sarasvati 32 has a long relationship with the control station and the White Phoenix group, so you can contact them through this line. Rescue operations would be easier if there was a larger spaceship. This ship is now heading to rescue the White Swan.”

“*Wait, Sarasvati 32, a security fleet is rushing to the scene right now.*”

“Really?” Marika asked Coorie.

“They’re lying.” Coorie answered simply. “There has been no order from anywhere to dispatch the security fleet yet. There is no order to leave the port for the guard ship in port.”

“We are faster than the security fleet. The situation is time sensitive. Sarasvati 32 is now on its way to rescue the White Swan.”

“*ATC to Sarasvati 32, the situation is still unknown. Please hold for a moment until we can confirm the status.*”

Coorie connected the communications line she was monitoring to the bridge's speakers.

“*This is Cayenne, site supervisor of the White Phoenix Group!*”

Marika does her best to stifle a laugh at the sound of Captain Cayenne's enthusiastic performance.

“*It seems that something hidden inside the White Swan has taken over the ship! If we can make it in time, we'll rush to the rescue!*”

“It's a tough situation for the control station, isn't it?” Coorie leisurely gives her impressions while listening to the operators at the control station asking questions about the situation. “Probably, no unmanned spacecraft has ever sent out a distress signal at such a short distance and just after departure, and of course, no one has ever thought of how to deal with the situation.”

“The key is to see how much the Pirate Guild has infiltrated the control station, and how quickly they realize what's going on and respond.” Marika put her fingertips on the headset. “Sarasvati 32 has caught a transmission from the control station, White Phoenix group. In order to protect Meiya's safety, Sarasvati 32 is now on its way to the White Swan's rescue. Depending on how the other party reacts, things may get rough, so please keep other spacecraft away from the White Swan's vicinity.”

“Scylla has moved!” At the same time as Coorie spoke, a clear voice, like the ringing of a bell, sounded on the bridge of the Bentenmaru.

“Chimera of Scylla to Control, we also received a distress signal for the White Swan here.”

Marika glanced at the communication monitor. Only audio signals are flowing on the emergency frequency, and there are no images.

“Chimera of Scylla is also on its way to rescue the White Swan.”

“Oh, they're coming this way.” Marika couldn't help but mutter. “This might be a little difficult.”

“Right on schedule!” Kane pointed the bow of the Bentenmaru, which was on a departure trajectory, toward Odette II, who continued to move slowly being towed by a service ship. “If you want to pirate without breaking Meiya's system, your options are limited. It's a common move to approach someone pretending to be dealing with the same enemy.”

“I know. If Scylla's moving, the control station should also be tacitly approving of our movements.”

“*The control station would like to thank the White Phoenix Group, as well as Sarasvati 32 and Chimera of Scylla, for their offer of immediate rescue.*”

“Here they come.” Kane applied a light acceleration. Because it's a short distance, it can't accelerate much.

“*Departures from Central Port Pier 230 to Pier 315 have been temporarily suspended. A security fleet is rushing to the scene, but we don't know the exact situation, so please give us a detailed report.*”

“Roger.” Marika replied to the control station. “Sarasvati 32 will now rush to the Swan and seize the spaceship from the hijacker.”

“The White Phoenix group took possession of the White Swan.” Coorie provided an update. “No further communication with the ground forces after that.”

“How soon will the Scylla be back?”

The Chimera of Scylla, which left port earlier, was sailing slowly not daring to take a hurried trajectory towards the anchorage area. Even though there was an emergency situation in the airspace near Meiya, large ships could not perform combat-like maneuvers. If they carelessly used high thrust and ultra-high speed maneuvers, the plasma flame will burn or blow away other unrelated spacecraft.

“Five minutes.” Coorie responded immediately. “It will mean going backwards from the departure trajectory, but I think the air traffic control station will allow it because it is an emergency.”

“They have to do that because they have to tolerate so many other things. Now, watch us pirate a spaceship without firing a single shot!”

The ground forces led by Captain Cayenne were waiting on the outer wall of the port by the entrance, outside the Central Port of Meiya, in armored space suits and other space equipment. The area around Meiya's Central Port is equipped with an air shield maintenance system, independent guidance systems for each pier, and a navigation support system.

Around the port are small spots where service ships and tugboats move in and out of the air shield. As a free trade port, the port usage fees are kept much lower than average for a free trade port, there is no telling how much it would cost to set up not only a maintenance hangar but also a storage area inside the air-pressurized port. For this reason, many of the port service providers in Meiya are based in blocks just outside the port, where safety standards are strict because of the space ships coming in and out of the port, and where land costs are relatively low.

Because of the large base of service contractors, there is no shortage of portals, both public and private. The ground forces, led by the Barbaroosa and joined by the crew of the Bentenmaru, are notably lacking in a sense of uniformity, with their combat uniforms and armored space suits of various types, and their exteriors covered with gaudy colors and hobbyist markings that could hardly be said to be suitable for actual combat. Taking advantage of this situation, the combatants replaced their large-caliber firearms, which were recognizable at a glance as combat-use weapons, with maintenance and carpentry tools, and deployed themselves from separate airlocks on the outer wall of Meiya.

As part of the White Phoenix group, a professional organization whose main job is maintenance, renovation, and construction work, dozens of space walkers collectively report to the air traffic control station for outside work. The White Swan, which advanced over the heads of the White Phoenix group, which had begun a routine inspection and simple maintenance work, sent out a distress signal.

As is typical of combat EVA equipment, the entire ground squadron has propulsion systems that allows them to fly through space under their own power. Waiting for Captain Cayenne's rescue declaration, the ground forces, who have spread out on the Meiya's downtown side west wall and on the planned course of the White Swan, attached themselves to the White Swan one after the other wearing only their spacesuits.

The service ships, one at the bow and two at the stern, had lost contact with the control station and with each other even before the Odette II sent out a distress signal. Although the loss of communication is an abnormal situation, it is not an unusual situation. Once the ship was close to the destination dock, there were many ways to make contact, whether it was by using radio or by wire, so the service ship's crew continued their mission without panicking.

Because there is a lot of delicate work involved, many service ships are equipped with windows with good visibility that allow the operator to look out directly from the cockpit. The service ship, towing with a robotic arm fixed to the bow of the White Swan, is equipped with old-fashioned large windows that allow some of the windows to be opened in a pressurized environment, rather than the popular foam canopy.

An armored space suit in gaudy red and white paint attached itself to the front of the service ship's cockpit with the light on the side of its helmet turned on. It knocked lightly on the window in a sign of non-hostility, waved a hand, and then attached a corded suction cup for communication to the window.

“*This is the White Phoenix group, specializing in manual labor.***”**  The suction cup directly vibrates the laminated cleartight window and transmits the voice inside the cockpit. “*Can you hear me?*”

“*I hear you. This is Taratta Trading Company, Service Ship 718.*”

Many small service ships operated over short distances have only a registration number and no personal name. The pilot of the service ship, wearing his worn-out work clothes and half-covered helmet, raised his hand to the armored space suit, which did not show the wearer’s expression inside the helmet thanks to its colorful sunshield.

“*What do you want to do? I haven't heard of any exterior work being done while taking it to the dock.*”

“*It's an emergency.*” The armored space suit summed up the situation. “*The White Swan, which is in transit, has been hijacked by something and is sending out a distress signal.*” The space suit pointed a mechanical finger at the sailing spacecraft beneath the belly of the robotic arm. “*Aren't all communications with the outside world cut off right now?*”

“*Yes, they are. That's why you're talking to me with your classic string phone, isn't it?*”

“*That's right. If you come into contact with this spaceship or come within close range, the radio will no longer work.*” The armored space suit once again pointed to the sailing spacecraft below. “*It seems like something is going wrong inside.*”

The pilot in the cockpit clicked his tongue. “*Wasn't it an unmanned ship?*”

“*I'm only hearing about it from other people, so I don't know the exact situation. For now, the spaceship is transmitting a distress signal, so please evacuate as soon as possible.*”

“*Even if I'm told to evacuate…*” The pilot looked at the display around the console to check the latest status. “*Abandoning the scene is treated as fleeing in front of the enemy. If I accidentally leave, it will be difficult afterwards.*”

“*I see, that’s difficult too.*” The armored space suit pretended to understand what was being said and turned down the output of the speakers. “*But you're also aware that this job is a request from pirates, right?*”

“*Ah, well, it was a request from the guild's usual dummy company.*”

“*I'm sure the client didn't explain that there are traps inside the spaceship. Also, I don't think you can hear it with this communication situation, but it seems that some pirate ships are heading towards here.*”

“*What!?*” The pilot in the cockpit looked out the window at the armored space suit. “*They're going to do this in Meiya's controlled airspace!?*”

“*I don't know how far they're willing to go, but my friends are trying to enter the spaceship to disarm the traps inside.*” The armored space suit restored the volume on the sucker cup speaker. “*I won’t say anything bad, so run away! If you stick around like this, you'll get caught up in a fight you don't have to do and suffer damage you don't have to take!*”

Pulling the wired cord, the armored spacesuit floated away. “*Look, the service ship behind you has already undocked.*”

The pilot clicked his tongue. “*It's too early to judge. Well, it can't be helped if it's an emergency.*” The pilot quickly began the procedure to release the robot arm. “*So, why are you bothering with a spaceship that you know is connected to the guild?*”

The armored space suit returned the salute to the service ship. “*Actually, my main job is being an ally of justice.*”

“The ground forces have opened the Odette II. The service ship is undocking.” Coorie reported.

Marika asked “No traps?”

From monitoring from the outside, no one should have entered the Odette II after Captain Ririka, the yacht club members, and the ground forces left. However, we cannot deny the possibility that someone had sneaked in or set a trap from the outside.

“Contact electronic jamming is still active.”

Communication from service ships and spacesuits approaching or contacting Odette II is not possible. Once away from the Odette II, the service ship began reporting its current status to the control station and its company command center.

“The second group has arrived.” Coorie reported indifferently. Following the ground forces’ rugged armored space suits, slender, colorful light space suits separate from Meiya's outer wall and attach themselves to the Odette II.

The ground forces boarding the Odette II, experiencing contact-type electronic jamming, are unable to communicate by radio with not only the Bentenmaru but also their companions, who are within a line-of-sight distance of several hundred meters. For this reason, communication between the ground forces and the trailing yacht club members is carried out using hand signals that had been agreed upon in advance. A member of the armored spacesuits who had boarded the ship through the hatch on the side of the ship came out again and made a large circle with both arms, and a member of the team, who confirmed this through electronic binoculars that could be used even through the spacesuit's shield visor, gave a signal. One after another, they jumped from Meiya’s west wall to the Odette II passing overhead.

“The Odette II is uncontrolled right now.” Marika murmured as she checked the situation. Objects that are close to the structure are not controlled by anything, and continue to move based solely on their inertia, which is tantamount to neglecting the danger. Marika checked the elapsed time with a chronometer. The situation is being kept quiet thanks to the White Swan's distress calls and emergency signals indicating hijacking, but a forced evacuation order could be issued at any time depending on the decision of the air traffic control station. “What about the Scylla?”

“Still approaching.” Coorie reported. “However, since their speed remains low, there is no change in the scheduled contact time. Although they are far apart, optical observation should also show that many spacesuits are attached to the Odette II.”

“Leave the Odette II to Ririka. Concentrate on the Scylla's movements, and then keep an eye out for any strange movements of other ships in the anchorage area.” As she said this, Marika called up a list of ships leaving port in Meiya, picking out the spacecraft that are likely to move soon in the central port and anchored airspace and are ready to move. “Yeah, this list is a waste of time!”

Marika displayed the ships anchored around Meiya on the 3D display in the captain's seat. In no time at all, Meiya's egg-like surroundings were filled with bright spots. “That’s too many to handle!”

Marika sorts the display so that only spacecraft that had recently departed, moved, or had their plans submitted to the air traffic control station within the last hour or so were displayed. The number of spaceships displayed will be reduced to less than one percent. “And still there are so many!”

“The yacht club members are following the ground forces into the Odette II.” Coorie reported the current situation. “Captain, what are you doing?”

“I was wondering if there are other pirate ships coming in, not just the Scylla.” Marika further divided the ships listed as departing or scheduled to depart by size. Pirate ships are chosen for their ease of use in various situations, so highly maneuverable spaceships that are not too large are chosen.

“A pirate ship with a transponder disguise like ours would either be moving with the intention of setting it up, or else move to a location where it's easier to do so. If they don't intend to make an enemy attack on the Meiya's control station, they would take a position where they can easily come out to put pressure on the station, so I think this area is suspicious.”

“Show me.” At Kane's request, who was still holding the steering wheel, Marika sent the selected data, which was simply marked, to the helmsman's seat as a 3D image. Kane gave a sidelong glance at the 3D image on the display. “Oh, not bad. If there's a bunch of spaceships from around here heading our way, we'd better watch out.”

“You'd better be careful. You'll have to deal with them.”

“Odette II's contact electronic jamming has been turned off.” Coorie reported. “Distress and hijacking signals both cancelled.”

The ground forces that boarded the Odette II first would have confirmed that there were no abnormalities inside the ship, and then the yacht crew would have boarded the ship and restored control of the Odette II. It seems that the plan has reached the point where the yacht club members who boarded the bridge have regained control of the Odette II.

“*This is the White Swan.*” Gruier's voice, no video, only audio, came over the radio. “*This is East Galaxy Express Transport's White Swan. Meiya control, do you copy?*”

“*Meiya control to White Swan, reception is good. Please explain the situation.*”

“*The detailed situation will be sent via data.*” Gruier responded in a calm voice. “*The control of the White Swan was temporarily taken over by an external crack. The Swan is now under the control of its original crew. We sincerely apologize for any disruption to Meiya's orderly space control.*”

“Whose scenario?” Marika murmured at the message in Gruier's calm voice. “Or are you just making it up?”

“Leave it to her, okay?” Kane is fine-tuning the Bentenmaru's course. “She's a princess with great acting skills. I'm sure she's good at improvising.”

“Her acting ability is probably her greatest strength.” Marika held down the headset that played Gruier's voice, which was being broadcast over normal communications that could be received by all ships in this airspace.

“*Crisis averted.*” Gruier reported. “*I’m applying for the cancellation of the state of emergency. I have no problem with the surrounding airspace returning to normal control.*”

“*White Swan from air traffic control, we understand your situation. As of this moment, the state of emergency for the west wall and departure track has been lifted. White Swan crew members are requested to cooperate with the security department's investigation after submitting their report.*”

“*Roger. The White Swan is…*” Gruier's line was cut off by a jarring noise.

“They’re here!” The movement of Coorie's hands on the control panel suddenly became faster. “Communication jamming from Scylla!”

“*White Swan from air traffic control?*” The control station, which is unilaterally disconnected not only from voice but also from data communication, calls the White Swan with a clear voice. “*What's the matter, another unusual situation? White Swan?*”

Once again, a distress signal was sent from the White Swan.

“Is Chimera of Scylla jamming communications?” Marika confirmed the current location of the White Swan, which was quite close to the Chimera of Scylla, which was still far away. “Even though it's this far away?” After she says that, she realizes that she hasn't lost communication with the control station. “No way, just the Odette II?”

“Chimera of Scylla has her antennas fully open.” Coorie reported. “The ship had a clean hull when it was in port, but now it's spreading its antenna like a hedgehog and shooting at Odette II. It's amazing accuracy that they can jam the Odette II so close to Meiya and not be noticed by the control station or other spacecraft.”

“It's not just communication disruption that they're after. If they found out that the Odette II was moving on her own, they would try to take over control by electronic attack or whatever… I wonder if it'll be okay without president Lynn.”

Lynn, along with Hyakume, are aboard the Silent Whisper, not the Odette II.

“*Meiya Control Station from Chimera of Scylla.*” The same voice as before called the control station on the emergency frequency. “*It seems that the state of emergency on board the White Swan has not been resolved. The security fleet is requested, and this ship will enter the departure orbit to rescue the White Swan.*”

“It looks like they're going to request the dispatch of the security fleet and return the trick that we used.” Coorie stopped running her hands over the control panel. “I think it's likely that they’ll board the Odette II and engage in hand-to-hand combat.”

“There are members of the ground forces in the Odette II, so I don't think it will be easy.” Marika shook her head as she considered the difference in size and number of crew members on the Odette II, which is only the size of a small boat from the perspective of the Chimera of Scylla. “But there's no way our members can fight hand-to-hand, so if they board her, we’re sure to lose.”

“I'm guessing they're going to settle that before the security fleet is on the scene.” Coorie started moving her fingers again. “The escort ships in the port are preparing to leave, but at the current pace it would probably be faster for the Scylla to contact the Odette II.”

“*...Control station from White Swan.*” Gruier's interrupted voice returned to the emergency frequency. “*The ship is currently under some sort of electronic attack...*”

The voice was cut off again before it could convey any information that would help the control station make a decision.

“Not bad.” Coorie smiled when she heard the transmission from the Odette II, which was supposed to be under strong electron interference. “If you can make such an audible voice in normal communication after that electronic attack, it's a big deal.”

“Sarasvati 32 to Control, this ship is also en route to the rescue of the White Swan.” Marika declared her continued participation in the war to the Control Bureau and Chimera of Scylla.

“Get in between the Scylla and the Odette II.” Marika instructed. “The Bentenmaru will receive electronic attacks from the Scylla. Is it possible to electronically attack the Scylla in the current situation?”

“I don't think there's anything we can't do, but I don't think we should do it.” Coorie replied. “An electronic attack on the Scylla is probably being done by the Silent Whisper, so if I mess around with it, I'll end up getting in the way instead. The Odette II has spread her antenna and started moving, so I think it would be better to go and support her.”

The Odette II, which until then had only been flying slowly in controlled flight over the airspace near the Meiya’s western wall, had begun to deploy its folded mast as it slowly circled the bow.

“At least it doesn't look like they've taken over control of the Odette II.” Marika nodded at the sight of the sailing spacecraft, its bow cruising into outer space as if to show its willingness to fight. “Well, the way it operates is completely different from modern spaceships. No matter how much pattern data Chimera of Scylla has for her attacks, she can't hijack a human-powered spaceship.”

The Odette II slowly rotates the bow of the ship while extending its three rows of nine masts. Marika noticed that the Odette II was deploying its masts much more deftly than when she first boarded it. “Wait a minute. Stop intervening between the Scylla and the Odette II!”

“What's up?” Kane moved the rudder wheel a bit to fine-tune the course.

“What the Odette II is spreading is probably a sail, not an antenna.”

“It’s an antenna mast?”

“The Odette II's sails can change the reflectance of the front and back sides as much as you like. Normally, the reflectance in the forward direction is the lowest, and the reflectance in the backward direction is highest, so that the light can be converted into maximum propulsion, but since it's just a matter of setting, it's easy to swap the front and back.” Marika thought of a mast and sail structure that reflected nearby starlight with almost 100% efficiency. “The propulsion is not only visible light, but also all electromagnetic waves, from infrared to ultraviolet, as long as they can be reflected by the sail. Of course, normal communication radio waves are also electromagnetic waves, so I think they are trying to expand the sail and reflect all the emitted electronic attacks.”

“Isn't it their specialty, active stealth?” Coorie confirmed as she moved her hands. “Aren't they thinking of aiming back at Chimera of Scylla 's antenna directly?”

“If president Lynn was on board, I'd think she would retaliate aggressively, of course, but right now she and Hyakume are analyzing enemy forces with the Silent Whisper. Besides, there is no need to have an electronic warfare expert on board the Odette II if all they have to do is to spread the sail to reflect the enemy's electronic jamming.”

“Are you saying that the solar sail will reflect back the jamming waves?” Coorie confirmed calmly. “To where? If they accidentally reflect without setting the direction, the Odette II will launch an electronic attack on the entire area.”

“They’ll probably get angry.” Marika gave her honest opinion. “Will we be able to explain that it was just a reflection of an attack from another spacecraft? I wonder if there will be a bounty even if it's not a physical attack?”

“Are they going to try it?”

“Well, probably not, I think they're planning on returning all the jamming waves back to the source, the Scylla.” Marika remembered the first training cruise she took on the Odette II. “I once burned a smuggler's optical observation system by collecting starlight. As long as you know where they are, fine tuning of the sails is fully automatic, so it's not that difficult a technique.” Marika continued, wondering if someone remembered it or came up with an advanced version. “Even against a heavily armored battleship, it would be a real problem if your electronic attacks are reflected in a concentrated manner. The Odette II's sails are much larger than they appear, including the reflection field, and each sail can be fine-tuned individually.”

“At that time I was in the captain's cabin, pretending not to know, and watching the situation with excitement.” Kane applied a light reverse jet to slow down the Bentenmaru.

“At that time, the Odette II was flying on sunlight with her sails spread from the start. But now, they can't make any adjustments in advance.”

“I know.” Kane continued. “If the sights are not aligned with the Scylla at the moment of sail unfurling, Scylla's highly directional jamming radio waves will be scattered everywhere.”

“And then wouldn't it be Muller, the pirate of Scylla, who would be in trouble?” Marika slowly leaned back against the captain's seat. “Also, the distance to the target is much shorter than when I targeted the smuggling ship on the training cruise.”

At that time, the disguised cargo ship that was targeting Odette II was so far away that it could not be seen with the naked eye. The Chimera of Scylla, which is now entering its departure orbit from the anchorage airspace, is close enough that its flashing navigation lights can be seen.

“If it’s this close, they don't need to make any preparations or adjustments. As long as the sighting coordinates are entered correctly, all of the jamming radio waves will be returned to Scylla as soon as all the sails are deployed.”

While turning its bow, the Odette II's three rows of nine foremasts, mizzenmasts, and mainmasts stood straight up. The yards that had been folded over each mast began to unfold.

“The first time I saw a mast and yard deployment while turning the spaceship, we had hard time raising the mast because the yards got tangled up.” Marika secretly murmured. “They’re quite skillful, aren’t they? I guess everyone's level has improved. Is Scylla's electronic attack pattern unchanged?”

“No change.” Coorie replied. “Maybe they haven't changed their plan to contact the Swan without allowing it to communicate with the outside world, forcibly suppressing it in hand-to-hand combat.”

“At this rate, will the Bentenmaru be ignored?” Marika sighed as she thought of the Bentenmaru's hand-to-hand combat ability now without Schnitzer, as well as their frontal combat ability. Even if we teamed up with the Odette II, I don't think she would be a match for the Chimera of Scylla.

“The rule that you can't engage in anti-ship combat within Meiya's line of sight is advantageous for us.” Coorie said, moving her hands. “In a proper firefight, the Bentenmaru would be no match for a battleship of that class.”

“I know. So we have to somehow make it so that we win.” Marika looked down at the external monitor in the captain's seat. The Odette II has finished deploying all her masts and yards, and continues to turn with graceful movements that belie the fact that she is being bombarded with highly directional electronic attacks from the Scylla. Soon, Odette II's bow will be pointing exactly at the Scylla.

Solar sails glittered on all of the Odette II’s masts. Solar sails, which would normally receive sunlight from behind, cannot be seen from the front. After deploying all sails at once in her normal sailing position, the Odette II immediately reversed all of her sails.

All electromagnetic waves have properties similar to light. Odette II's sails, which reflect sunlight with a high efficiency of nearly 100%, accurately reflected the torrential downpour of electronic interference that continues to be pinpointed from Chimera of Scylla back to its source.

“*Meiya control station from the White Swan.*” Gruier's clear voice was received on the bridge of the Bentenmaru. “*This ship has been exposed to electronic attacks from outside for some time now. Currently, we are using passive countermeasures to avoid any electronic attacks.*”

“Passive countermeasures.” Marika chuckled. “I wonder who thought of it.”

“*The distress call you heard earlier was not sent from the Swan. The ship is currently under the control of its original crew, and there is no situation on board that requires external assistance.*”

“What happened to the Scylla's electronic attack?” Marika asked. Coorie answered.

“As expected, it seems like it stopped right away. Until just now, it was making a lot of noise that I didn't appreciate even observing it from outside of its directional range, but now that bright red battleship is quiet.”

“*White Swan from control station.*” The control station responded. “*Are you saying that the White Swan was under electronic attack? We have no such data.*”

“*We have recorded all the data from the electronic attacks on this ship.*” Gruier explained, knowing her voice was echoing throughout all of the controlled airspace. “*I assume that only this ship was targeted with highly directional electromagnetic waves. Since this is not an electronic warfare ship, we cannot analyze and evaluate this, but with the proper facilities, it would be possible to analyze who put the ship under electronic attack, by what method, and with what intentions.*”

“Now, how do you get out of this?”

The response from the control station was a little delayed. “*Control to White Swan, we understand the situation. Please forward the electronic attack data obtained by the White Swan to air traffic control.*”

“Yay!” Coorie said happily. “This way, at least the data will remain at the control station even if there is an electronic attack upon departure. Well, if there is influence from the guild, the observation data may be altered or deleted, but this should make it difficult for the Chimera of Scylla to openly attack.”

“*White Swan here, I understand. Transferring electronic attack data to control station.*” After a brief pause, Gruier continued. “*We are deeply grateful to the two starships, Sarasvati 32 and Chimera of Scylla, who offered to rescue the White Swan during the crisis. However, the identity of the attacker is still unknown, and we do not believe that the crisis is completely over.*”

Marika listened to the headset, wondering what she was going to say.

“*The White Swan will now depart from port. It pains me to ask the two spaceships that rushed to our rescue to do something like this, but, if possible, could you please provide cover for the White Swan until it leaves Meiya’s control airspace?*”

“Eeeeee…” Marika raised her voice. “What are you talking about, Gruier?”

“Captain, reply.” Kane adjusted the Bentenmaru's trajectory so that it was parallel to the White Swan as it entered its departure orbit. “If you don't hurry, Pirate Muller will beat you to it.”

“Ahhh!” Marika hurriedly tried to open the communication channel. A split second later, the pirate Muller appeared on the communication monitor.

“*Chimera of Scylla, Captain Muller Grant to the White Swan.*” A female captain with sparkling silver hair said with a cool expression on her face. “*It looks like you're in serious trouble. I don't know how much I can help you, but it's not a big deal. In order to maintain the safety and order of this airspace, the White Swan will be placed under the protection of Chimera of Scylla*.”

Marika's mouth twitched as she put her fingertips on the communication panel. Kane opens his mouth. “Is this part of the scenario?”

“I haven’t heard! Ririka has no choice but to ask for cover from the Crimson Pirates who are attacking her!”

“*The White Swan thanks Captain Mueller Grant of the Chimera of Scylla for their offer.*” The only communication from the White Swan, which remains on the emergency line, is voice.

“Here you go, Captain.” Kane called out to Marika. “What should we do here?”

“It's decided!” Marika flicked on the communication panel. “White Swan from Sarasvati 32, this is Captain Kato Marika. The departure route of the Sarasvati 32 also matches with that of the White Swan.” From that point on, Marika spoke the lines as planned. “I will accompany you from the controlled airspace until we return to the Scholar route.”

“*Chimera of Scylla to Sarasvati 32, Captain Kato Marika?*” Still using the emergency frequency, the silver-haired female captain called Marika. Marika locked eyes with Muller on her communications monitor. “*Nice to meet you. I think it will be a short flight, but thank you.*”

Seeing Muller's smiling face, Marika bowed calmly. Video transmissions from the Sarasvati 32 should have also reached Chimera of Scylla. “Thank you very much. ...I hope it won’t be too much trouble.”

The Odette II, with its sails fully extended, used its main engine's jets to get on a departure trajectory. Behind it is the Bentenmaru, and in front is the Chimera of Scylla, which has a hedgehog-like antenna that was once fully deployed, neatly housed in its streamlined hull.

“This is a strange turn of events.” Each spacecraft is offset from its axis to avoid projecting its own jet onto the one following it. Kane watched the back of the crimson pirate ship projected on the display while maintaining the course of the trailing Bentenmaru, which was proceeding on its departure trajectory with the sailing spaceship in between. “Right now, we can aim at whatever we want with our main gun, but I'm sure the other side's cannon will be able to aim at us as well.”

Just as the Bentenmaru's main guns are not elevated, the Chimera of Scylla's rear-facing triple main gun is also not aimed. However, the power of the main guns is vastly different between the Bentenmaru, which is based on an ancient light cruiser, and the Chimera of Scylla, which uses the hull of a modern battleship.

“Even at close range, will the Bentenmaru's main gun be effective against a battleship?” Marika remains sunk in the captain's seat. “Well, if we aim at the right place, we can manage.”

“Give me a break.” Sandaime interjected. “Even if we shoot our guns with as much energy as they can stand, it is impossible for our class 40 guns to pass through the armor of a battleship. Their main gun is a class 120, and even if they don't aim it, it would pass through everything here like paper.”

“Ummm…” Marika let out a pitiful groan. “Gruier is one thing, but I’m sure Ririka knows about that, so why do I have to get along with her and fly with her as an escort for our sailing ship?”

“Schnitzer and Captain Cayenne should be with them, so they should be able to make good combat decisions.” Coorie replied. “In any case, if the Odette II, which is not armored let alone armed, were to get into a shootout with the pirate Muller who has a battleship, it would be a surefire loss at that point. As an escort, we won't have to worry about a ship-to-ship battle in the control zone with the enemy right in front of us, so I don't think it's such a bad development.”

“Well, I didn't think it would be easy to get out of Meiya's controlled airspace.” Marika complained bitterly as she checked the course of the three ships. The departure trajectory will continue to expand the designated airspace and continue up to the Scholar route. “Well, if the pirate Muller has enough sense to avoid fighting in Meiya's control airspace, then she would have to start something in the northern sky of Meiya when she enters the Scholar route at the end of Meiya's control airspace.”

Of course, there are many exceptions, but routes are set to avoid orbiting stars or planets. The navigation zone around Mesaiya is set to pass through the northern sky parallel to the ecliptic plane. The port entry and departure trajectories change depending on the position of Meiya as it orbits Mesaiya, but there is no navigation support equipment or air traffic control between the controlled airspace and the shipping lane. A spacecraft heading toward or departing from Meiya via the navigation zone takes an orbit according to its own convenience and performance.

“We won't be fully visible from Meiya or the Scholar route.” Marika looked up at the bridge. “Do you think she'll set this up in such a conspicuous place?”

“She’s the kind of opponent that will attack you right in front of Meiya, even in controlled airspace.” Coorie answered leisurely. “If you were concerned about what people see, you wouldn't be able to become a pirate.”

“...That's right.” Marika, in her captain’s uniform, spread her arms in the captain’s seat. “Um, then what are the other spaceships doing? Of the spaceships that came out at the same time as the Scylla and us, how many are likely to be together once they leave the controlled airspace?”

“About seven or eight ships.” Luca answered from the navigator’s seat. “More than half of the spacecraft that the captain has checked are moving out of the anchorage area at the right time. That's a good read.”

“Eight ships are coming!?” Marika looked disgusted and called up a list of ships scheduled to depart on the display. “I'm not very happy that it ends up like this.”

Medium-sized transports, research vessels, training ships. There may be a few spaceships that just happen to appear at the same time. However, considering that it is not that unusual to find ships equipped with large caliber guns for self-defense in the frontier areas, all the ships listed appear to be a pirate fleet under the command of pirate Muller.

“For the time being, there is no need to worry about fighting within controlled airspace.” Kane said as he continued to navigate safely, observing the speed limit. “Incidentally, they have no intention of fighting properly once they leave the controlled airspace.”

“Of course not. There's no point in fighting a battle when you can see the outcome.” Marika shook her head. “Once you leave the controlled airspace and get to a point where you can attack without causing trouble for other people or getting complaints, I'm sure you're thinking of surrounding us with your forces and requesting surrender, Pirate Muller.”

“You're starting to be able to read the situation quite a bit.” Kane said happily.

“Anyone could have predicted this obvious turn of events.” Sighing, Marika looked at the back of the Odette II, flying with the light from Mesaiya on its spread sails. “With the Scylla so close, no matter how much I communicate privately, she would hear it, and there was no way I could rendezvous with her by accident. I wonder what kind of face Ririka is making commanding that spaceship.”

“Since it's Ririka, she’s probably giving mean assignments to the students while pretending to be okay as usual.” Before I knew it, Misa was standing next to the captain's seat. “I wonder if I will be okay. I guess it would have been better if I had been forced to ride over there.”

“If it's a combat injury, the medics in the ground forces are more experienced and quicker to deal with it.” Marika remembered Ririka's excuse for refusing Misa's boarding the Odette II at all costs. “That's why I told Misa to work on the Bentenmaru and not go to the trouble of boarding the Odette II.”

“Well, I'm sure that's what she'll say on the surface.” Misa's eyes were downcast. “Ririka has always been good at putting things where they are needed, to the point where you might think she has supernatural powers, so she probably thinks it's okay even if there's no doctor on her ship.”

“I'm good at preparing things, but I'm terrible at using them.” Marika saw the Swan sailing immediately in front of her with its solar sails spread out, and the back view of the Chimera of Scylla sailing beyond it. “So, what do you think? Did you collect enough data to cheat against the pirate Muller?”

Coorie's reply was not immediately forthcoming. “Thanks to the pinpoint electronic attack aimed at the Odette II earlier, I was able to establish some attack patterns.”

Coorie, who had barely touched the console for a while, touched the panels one by one. “Well, it's just as troublesome as I expected. I don't know what kind of hypothetical enemy they are equipped for, but if their class 120 main guns are as destructive as in the catalog and their main engine output is good, I think they could put up a good fight even against a regular imperial fleet.”

“Is the other party that rich?” Marika puffed out her cheeks as if she was about to squeal. The combat power of a combat spacecraft is determined in part by how generous a budget it has and how many destructive weapons it is equipped with. “I wonder if the piracy business in the frontier is that profitable?”

“The Stellar Slayer is just a strategic-class ultimate weapon that they’re trying to sell.” Kane turned the helm of the Bentenmaru slightly away from the Odette II, which was flying close by. “Aren't we almost out of the controlled airspace? Even from here, I can see that Scylla is starting to open up in many places.”

“At the current speed, the Chimera of Scylla will be the first to leave the controlled airspace in 1 minute and 30 seconds.” Luca gave predicted future numbers based on the Bentenmaru's exact current position and speed. “There is no significant time difference between the following Odette II and Bentenmaru. They have already reached interplanetary speed in their departure orbit.”

“They’re starting to open...” Marika manipulated the display to enlarge the back view of the Scylla, which was leading the way. “Oh, it's true.”

The battleship's crimson hull floats in jet-black space, with the nozzles of its three horizontal main propulsion machines visible to the Odette II and the Bentenmaru, its streamlined side armor plates beginning to spread out like a number of antennae. “...Is there an antenna hidden under the layered armor? Hey, if the antenna is open right in front of us, shouldn't we be able to get a shot at it?”

“It would be nice if it were a battleship whose hull was designed like that by an amateur.” Kane scanned the analysis data on the Chimera of Scylla's surface armor, which was obtained from sensors operated by Coorie. “The layered armor that appears to be open is the outermost primary armor of the hull structure, and there are still about three layers of composite armor underneath. If we aim and shoot, we might be able to tear off the antenna, but with our firepower, we'll probably end up with a lot of holes before we can disable all of the battleship's antennas.”

“They’re spreading so many antennas.” Marika widened her eyes at the appearance of the Chimera of Scylla, which had changed its profile to look like it had many pairs of wings spread out on both sides of its slender hull. “...It seems like it's hard to move.”

“I guess they didn't think about the situation of conducting combat maneuvers while using electronic warfare.” Kane regained his grip on the steering wheel. “Now, it's time to leave the control zone.”

“*Meiya Control Station from the White Swan.*” Gruier's voice came over the communication line, which had been shifted to a normal frequency because the state of emergency had been lifted. “*Our ship will soon be leaving Meiya’s controlled airspace. We would like to thank the Chimera of Scylla and Sarasvati 32 for escorting our vessel to this point.*”

“*We can't thank you enough.*”

The silver-haired female captain returned to the communications monitor. “*I wish the White Swan all the best on its future voyages.*”

“*We wish the Chimera of Scylla and Sarasvati 32 all the best in the future.*”

Pirate Muller gave a small smile. “*Well, now that we're in an airspace where we don't have to worry about each other getting in the way, let's get to work. I could have just crushed you beforehand, but I'll do it my way. I recommend that the Odette II and Bentenmaru surrender.*” Instead of the names of the ships disguised by transponders or flight plans, Muller suddenly called out the true names of the two pirate ships. “*I don't need to explain to you the situation you are in. I will wait one minute. If you don't answer, I will use force.*”

As soon as Muller finished speaking, a countdown timer appeared on the communication monitor. The analog display and digital numbers move simultaneously and begin counting down from 60 seconds.

“As I expected.” In the Odette II's captain's seat, Ririka looked at the silver-haired pirate's face projected on the display. “If we turn around and flee to Meiya's control airspace, we can at least avoid fighting for the time being, but they suddenly revealed their intentions and declared war.”

“What do you mean by ‘expected’?” Gruier asked from the observer seat. Ririka answered.

“If they know the name of our ship, it means that they think we are someone who won't run away if they suddenly play their cards and give us an ultimatum. But even so, Muller the pirate is so impatient that it is hard to believe that she is a Methuselah, a pirate with a long temperament.”

“Just because you're a Methuselah doesn't mean your patient.” Gruier said. “I think it's a matter of personality. I sometimes hear that a Methuselah does not change their personality even after many years.”

“Oh, now that I think about it, there was some data saying that the pirate Muller is not only willing to use any means necessary, but also quick to make decisions.” Ririka looked at the countdown timer on the communication monitor. “What's up with the Scylla?”

“It's turning slowly with the antenna deployed. Not only the aft third turret, but also the first and second turrets are all aiming toward us.”

“It is generous to use the main guns of a battleship against a sailing ship at such close range.”

The Odette II, which is a lightweight sail-equipped spaceship that could only rely on weak thrust, had no armor. If you want to destroy it, you don't have to bring a battleship-class main gun, the transport ship's small self-defense cannon will suffice.

There was a harsh noise on the bridge. Momentary noise appears on almost all displays.

“The Chimera of Scylla has begun radiating high-frequency radar.” Instead of the low-power radar used for navigation, the Odette II is mercilessly bombarded with powerful radar that pinpoints the target's current location. Marii continued. “Radar is aimed not only at the Odette II but also at the Bentenmaru. The third rear turret seems to be facing the Odette II, and the first and second front turrets are facing the Bentenmaru.”

“What should we do?” Gruier asked, looking sideways at the steadily decreasing numbers on the countdown timer. “Are you going to do it after accepting the recommendation to surrender? Or do you want to do it before then?”

“Please stop using such vulgar language.” Ririka said, putting aside her own words. “Well, since they've advised us to surrender, let's not pretend to be on board. Gruier, please reply. Reject the appeal for surrender as loud as you can so that even the Bentenmaru and the Silent Whisper can hear it.”

“I understand.” Gruier responded to Chimera of Scylla, placing her finger on the communication panel.

‘“Odette II to Chimera of Scylla, I am deeply saddened by your polite request for surrender.” Gruier continued with a chuckle. “However, I have a busy schedule, so unfortunately I don't have enough time to visit with the Crimson Pirate. If you like, how about never?”

The count has reached zero. No response. Gruier tilted her head a bit and mumbled. “Would you be able to understand me if I used more vulgar language?”

“Energy reaction surging!” The club member in the sensor seat screamed. “The Scylla is firing!”

Without sufficient preheating, the Scylla's rear triple turret opened fire at close range.

“Okay, I let them shoot first.”

Three large-diameter beams spread in three directions and grazed Odette II. The hull of the ship shuddered as it was exposed to the powerful noise, and monitors flashed and sparks flew all over the bridge, where the only lights were emergency lights and displays in battle mode.

“Not only am I carrying Meiya on my back, but even though I've been observing the gun barrel and I know that the aim is slightly off, it doesn't make me feel good.”

“Even if they did not hit Meiya directly, there was a possibility that they would be willing to shoot the beam into the control airspace.” Gruier calmly analyzed the battle situation.

“That way, we'll achieve the goal in front of us, and at the same time, the well-paying frontier pirate Muller will instantly become the villain.” Ririka didn't change the smile on her lips. “Methuselahs, whether they're short-tempered or not, think ahead before they act. Some people think too far into the future and lose track of what's going on right in front of them, but fortunately Muller is calm enough to see what's going on around her anyway.”

“The radar/sensor system has recovered.” The Odette II’s radar/sensor system, which had been temporarily disabled by the high-powered cannon beam that raced through at close range, was restored.

“Chimera of Scylla has begun combat maneuvers! It appears that the ship will move around to the side of our ship and move to a firing position where it does not have to worry about Meiya's controlled airspace.”

“Odette II to Bentenmaru and Silent Whisper!” Ririka shouted into the line she had opened. “Run away! Avoid Scylla's fire on your own!”

A large amount of data was sent from the Silent Whisper. “*Exact current and planned future position of the ships between your current position and the Scholar route!*” Lynn's voice was heard from the Silent Whisper. “*Be careful, it won't show up on your radar or sensors!*”

“Ready” Ririka switched the channel on her ship's communications. “Release the smoke screen, now!”

Cargo hatches opened wide from the hull of Odette II, between the center mizzen mast and the rearmost main mast. The waiting ground squadron threw out drums the size of a small container using their powered suits and their own strength.

The ground squadron threw out two large drums from both sides and immediately closed the cargo doors on both sides. The ejected drums were detonated between the masts by remote control without getting too far from the Odette II.

With a dull light, the Odette II was engulfed by explosions from both sides.

“Yay!” Coorie exclaimed. “The Odette II released the smoke screen!”

On radar, the Odette II appeared to have exploded. Not only for radar, but also for infrared and various other chaff was scattered densely.

“Bentenmaru, launch!” Marika instructed. “Compared to the Odette II, we’re like a bonus, but if they can't aim for them, she might narrow her sights to us. Coorie, use electronic jamming on the Scylla!”

“With our current position, we don't have to worry about causing problem for Meiya.” Coorie started electronic jamming against the Scylla, which was distancing itself from the Odette II, which itself was surrounded by a smoke screen with its antennae fully extended.

“I'm going to swing us around.” Kane declared as he regained his grip on the helm. “For a while now, a powerful radar has been targeting the Bentenmaru repeatedly. We're taking an evasive trajectory and getting into the Odette II's cover!” Kane accelerated the Bentenmaru rapidly to hide behind the smoke screen that continued to spread from the explosion’s momentum.

“Here comes the fire control radar!” Coorie reported. “Bombardment incoming.”

“Don’t worry, it can’t pass through the smoke screen’s current density.”

In addition to the Bentenmaru's electronic attack, as well as the Odette II’s smoke screen, was added to the sensor noise. Kane slid the Bentenmaru behind the smoke screen. A moment later, the front two triple main guns of the Chimera of Scylla, which was maneuvering around, fired six energy beams in succession.

The Scylla's class 120 beams were sucked into the scattering smoke screen. The tiny reflective elements contained within the smoke screen diffused the beam, and at the same time, the heavy particles absorbed energy and convert it into heat and light.

The smoke screen, which was hit by six direct hits from the battleship's main guns, emitted a muffled light from within like a thundercloud.

“As expected of something sold to the Imperial Fleet.” Kane slowed the Bentenmaru down to avoid inadvertently exiting the smoke screen and taking a direct hit from Scylla's beam. “It successfully caught a battleship-class main gun salvo.”

“They thought they were going to be dealing with a light cruiser or a sailing spaceship, so they reduced the power of their main gun.” Said Hikoza, a veteran of the Imperial Fleet who has replaced Schnitzer in the battle commander's seat on the bridge. “You don't need the full power of a battleship against small fry like us. If you fire a naval gun with a weak beam, the charge will be shorter, so you can increase the number of consecutive shots. But next time…” Hikoza glanced at the stopwatch, which had started from Scylla's previous naval gunfire. “Maybe a fully charged, full-power beam is coming.”

“Can you shoot accurately through the smoke screen?” Kane said while carefully changing their course so that the wake from the jet would not be observed and their current location deduced.

“At best, they can use the full power of the main gun to burn away the smoke screen.”

A smoke screen, which diffuses an aggregate of fine particles through an explosion, will diffuse and decrease in effectiveness in space even if left alone. The explosive power can be adjusted, and if the explosive power is set to a low value, a high-density disturbance curtain can be maintained for a long time, but the spread range will be reduced. On the other hand, if the explosive power is increased, the disturbance curtain can be effective over a wide area in a short time, but its effectiveness decreases as the density per unit space decreases.

If the power of the energy beam is increased, the beam entering the smoke screen will be scattered and diffused, but will still push past the reflective elements, vaporizing the heavy particles as it goes. If the power is sufficient, even if the leading edge of the beam is scattered, the trailing edge will continue through the cleared space and can penetrate the smoke screen. If their aim is accurate, it is not impossible to hit targets hidden within the smoke screen.

The Chimera of Scylla fired its three main cannons, nine guns in three stacks, at the diffuse smoke screen. The nine energy beams, released from a position where the beams do not flow into Meiya or its anchorage airspace without worrying about the angle of fire, were absorbed by the smoke screen, glowing dully like a thundercloud, and then popping out from the other side.

“They're used to the smoke screen.” Hikoza muttered. “They didn't even look to see what was going on with their secondary guns, they just fired their full-power main guns right at us, with their sights set perfectly.”

“A point-blank shot?” Although some of the Bentenmaru's displays flashed blank, there was no shock that made it to the bridge. Marika confirmed that there was no damage to the Bentenmaru.

“A point-blank shot.” Coorie is busy moving her hands. “There's something wrong with some sensors, but it's okay, we can fix them right away.”

“What's going on with the Scylla and the other ships?” While saying this, Marika looked at the battle display. The movements of the Scylla on the other side of the smoke screen can only be seen through predicted data, but four of the eight spaceships predicted to join the battle have already left the control zone and are deploying at high acceleration. “It seems they are not used to fleet battles.”

The four ships, each having left Meiya's controlled airspace on different trajectories, appear to be rushing into the current airspace, where the smoke screen continues to spread, as if vying to be the first. Even looking at the predicted trajectory, it does not appear that they are intending an efficient battle with divided roles. “Coorie, please deal with them individually.”

“Sure” Coorie replied. “I thought it would be troublesome if they were to participate in electronic warfare under Scylla's command, but it seems that not all pirate ships in the frontier are so well equipped and wealthy.”

The Chimera of Scylla is equipped with equipment comparable to the Imperial fleet's standard electronic battleships, but in order to fight electronic warfare at the same level, the ships under her command will also need high-end electronic warfare equipment. Maintaining a network with command ships during electronic warfare requires not only standard military communication systems, but also expensive additional equipment and coordination. However, the following pirate ships appear to be acting on their own without any direction from the Scylla.

The fast disguised merchant ship leading the way fired its main gun, which was too large for self-defense, at the smoke screen. The ship's attitude was not stabilized at the time of firing, perhaps hoping to boosting the ship's spirits by getting a lucky shot.

“He's a lousy shot.” Hikoza is busy collecting data on newly joined ships. “Well, if we assume that each individual fires at their own discretion, Pirate Muller may not have as much command over her fleet as we'd expect.”

“I'm sure the Bentenmaru will be able to handle such a careless opponent.” Marika said as she watched the trajectory of the four new ships that seemed to be moving on their own. “Please don't make me think that I'm going to accidentally target the Odette II.”

“Sure” Coorie responded the same way as before. “We've secured the exact vectors of the other ships in their evasive orbits. Now it's up to Scylla and the rest of the pirate ships, but I think we'll manage just fine.”

The smoke screen blocks not only radar and sensors, but also communication signals. Even at close range, communication with the Odette II is not possible unless the smoke screen is sufficiently diffused.

“Ready?” Marika looked around the bridge to confirm.

“Data from the Silent Whisper and future orbits are set.” Luca replied.

“Preparations for firing the main gun are complete. We can go anytime.” Hikoza answered. Sandaime then raised one hand.

“Both main and auxiliary engines are at maximum output. We can run them for a while.”

“I’m good to go.” Coorie replied while facing the electronic warfare seat. Marika also looked at Misa, who was standing next to the captain's seat, just to be sure. Misa nodded.

“Kane?”

“Okay” Clapping his hands together, Kane regained his grip on the helm. “Well, let's make a big splash.”

“Let's go. Bentenmaru, sortie!”

Spewing high-speed plasma flames from its main engine, the Bentenmaru leaps out from behind the smoke screen at a rapid acceleration. The Bentenmaru accelerates in a random trajectory that appears to be straight at first glance, but with subtle changes, and the trajectories of the following pirate ships are suddenly thrown into disarray.

Marika confirmed the current position of the Scylla. Not paying attention to the Bentenmaru, which appears to have fled, the Chimera of Scylla continues to approach the smoke screen with its antennas spread wide all over its body.

“As expected, the boss hasn't forgotten her purpose even during this period.” Marika, in the captain's seat, smiled. “Well, that's a bit troublesome, but please…”

The Odette II jumped out from inside the smoke screen, her solar sail sparkling. The inertial control system lowers its weight to a minimum, and plasma flames used for normal propulsion accelerate it at full speed, taking a course toward the Scholar route. As soon as the Odette II's symbol returned to the display, the Chimera of Scylla's symbol was disrupted by a barrage of electronic attacks.

The Scylla didn't seem to react immediately.

“Oh…” Hikoza, in the combat commander's seat, sounded impressed. “Prioritizing shooting chances over pursuit, you really know how to use a battleship.”

“You won't miss it at this distance, right?” Marika looked at the Scylla's latest information with a worried look on her face. Before the smoke screen was deployed, the two front turrets and the one rear turret were aimed at different targets, but now the Chimera of Scylla has three turrets pointing at different targets while keeping her hull diagonally stable. All of its main turrets are aimed at the Odette II.

“It’s close range compared to a battleship's gunfire range.” Hikoza nodded. “The distance is such that it is difficult to aim and miss. The only question is whether the Scylla’s crew will have enough time to look around before shooting.”

As if to mock the Odette II's full power electronic jamming, Scylla fired a finely focused fire control radar at the sailing spacecraft to determine its current location. Next comes the energy beam.

The Odette II suddenly stopped normal propulsion. Once acceleration ceased, the spacecraft continued to advance at its previous speed, making it easier for the target to aim. The Chimera of Scylla once again used its fire control radar to gauge the target's intentions as it shifted to inertial navigation, but did not fire its cannons.

“I'm glad they noticed.” Coorie said leisurely. “Thank goodness. If they hadn't noticed what was beyond the Odette II, all our preparations would have been for naught.”

Space battleships have a long range. Even interplanetary distances can become artillery ranges. In reality, too great a distance makes it difficult to detect the enemy, and energy beams that reach only at the speed of light must be fired in anticipation of the enemy's movement.

In the vacuum of space, a large-diameter beam fired will travel indefinitely, but its destructive power will not be maintained indefinitely. Even the most focused beam will diffuse over distance and time, reducing its destructive power per unit area. However, a beam that retains its destructive power over a distance between inner planets will not decay until it has passed through a distance between outer planets.

The Chimera of Scylla, aiming at the Odette II as it shifted to inertial navigation, spotted a container ship heading for the Scholar route beyond the axis line. The Odette II was unaccelerated, and the distant container ship was under slow acceleration toward the route zone, exactly in line with the Chimera of Scylla, which was ready to fire.

If all the gunfire hits the target accurately, there is no need to worry about stray bullets. However, if the main gun of a battleship-class ship aims at the Odette II, which has no armor, even if the beam hits the target, there is a large possibility that it would pass straight through and continue straight ahead.

If they shoot without worrying, the Chimera of Scylla's fire will reach a third party, the container ship.

The Chimera of Scylla began to accelerate again in order to change its firing position. The Odette II, which had shifted to inertial navigation, opened her cargo doors on both sides again.

The waiting ground squadron releases drums filled with smoke screen again and closes the cargo doors.

The second smoke screen exploded before the eyes of the Chimera of Scylla, which was moving toward its next firing position. The shadow of the Odette II, which had been exposed in detail to the high-powered firing radar of the Scylla, swelled up like a silhouette surrounded by noise. Although the smoke screen that was blown up was about half the size of the previous one, the distance between the Chimera of Scylla and the Odette II, which was not actively pursuing the ship, was at least as wide as the shortest gun battle distance.

“How's it going?” Marika asked Coorie, who was dealing with four more pirate ships coming out of the controlled airspace. “Can you do it?”

“We are now electronically jamming all eight ships we have locked on to.” Coorie replied, busily moving her hands. “They can't communicate, and their radar fire must be so invisible that they can't expect it to hit even with such flashy maneuvers. Also, this is the important thing.” Coorie snapped, placing both hands on the control panel and issuing commands. “All eight ships, and of course the Scylla, must know that this Bentenmaru is the one that is electronically jamming them.”

“Then hit them with radar so hot it'll scorch their surface armor.” Marika sat back in the captain's seat. “Then, fire our main guns as flashily as possible. So that everyone’s blood will rush to their heads and come running after the Bentenmaru.”

“Two salvo spreads.” Hikoza ordered the first and second turrets to their respective targets. “If there are less than six ships, a single salvo would be enough, but if there are eight ships, we can't do that. Kane, I'm going to need you to make a turn.”

“Aye, sir.” After confirming the ship's posture and the direction in which the bow should be pointed, which was sent from Hikoza, Kane turned the helm in a wide circle. “We're in range of the Scylla, too. Please keep an eye on them so they don't change their target on a whim.”

The ship was turned so that it was defenseless against Scylla. Keeping the same pace, she turned her bow towards the pirate fleet that was approaching in two groups from behind.

According to the pre-loaded firing data, the two triple-barreled main guns fired a beam of light. Destructive power was secondary, and the six beams were shot out without being focused for the purpose of being intimidating and dazzling, heading towards the four ships that were charging without even forming a fleet. Next, the aim of all the turrets changed and fired the second shot.

Whether it was the result of electronic jamming or the quick attitude change and cannon fire, none of the eight pirate ships that later avalanched onto the battlefield were able to take good evasive maneuvers. The Bentenmaru's two-shot, twelve-round beams, which flashed through the battle airspace, were sucked into the void far away from Meiya.

“Odette II has started accelerating again.” Coorie announced on the bridge of the Bentenmaru, which was rotating its axis in the direction of travel. Out of the dark clouds of the ever-expanding smoke screen, the Odette II jumped out, trailing her wake.

“What about the Scylla?” Leaving Coorie to track the eight ships that had just received warning shots, Marika followed the Scylla's movements.

“Their radar is irradiating a wide area while closing the distance with the Odette II.” Coorie reported in a businesslike manner. “Here we go, we've secured positions for the other spaceships up to Scholar Route.”

“What about electronic jamming over here?”

“It's not working.” Coorie replied, not looking too disappointed. “After all, if you want to take on a well-equipped electronic battleship like that, it seems like you'll have to bring something like the Silent Whisper.”

“In other words” Marika breathed a sigh of relief “it's going well.”

“That's a lot of power for a wide-area radar.” From the cockpit of the Silent Whisper, which was leading near the Scholar Route, Hyakume let out a disgusted voice. “Are you saying that an antenna that increases the front projected area by up to three times is just a piece of cake?”

“On the contrary, it seems that they have no idea that the received data has been rewritten.” Lynn, in the operator's seat, is moving her hands as she looks at several layers of data over her headset’s glass display. “I bet with all that electronic equipment in a place like this, I am invincible.”

“I’m lucky that I've never had anyone question my equipment and tactics before.”

Hyakume looked sideways at the current position of the spaceship occupying the space between Meiya and the Scholar route, which is being updated moment by moment. The space between the departure orbit and the Scholar route is set to one-way traffic, and no spacecraft will travel in the opposite direction unless there is a serious emergency.

“Well, with this density, almost all of them are real spaceships with working transponders. Unless we are prepared to track all the spacecraft in the surrounding airspace from the beginning, there's no way to tell which ones are real and which ones are decoys.”

Currently, there are dozens of spaceships flying in the space between Meiya's departure orbit and the Scholar route. The Silent Whisper was able to increase the number of ships by more than a hundred by transmitting responses directly to the Chimera of Scylla's radar from a far-advanced position. The same data was sent to the Odette II and the Bentenmaru, and evasive trajectories were constructed on the assumption that all spacecraft were real.

“The Scylla has stopped accelerating.” Lynn informed. “It's probably about time to prepare for the next salvo.” Lynn confirmed Odette II's current location on the high-precision 3D display. There is a slow plant ship stuck to an asteroid in a straight line between the Chimera of Scylla and the Odette II. It is an asteroid ship that generates resources during its long flight by installing an unmanned refining plant on the surface of an asteroid rich in mineral resources.

“Oh, as expected. I thought they would be reckless and shoot an asteroid ship that has barely dug into it yet, but they didn't fire.”

“That’s real.” Lynn replied. “Since it's an asteroid full of heavy metals, it's probably possible for a battleship to pick up a lot of reactions, not just radar.”

Two-thirds of the spaceships in the airspace up to the Scholar route are decoys generated by the Silent Whisperer, but one-third are real spaceships.

“Well, I'm worried...” Lynn mumbled as she looked at the Chimera of Scylla, which was in firing position but remained motionless. “...That's not it! They realized that they can use it!”

Small, high-speed flying objects emitting high-energy reactions left the Chimera of Scylla. Missiles were fired toward the accelerating Odette II. Missiles can be guided and self-destruct, so even if they miss their target, there is little worry that they will hit another spacecraft behind of them.

Even the Odette II had predicted that if the pursuing Chimera of Scylla's beam cannon could not be used, she would be targeted with missiles next. Electronic interference is concentrated on the two missiles, which are rapidly approaching at a high acceleration that far exceeds that of sailing spaceships and battleships.

There are a variety of ways missiles can be guided, ranging from those that fly towards a pre-specified target with their eyes closed, those that attack while searching for a target specified by radar, to those that fly without having a set target. Anti-ship missiles mounted on battleships can fly in a variety of patterns after launch, unless the mode is initially locked, and it is even considered possible to recover them if they do not score a hit after the end of the battle.

“Can you even tell the type?”

“They’re a self-guided type that has their own radar.” Lynn read the data on the display. “I don't know the model. The acceleration isn't ridiculous like the latest models in the military, so I think it's okay.”

The Bentenmaru had already changed its course and moved into a firing stance. The Bentenmaru, which was located closer to the Odette II than the Scylla, waited for the missiles, which took a simple straight trajectory, to achieve the shortest distance, and mobilized all of her main guns to intercept them. Anticipating some misalignment, the six beams from the two triplex units were released in a diffused manner, which soon merged into two thick beams and captured the missiles.

The missiles could not withstand even an unfocused direct hit from the cruiser-class beam. The two missiles exploded almost simultaneously, sending a hot ball of light into space.

“Uh-ha!” Hyakume raised his voice at the explosives, which would have easily evaporated a slender sailing spaceship like the Odette II. “Was it an unfettered explosion, or did our beam turn the entire warhead into energy?”

“High-energy waves!” The large explosion, which could even pierce battleship-class armor, caused a terrible noise via electromagnetic waves. Lynn confirmed that the false radar signatures being sent from the Silent Whisper to the Chimera of Scylla were carrying the same noise as the real thing. “Still, it's easy enough that if there's an explosion, it automatically reproduces even the fluctuations in the reactions.”

“Because it's for military use. It's this guy's job to do his job in the middle of the storm, beam cannons and missiles being shot at each other. Oh, second wave attack.”

The Chimera of Scylla fired two more missiles. The missiles left the Scylla with great acceleration, as if they had been deflected, but exploded immediately after launch due to the Bentenmaru's cannon sniping, which had stabilized its attitude with inertial navigation.

A smaller explosion than the previous one illuminates the Chimera of Scylla.

“Good! That's Hikoza's naval gunfire, he’s doing a great job.”

The Chimera of Scylla looks like she’s blinded by the explosion in front of her.

“Okay, now you don't have to worry about the Scylla for a while. The Odette II should run away now.”

The main propulsion engine was probably running at full capacity, but from Hyakume’s point of view, who was used to riding the Bentenmaru, the Odette II's movements are so slow that it is almost frustrating. If they could stop Chimera of Scylla, they should be able to gain some safety distance.

“That doesn’t seem right.” Lynn muttered in the operator's seat.

“What!?”

“When a warhead of that class explodes right in front of you, the light and heat should stay there for a while, but Chimera of Scylla doesn't care, it's on a trajectory that just grazes the explosion.”

Immediately after launch, Scylla’s missile was intercepted by the Bentenmaru’s beam, creating a huge glow in the immediate vicinity of its direction of travel. Although the Chimera of Scylla was under the influence of the explosion that it had created, it took only the minimum possible evasive trajectory and forcibly missed the explosion and resumed its advance. Closing the fully opened antennas on both sides of the ship to minimize the effects of light and heat from the explosion, the ship moved forward with full power acceleration to minimize the contact time.

“Is this the Chimera of Scylla’s maximum acceleration?” Although the data was shaky due to the explosion of the two missiles, Chimera of Scylla's acceleration rate jumped as soon as it closed its antennas.

Coorie graphed the navigational data for the Scylla from its departure to the present. “I thought it focused on maneuverability since it has a smart ship shape, but surprisingly that's not the case.”

“Considering it's new, the acceleration isn't surprising.” Marika also sees the Scylla's data, accelerating past the explosion flames in the blink of an eye. “Is it the same as Barbaroosa, or a little bit lower if it's not as good?”

“That's how heavy it must be.” Hikoza calculated the mass, specific gravity, and average thickness of the outer hull from the data obtained. “The battleship's armor is quite thick, although it doesn't look that way because it hasn't been modified in any way to fatten it up.”

“One more thing, it seems that the antenna cannot be closed or expanded during maximum acceleration.” The Scylla survived the explosion, and the acceleration it displayed for a short period of time had significantly decreased. Large antennas began to be deployed on both sides of the slightly burnt crimson hull. “Well, it would be difficult to perform combat maneuvers with such a large antenna extended, and in normal anti-ship warfare on the frontier, there would be no opportunity to conduct combat maneuvers while using electronic warfare.”

The Bentenmaru is now avoiding enemy fire with combat maneuvers while engaging in electronic warfare against the nine pirate ships, including the Chimera of Scylla. However, electronic warfare is usually carried out in the early stages of a battle, and combat maneuvers, including torpedo bombardment, are carried out in the final stages.

“I see.” Marika sighed when she saw the thickness of the Chimera of Scylla's armor, which Hikoza tentatively estimated. She had not originally thought that the main guns of a cruiser-class ship like the Bentenmaru would be effective against it, but the armor of the Scylla was thicker than that of the Barbaroosa. It would be nearly impossible for the Bentenmaru to sink the Chimera of Scylla in a proper firefight. “Well, I didn't think she was someone I could manage with just the Bentenmaru, but it looks like it will be a tough opponent.”

“Don't forget, Captain Marika.” Coorie unusually called the captain's name. “We don't need to sink the Chimera of Scylla. If we can escape, that's enough.”

“If you look at it that way, she’s not a very fast opponent, so it’s easy to get away from her.” Marika compared the current positions of the Odette II and the Chimera of Scylla. Thanks to the various efforts of the Chimera of Scylla, the gun battle distance has not decreased much. Even so, the Chimera of Scylla is faster than the Odette II, which uses normal propulsion as well as its sails.

After redeploying its antenna, the Chimera of Scylla once again began scanning the entire sky with its powerful radar. A deafening alarm sounded on the bridge of the Bentenmaru.

“Here it comes.” Coorie said as if it were obvious. “This time, they fired a radar shot to check our current position as well as the Odette's. Next time, they will probably come at us and the Odette at the same time!”

“If they know that the Bentenmaru is in charge of intercepting the missiles, even an amature could come up with the idea of quickly destroying us, or, if not, then putting pressure on us and launching missiles at the Odette.” Hikoza explains clearly.

“The Scylla's front main gun is in motion.” Accelerating with its bow pointed toward the leading Odette II, the Chimera of Scylla's two forward-mounted Class 120 triple main gun turrets swiveled toward the Bentenmaru. High-density, high-power radar waves intermittently bombard the Bentenmaru, as if warning of the bombardment.

Marika silently watches the process. Since she knows what she has to do and her objectives are set, it is faster and more reliable to leave the work to the experts.

“Maybe they'll aim at us first and then launch the missiles.” Coorie predicted the Chimera of Scylla’s tactics. “It's okay, I've sent a reaction to the Scylla that will shift our position data, so if we make an evasive maneuver like this, and then the Scylla launches a missile, we'll have three or four chances to intercept it, right?”

The camouflage radar response sent to the Chimera of Scylla, the Scylla's firing prediction based on it, the Bentenmaru's evasive maneuver in response, and the interception pattern if Scylla launches a missile during that time, are all set to all seats on the bridge by Coorie.

“Aye, evasive maneuver understood.” Kane read the trajectory displayed in 3D coordinates and acceleration/deceleration patterns. Although the exact moment at which Scylla would fire a cannon shot at Bentenmaru and a missile at Odette II was only a prediction, the basic trajectory should fall within the variations of the maneuver pattern that Coorie had assembled.

“The main engine still has plenty to spare.” Sandaime usually checks the current status of the propulsion engine. “We're good to go.”

“With this many chances to intercept, we're good.” Hikoza answered. Again, an alarm sounded on the bridge.

“Radar contact from the Scylla.” Coorie said. “Energy signatures are spiking. They're probably going to fire their cannons next.”

“Let's swing it around.”

The Bentenmaru accelerated rapidly to avoid another barrage of high-powered radars. The Bentenmaru accelerated by spouting a large amount of plasma flame, and the Chimera of Scylla fired its front six main, two triples, cannons.

The sharply focused beam attacks the Bentenmaru in a pulse-like manner. In this mode, the firing time is kept short, and the firing timing of the six main guns is staggered so that they fire in rapid succession like machine guns.

The Bentenmaru avoided the Scylla's pulse-like cannon fire by maneuvering with its high-power propulsion engine at full capacity. While continuing to fire on the Bentenmaru, the Chimera of Scylla fired missiles at the accelerating Odette II.

“It’s four this time.” The Scylla's attack is not always accurate due to electronic jamming. Coorie's voice rose as the bridge swung around for evasive maneuvers.

“It's okay. I see them.” Hikoza replied. “At this level, the guys in the turret can handle it on their own without any instructions from me.”

Before the evasive maneuvers began, both the first and second turrets had completed energy charging in preparation for the Scylla's next missile launch. After a brief exchange with the turret command post, the Bentenmaru fired its main battery to intercept the four missiles fired by the Scylla.

While taking evasive maneuvers, the Bentenmaru's main guns fired from the first and second turrets in that order, accurately hitting four missiles. The four missiles were intercepted at the midpoint between the Chimera of Scylla and the Odette II, and four large fireballs exploded into the sky.

The Scylla stops firing at the Bentenmaru without getting a single hit.

“Eight missiles were fired in vain.” Misa, who was watching the battle beside the captain's seat, murmured. “Isn't it about time to think of a different method?”

“Do we concentrate our forces here in front of the Odette II, or do we continue the attack as before, waiting for a chance to fire?” Marika tried to verbalize the future actions that the Chimera of Scylla could take. “If not...”

The Chimera of Scylla continues to use radar not only on the Odette II, but also on the Bentenmaru and the Scholar Route.

“The Scylla's acceleration rate is increasing again.” Coorie announced. “If they keep accelerating, they can catch up with the Odette II, so I wonder if the plan is to forcefully hold her down and engage in hand-to-hand combat, as originally planned.”

“Or, before that, aim for a direct hit from the main gun.”

The closer the distance between the Odette II and the Scylla, the more shooting opportunities will increase. Since there are not countless spaceships in the space leading up to the Scholar Route, so if they get close they will be able to shoot without having to worry about stray bullets. Both the actual spaceships heading for the Scholar route and the phantoms created by the Silent Whisper have their own unique vectors, so any number of shooting positions could be obtained without affecting other ships if calculations were made on the Chimera of Scylla's side. However, the Scylla is taking a straight course to close the distance to the Odette II.

“It's not a course that creates shooting opportunities.” Coorie quickly superimposed the future trajectory of the Chimera of Scylla on the planned trajectory of the Odette II. “This is the course that will catch up with Odette II the fastest. Maybe the calculations were too troublesome. As it is, the difference in speed at closest approach is quite large, so just ramming the boat might break it.”

If the speed difference between the spaceships is large enough, even ramming will have a large destructive force.

“If the inertia control is effective enough at the moment of collision, it will be able to absorb the enemy’s kinetic energy, so I don’t think it will break that easily.”

“In that case, they might not worry about it and forcefully come alongside while snapping the antenna mast.”

In order for the hull of the Chimera of Scylla to come alongside the Odette II, whose masts are spread in three directions in sailing mode with even the solar sails are deployed, the destruction of the masts and yards is unavoidable.

“It's not as if you can't expect to get hit by the smoke screen before you get that close.”

“The smoke screen isn't invincible, either.” Hikoza looks sideways at the projected orbital map of the Odette II and the Chimera of Scylla. “No matter how densely the smoke screen is spread, radar can still penetrate it at close range, and it won't be able to stop the main guns of a battleship-class ship. If you get close enough to the target before they put up a smoke screen, a ship with that much power and that many antennas spread out will probably think it's no big deal to grab a sailboat.”

“Even if they enter the Scholar route, it's not as if it’s being policed by a powerful traffic control fleet like the Imperials.” Marika looked at the established space of the Scholar route, which was still some distance away. “If you fight a fleet battle in the shipping lanes, hitting other ships with stray bullets everywhere, you will be beaten up, but if you are forced to dock in pirate style and engage in hand-to-hand combat inside, you won't cause trouble outside, and if the pirates are doing something suspicious, an upstanding ship will turn a blind eye.”

“The eight pirate ships following us are getting very close.” Coorie told them leisurely.

Marika ran her eyes over the list of eight ship types on the display. There was one old but fast light cruiser and one heavy cruiser, and a supply ship that had apparently been used for military purposes when it was first built, a fast transport, an empty container ship, an observation ship, and a space ship whose original form could not be determined from the Bentenmaru's data bank. There are no small pirate ships such as frigates or escort vessels, as is typical of a frontier region that must operate for long periods of time without ample supplies. As might be expected, there are no ships equipped with class 120 cannons, a large caliber that would be able to shoot with the heavy battleships of the Imperial Fleet, but even so, the attacks so far have confirmed the presence of a class 60 beam cannon, twice as powerful as the Bentenmaru's. “None of the ships are equipped with good electronics, so the Bentenmaru by itself will be fine.”

Marika looked at the Odette II on the display as it continued to accelerate while changing its trajectory minutely to match the current position of the civilian ship ahead. “It would be troublesome if even one ship noticed the original target and went in that direction.” After making several inconvenient future predictions, Marika shook her head. “Besides, if the Scylla is planning on doing lawless things in the shipping lanes, we don’t have the power to stop them at this point.”

The Bentenmaru’s current strategy is merely to buy time to reach the shipping lanes while ensuring the safety of the Odette II. In the current situation where the Chimera of Scylla's speed exceeds the Odette II, the breaking point will eventually come.

“Oh, that’s not good.” Coorie sounded pitiful. “The Scylla has started pinpoint sensing.”

“What is pinpoint sensing?” Marika asked back, hearing the words for the first time. She tries to guess. “Um, do you use the sensor by concentrating on one point?”

“Yes. The Scylla has begun pinpoint active sensing of other civilian vessels flying in the vicinity of the Odette II's future location. It's not only using radar, but also laser and infrared to scan the space ahead.”

The Odette II deployed the next smoke screen. The Scylla did not change course, heading straight into the target.

“That means...” Marika's face changed color. “Regardless of whether it's a decoy created by Silent Whisper or the real thing, they've started checking for spaceships flying past the point where they're likely to be hit by stray bullets!?”

Radar is not the only way a spacecraft can detect other spacecraft while in flight. In addition to optical observation using visible light, it is also effective to emit a weak laser beam that does not affect the target even if it hits the target directly, and to detect thermal reactions by irradiating it with an infrared searchlight.

Spatial scanning using laser scanning is inefficient for wide area searches. Using a high-power infrared searchlight is disadvantageous because it means loudly advertising your location. Therefore, it is not a method normally used in space combat, and the Silent Whisper does not have any equipment that can provide a false response to such detection methods.

“More than half of the spacecraft flying toward the Scholar route right now would be exposed as decoys!”

“If we had had a little more time, we could have placed balloon dummies and decoys to properly respond to such sensing.”

There is a method of placing dummy balloon spacecraft or decoys that respond not only to radar but also to laser and infrared rays in the same way as the real thing. If a balloon emits its own radar waves or lasers, or if a decoy changes its energy response while changing its course, the probe will respond in the same way as the real thing. However, the Silent Whisper and the Bentenmaru, which specialize in electronic warfare, are not equipped to deceive other detection methods and cannot show the enemy the reactions of a non-existent spaceship without such preparations.

The smoke screen, adjusted to a larger explosive power, rapidly expanded the undetectable area of the following Chimera of Scylla while hiding the Odette II in its shadow. The battle situation remains the same as before, with the Odette II using the only effective means of concealment against the approaching Scylla, but it also appears that the Odette II is in a hurry to hide the truth from the Scylla.

“We’ve been found out.” Marika quickly came to a conclusion. Now that the Chimera of Scylla has begun to confirm the trick we have set up, the Scylla will soon begin firing its guns at the Odette II, which is within range. If there are no third-party civilian ships in the line of fire that could be hit by stray bullets, the Scylla would have no reason to hesitate in attacking.

“I thought that if they could escape to the Scholar route, there would be any number of other starships that could be used as shields, so she could make it, but if they were noticed before that, the Scylla would not hesitate to shoot at the Odette II at the next opportunity to fire.” Misa calmly predicts. “It's easier to force docking after killing the opponent's legs. Before that, will they give us another surrender request?”

“I don't think so.” Marika looked at the predicted trajectory of the Chimera of Scylla, which was moving forward almost ignoring the smoke screen that the Odette II had deployed. Coorie has already mapped out several shooting opportunities that the Chimera of Scylla will have. “I think it’s possible that the Odette II will admit defeat and raise the white flag, but I wonder if Mueller Grant will listen to that now after going this far.”

“There's no way Ririka would raise her hands on her own.” Marika nodded at Misa's words.

“The smoke screen will hold out for a while, but after that...”

“It’s okay.” Coorie’s voice sounded particularly leisurely on the bridge. “They’re in time. Pre-jump phenomenon, consistent with the Barbaroosa's pattern.

“They’re late!” Marika exclaimed. “Not just at the last minute, I thought they would not make it!”

“However, the location is perfect.” Coorie pointed to the expected appearance point of the Barbaroosa based on the pre-jump phenomenon observed on the battle display. “Right in front of the Odette II. It was worth it to keep them updated on the latest situation from us and the Silent Whisper.”

“Touchdown.” Nora, the XO on the bridge of the Barbaroosa, announced.

“Touchdown directly on the outskirts of the shipping lane, on the free trade port's outbound route!” Kenjo, in the captain's seat, is looking at the battle status display of the touchdown destination, overlaid with the latest information from the Silent Whisper and the Bentenmaru. “If I made a jump like this in the Empire, how many apology letters would I have to submit and how many supervisory ministries would I be sent to?”

“Our destination is the battlefield.” Nora repeated this advice to Captain Black Bearded once again. “Both the Bentenmaru and the Odette II are fighting against the rebels on their way out of the free trade city of Meiya.”

“The people we're fighting aren't the rebels who came out to Garnet A, but pirates from the frontier who are in the same business as we are.” Kenjo reads the location of enemy and friendly spaceships from the battle display, which has been updated to the latest situation. “In addition, they are commanded by Muller Grant, known as the Crimson Pirate, a leading figure in the pirate guild. We will fire our main gun at the Chimera of Scylla at the same time as the touchdown. Are you ready?”

“Aye Aye, sir.” Responses came back from inside the bridge and from all main turrets that had been told to be ready to fire.

“Position and target checks will be done later, after touchdown. Aim at the current position of the Chimera of Scylla that the Bentenmaru told us about and fire all guns as soon as we return to this world!”

“Emerging.” As soon as Nora announced this, Barbaroosa touched down from hyperspace to normal space. Barbaroosa's huge body appeared in space along with the spatial anomaly that occurs when a massive high-powered ship jumps long distances. Before the ship's radar and sensors could observe the latest situation from the distorted space, Captain Blackbeard raised his voice.

“Fire the main guns!”

The Barbaroosa, which was facing to the side due to its attitude predicted before the jump, is equipped with two quadruple main guns on the top of the bow, one on the bottom, and one on the rear of the ship, for a total of 16 class 90 large-caliber beams. The guns fired tightly focused beams of energy for anti-armor penetration.

Immediately after touchdown, the surrounding space is distorted, compressed, and disturbed by artificially caused spatial anomalies and gravity mutations. Sixteen anti-ship energy beams were emitted from the center of this space, releasing surplus energy and diffusing distortion and density variation, piercing space.

Even if the exact coordinates of the target are entered in advance, if the ship's own coordinates are not determined and adjustments are not made to suit the spatial situation, firing a salvo can only result in a fluke hit. As expected, the 16 beams that were released were supposed to extend in parallel if it were a normal naval gunfire, but they spread out unnaturally and cut through the space far away from the crimson pirate ship.

“Next launch, secure current location.” Following the routine command, Kenjo pressed the talk button on the radio, raising it to maximum output. A voice roars across the battlefield. “This is the Barbaroosa, sorry for the wait. Blackbeard's pirate ship has just arrived.”

Before the greetings from the Bentenmaru and the Silent Whisper, a huge bundle of battle information was sent to them. Nora, in the XO's seat, quickly reads the information and passes on only the most important parts to the captain's seat.

“One battleship and eight medium-sized ships?” Kenjo instantly read the enemy's formation. “They’re taking a lot of time considering they have so much equipment. Besides the Bentenmaru, there's only one slow sailing ship, right?

“There’s one high-performance electronic reconnaissance aircraft.” Nora adds to the strength of her allies.

“I forgot.” Kenjo readily admitted. “Even so, they are much more inept than Garnet A's frontier forces, even though they are deploying such a large number of forces at once. Are pirates on the frontier this low level?”

“*I'd like you to praise our pirates for their skill.*” The response came from Captain Ririka of the Odette II, who was able to get through the unstable spatial situation. “*As you can see, the bright red battleship in front of you is the main enemy. Please deal with it.*”

“Sure, of course I jumped with that intention.” Kenjo ran his eyes over the collected data on the enemy battleship Chimera of Scylla. “Nine class 120 main guns. What's more, it comes with such impressive electronic warfare equipment.”

Kenjo grinned and looked around at the battle display, showing the surrounding situation that was becoming clearer, and the all-sky monitor, displaying the position of ships in the surrounding space. “If we fight each other head-on, no matter how things turn out, we'll suffer more damage, eh?”

The Barbaroosa and the Chimera of Scylla are approximately the same overall length, but the Chimera of Scylla has greater mass, and the Barbaroosa has superior maneuverability due to its superior output. The caliber of the Chimera of Scylla’s main guns ares larger, but whether the Barbaroosa's class 90 main guns will be effective will not be known until it is actually fired. And if the Chimera of Scylla, with its expensive electronic warfare weapons and many pairs of wings that spread wide to take advantage of it, entered a torpedo battle with a battleship class, it would not come out unscathed.

“The main gun has been recharged.” Nora announced in a cool voice. “Second salvo, ready to fire.”

“Wait a minute.” Kenjo saw that the main gun of the Chimera of Scylla was pointed not at the Odette II but at the newly emerged Barbaroosa. “If we got into a fight with a battleship of that class, we wouldn't get off scot-free. Let the other side decide whether they want to fight or not here and now. Put the Barbaroosa between the sailboat and the red one.” Kenjo directed the Barbaroosa's course. “I'll make my intentions clear. Make sure to hit the red one with our radar so we can shoot anytime.”

“Roger... it appears that the Chimera of Scylla's electronic jamming has turned towards us.” Nora seemed to laugh. “Well, as the report said, impressive electronic jamming. With such electronic warfare capabilities in a remote area, they probably wouldn’t have any enemies!”

“It's a shame, we don't spend a lot of money on electronic warfare, but we have a bunch of guys who are used to it.”

Captain Blackbeard grimaced and showed his teeth. Electronic warfare ships are a type of ship that should be operated at a greater distance from the enemy. They are not the type of ship that should appear in front of you and engage in a torpedo battle.

“If we were to engage at this distance, we would surely inflict considerable damage on each other. Electronic warfare equipment is probably a lot more expensive than our armor.” Kenjo looked around the battlefield once again on the battle display. “It doesn’t matter if the red one is pointed at our flank. Keep all main guns pointed at him and get in front of the sailing ship.”

With the ship's side facing the Chimera of Scylla, the projected area against the enemy is maximized. Instead, the Barbaroosa can also aim its rear main guns at her flanks, giving her a total of 16 Class 90 main cannons.

n contrast, the Chimera of Scylla has only six front-facing main guns, two triple-barreled front guns. Moreover, the frontal projected area is not small because of the large electronic warfare antennas deployed on both sides of the ship.

The Odette II, accelerating with her solar sails fully extended, passes the Barbaroosa’s nose as she crosses her supposedly one-way departure trajectory. The Barbaroosa fires her side thrusters while reducing her forward speed, and begins to slide her hull sideways to match the speed of Chimera of Scylla, which is approaching from the side.

“She's not going to shoot at us.”

The Barbaroosa is not performing any serious electronic interference, but the Chimera of Scylla repeatedly hits it with fire control radar that confirms details. Even though it is a short engagement distance for a battleship and firing preparations must have been completed long ago, there is no sign of gunfire starting.

“What about the other eight ships?” While speaking, Kenjo looked down at the battle display.

“They are obviously confused.” Nora was following the movements of the eight pirate ships that the Bentenmaru was handling. “The enemy, seeing that we are a pirate ship of the same class as the Chimera of Scylla and that we are standing right in front of the Scylla, is having a hard time deciding whether to change targets or maintain the status quo.”

“I guess so.” Captain Blackbeard grinned. “We’re holding a class 90 four-barrel. For a lightweight spaceship that depends on speed, even if it grazes you it will take out all your armor.”

Large-caliber ships’ guns, which should be used against heavily armored battleships, are tremendously powerful against smaller ships. Conversely, small-caliber beams are almost powerless against heavily armored battleship-class ships.

“Two ships have left the Bentenmaru's pursuit trajectory.” Nora announced. “You could say they just returned to their normal departure trajectories, but without following the Bentenmaru, they are rapidly gaining distance.”

“It’s good to be able to judge quickly.” Kenjo looked at the communications situation in the surrounding space on the communications monitor. The communication lines with the consort ships were well maintained, and thick data lines were also being maintained with the Silent Whisper and the Bentenmaru. However, the attackers, led by the Chimera of Scylla, must not be able to communicate well with each other due to the Bentenmaru’s and the Odette II's relentless electronic jamming.

Even if the commander is determined and has a clear goal, it is impossible to unify the fleet if there is no radio connection. It would be a different story if the fleet has suffered enough damage to make it impossible to pull out, but a large and unscathed fleet has plenty of time to look around.

Kenjo kept a close eye on the Chimera of Scylla’s data as it approached without changing trajectory.

“The Scylla has stopped accelerating.” Nora announced. “No change in heading. The Scylla is approaching.”

The Barbaroosa, broadside to the Chimera of Scylla, is on a sideways departure trajectory, and the Scylla, which was chasing the Odette II, is on a nearly straight trajectory. The Scylla, which was pursuing her, was faster than the Barbaroosa, which intervened, so the distance between the two ships is shrinking over time.

“Now, how do you think things with that red one will turn out?” Kenjo asked Nora.

“She won't back down.” Nora replied. “The pirate Muller has long been known as a crimson pirate in the frontier. It would be one thing if she was alone, but in this airspace where there are eight other pirates in the same business, there is no way she would back down by herself. It’s probably a scenario where they play chicken with us for a while, and when she gets close enough, she will concentrate her fire on our engines to stop us, and then chase after the Odette II again.”

“But what if we shoot before that?”

“Just as they can't defeat us with a single blow, we can't defeat them instantly. Of course, we would like to avoid a battle where the damage is expected to exceed the break-even point, but in the popular business of piracy, there is more to profit and loss than just battle damage.”

“Well, even if it takes a little bit of time to fight with us, there's no need to worry about a sailing ship without a FTL booster escaping to a place where it can't be reached even if it enters the shipping lane.” Kenjo noticed that two more of the remaining six pirate ships that were chasing the Bentenmaru were gradually pulling away. “And there's a shortage of pursuers.”

Kenjo put his finger on the radio's talk button. “Well then, let me give you a chance.” Kenjo pressed the talk button. The radio transmission at maximum power flowed out of the transmitter, just as it had immediately after touchdown, regardless of whether it was friend or foe, the sender or receiver of the electronic jamming.

“This is the Barbaroosa, pirate ship Barbaroosa of Cetus constellation, Captain Kenjo Kurihara. Pirate Muller of the crimson pirate ship Chimera of Scylla, if you can hear me, please respond.” Although it was intended for communication, Kenjo's communication was transmitted with a violent output similar to that of electronic jamming, and it echoed throughout the entire departure orbit without any encryption. “This is Captain Kenjo of the Barbaroosa. Captain Muller of the Chimera of Scylla, please respond.”

There was no immediate response. Kenjo carefully looked at the navigational data of the Chimera of Scylla. Without acceleration, the Scylla was slowly closing the distance to the Barbaroosa.

Kenjo waited for a response without repeating himself. Yet another pirate ship distanced itself from the Bentenmaru's pursuit.

After nearly a full minute, a near-infinite amount of time on the battlefield, the Barbaroosa's communication antenna picked up a reply.

“*This is the Chimera of Scylla, Captain Muller Grant.*”

A silver-haired Methuselah appeared on the communications monitor with a beautiful voice that sounded like the ringing of a bell. Kenjo raised one hand in a friendly manner to the long-lived Methuselah female pirate, who was adorned with glittering accessories.

“Hello, Captain Muller. This is Kenjo Kurihara from the Barbaroosa, this is our first meeting.” Red eyes, framed by dark eyeliner, stared at Captain Blackbeard. Kenjo gave a slow salute to the silver-haired pirate captain behind the monitor. “It's a great souvenir story to be able to meet the historic pirate Muller face to face!”

“*Let's say hello when there are no conflicts of interest.*” Only Muller's mouth moved as he looked at Kenjo almost blankly. “*What is your business? Isn't it too late to accept surrender?*”

“Hey, it's not a big deal.” Kenjo raised his hand to Muller over the communications monitor. “I thought I'd tell you about my plans for the future. Oh, of course, you have your own agenda, so you're free to ignore it.”

Muller's red eyes widened slightly.

“Don't look into Muller's eyes.” Nora whispered to Kenjo. “If you are charmed by her red eyes, the enemy will be able to read your intentions.”

“Well, it's not a big plan though. After meeting up with three more pirate ships here, we will take the Scholar route back to the Galactic Empire. We have a slow-moving sailing ship with us, so there's no way we'll be able to make a quick trip at our convenience.”

“*You are going to the trouble of telling me your plans?*” Muller on the other side of the communication monitor turned her head slightly. “*What guarantee can you give me for that statement?*”

“What guarantee?” Kenjo exaggeratedly spread his arms. “There are a lot of ships under my command, so you can be sure of that by sending a query. By the way, our fellow pirate ships that should be here soon are the Glamorous Lydis, the Sinbad, and the Karyobinga.”

Kenjo pondered deliberately. “There are other spaceships that are promised, such as the Death Shadow and the Black Pearl, but they are all too loose with time, probably because they are pirates who can't get on a spaceship properly.” Kenjo shook his head. “I wonder how long it will take them to catch up. What do you think, pirates working the frontier are a little more punctual?”

“*The spaceship crews working with the pirate Muller are always on time.*” Muller lifted the corners of her mouth, her fangs shining brightly. Realizing that it was Muller's laugh, Kenjo laughed back.

A black and white image of two people

Description automatically generated

Regardless of Muller's response, Kenjo's transmission is being fired at high power into the combat airspace. Kenjo continued to take an evasive trajectory as he watched the pirate fleet pursue the Bentenmaru, which was supporting the Odette II. As the number of pirates pursuing the Bentenmaru decreases, the electronic attacks from the Bentenmaru become more intense, and the pirate fleet pursuing the Bentenmaru appears to be gradually losing their will to fight.

“They are bastards with many other flaws, but they can boast of their fighting ability. Unfortunately, the Death Shadow is the only one who can fight head-on with a heavy battleship as big as the Chimera of Scylla, but there are other guys with various special skills, so I'm sure you'll enjoy it.”

“*Oh dear!*” Muller smiled as if a flower had blossomed. “*You’re doing all this for me.*”

“Yes, it’s a great service.” Kenjo chimed in, feeling a shiver run down his spine at Muller's smile. “But, we can’t just go wild with each other here, right?” Kenjo stepped back slightly from the monitor and pointed to the area with his raised palm. “We're right next to a free trade port and a shipping lane, so no matter what kind of cannons we use or how careful we are, we don't know where or how a stray bullet will fly. As a pirate of love and justice who values duty and humanity, I truly want to not cause trouble to the public and avoid being seen if possible.”

“*But it's not you who are bothered by the lack of publicity, is it?*” Muller's red eyes narrowed. “*I'm not going to take it easy on you, okay?*”

“That's all I have to say.” Kenjo raised his palms to show Muller that he had nothing to hide. “Of course, I have no intention of returning from here to the Galactic Empire via only the Scholar route. Just before the boarder, I will turn onto the route to Cetus constellation. After all, if I carelessly chose the shortest route, I unknowingly would have gone through several territories of the Frontier Allied Forces that cooperated with the invasion of Garnet A.”

Kenjo looked down at the battle display. “Would you like to accompany me? I'd feel a lot safer with the pirate Muller with us.”

“*Oh, my.*” Muller tilted her head slightly, shaking her accessories. “*What could possibly be so reassuring about having an enemy for an ally without any safety precautions?*”

“Think about it. If a privateer with a privateer's license and a pirate with a bounty on their head are together, no one would think of messing with them unless they are a very crazy person. In other words, you can be sure that your safety on the journey will be guaranteed.”

“*I hope all the bastards on the frontier think that way.*”

Kenjo looked back into the silver-haired pirate's red eyes. “Do those bastards include military personnel?”

Muller seemed to be sending some kind of signal outside the communication monitor.

“It's working!” Nora shouted quietly. “The Chimera of Scylla's electronic interference has stopped!”

“*So, I hope everyone thinks that way.*” Muller repeated the same line with a smile on her lips. The Chimera of Scylla's antennas, which had been open in a battle-ready manner, began to retract on either side of her hull.

“Pre-jump phenomenon detected on the Scholar route side.” Chiaki reported. “It matches the pattern of the Glamorous Lydis.”

“*I wonder if your friends are starting to gather together.*” Muller, in the communications monitor, casts a glance into the distance. The Odette II, distancing herself on the other side of the Barbaroosa, deployed a smoke screen as if to insist that she was still ready for battle. Muller turned her eyes back to Kenjo. “*I like a disciplined, motivated opponent. It makes my job easier.*” Muller raised her hand, adorned with rings and bracelets, and gave Kenjo a relaxed salute with her index finger. “*Next time I'll attack you without warning. Later.*”

Folding up its antennae, which were spread out like pairs of wings, the Chimera of Scylla slowly moved its course away from the Barbaroosa.

“Oh, I'll be waiting for you with plenty of hospitality.” Kenjo returned the salute, which was much more reasonable than Muller's, and cut the communication. He turned away from the blacked-out communications monitor and rested his weight on the backrest of the captain's seat.

“The Chimera of Scylla is changing orbit.” Nora announced. “It’s no longer on a collision course with us.”

“Contact the Bentenmaru, the Odette II, and the Silent Whisper to loosen their electronic jamming.” Kenjo ordered. “They can't contact each other in the current space conditions.”

“Roger.” The communications operator sends instructions from Barbaroosa to their colleague ships.

“Well, don't let your guard down.” Kenjo called out to the bridge. “Even though the Glamorous Lydis has arrived and our forces are increasing, there's no guarantee that they won't try to take a shot at us at the last minute.”

“Radar was concentrated on the Odette II until the last minute.” Nora was playing the Chimera of Scylla's radar pattern on the observer seat display. “Until the end, she may have intended to stop the Odette II if she had the chance.”

“Their goal is the monomolecular crystal mast at the tip of the sailing ship.” Kenjo looked at the current location of the Odette II, which had not come out of the diffused smoke screen. “The balance of forces has changed somewhat thanks to the appearance of the Barbaroosa, but the tactical objectives have not changed. Even if we call for a cease-fire, until the other side agrees to it, we are still in a state of war.”

The Glamorous Lydis, which has just touched down, receives battle information from the Bentenmaru and the Silent Whisper before greeting them. Kenjo sees the crimson pirate ship moving away from the Barbaroosa.

“Captain Ririka must have known this as well, so she didn't let her guard down and set off a smoke screen. Judging that she could not take advantage of the enemy's carelessness after receiving reinforcements and that she could not recover, the pirate Muller withdrew. Both enemies and allies are full of unmovable female pirates, that's for sure.”

A black rectangular object with white border

Description automatically generated

The Glamorous Lydis was not the only one to touch down on the departure trajectory from Meiya to the Scholar route. The Karyobinga is an old experimental battleship that is used as a pirate ship, the Sinbad, which is a multi-purpose work ship modified to such an extent that the original model has disappeared, and the Death Shadow, which operates the largest battleship among the licensed pirates, arrived with only a slight delay.

The Chimera of Scylla had previously left Meiya for the Scholar route. The eight pirate vessels that had been participating in the pursuit after leaving Meiya disappeared at the same time. However, there are still a number of spaceships on the departure trajectory from Meiya to the Scholar route, and it is not known which of them are pursuit vessels under the control of pirates or surveillance vessels of frontier states or communities.

The last large battleship, the Death Shadow, arrived with the part that the Odette II needed most, a FTL booster for the Odette II, transferred from the Bentenmaru at Garnet A. The Odette II, built as a solar sailing ship, exhibits its highest flight efficiency near a star, and cannot exceed the speed of light without adding a FTL booster.

Before entering the Scholar route, the Odette II was in the process of connecting the FTL booster. In addition to the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa, which had joined the pirate ship, the newly joined pirate ships, Glamorous Lydis, Karyobinga, Sinbad, and Death Shadow, formed a tight formation to protect the Odette II during the connection work, and exchanged information by wired connection to avoid being intercepted.

At the same time, the ground forces aboard the Odette II withdraw to their original ships, the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru. The Silent Whisper, which had been deployed from Scholar Route, also joined the ship and was stowed board the Odette II, where the work to connect the FTL booster continues.

“Welcome back.” Marika, sitting in the captain's seat, called out to Hyakume, who had returned via the Barbaroosa with the battle data on the frontier pirates collected from the Silent Whisper, which had returned to the Odette II.

“Hey, I'm finally back.” Although he had already greeted the captain when boarding the Bentenmaru, Hyakume entered the bridge in the light work uniform he had been using as a flight suit for the Silent Whisper, raised his hand to the entire combat crew. “This is the result of the work I did earlier.”

Showing off the small data card held between his fingertips, Hyakume headed straight for Coorie’s electronic warfare seat. He held out one hand and handed the data card to the waiting Coorie. “Not only does it contain data on the crimson pirate ship, but also on the eight other ships.”

“Thank you.” Coorie tossed the card she received straight into the slot. “From your point of view, what do you think about the red one?”

“They’re a troublesome opponent.” Hyakume turned to Marika in the captain's seat. “To begin with, the methods of electronic warfare inside and outside the Empire are quite different. Combat equipment changes with time, place, and fashion, but even within the same galaxy, the performance and level required are vastly different between imperial territory and the frontier.”

“I'm beginning to understand that.” Marika nodded unsurely at Hyakume's explanation. “If electronic warfare is not as important in the frontier as it is in the empire, then I was hoping that the other side would be less concerned with countermeasures against electronic warfare, making my job easier, but I don't feel like that matches up.”

“If a radar is being emitted, you don't want to be detected, so you send out jamming waves. If you don't want to be jammed, you send out radio waves to cancel it. You intercept the enemy's communications. If you don't want to be intercepted, you encrypt them. The basics should be no different on the frontier than they are in the empire.” Coorie reads the vast amount of battle data recorded on the card into the Bentenmaru's system. “Even if the basics are the same, the systems and standards used are slightly different, and the parts and specifications are not even remotely similar. If we are serious about electronic warfare, I think we need to have a meeting and unify the standards before that.”

“Did you know?” Hyakume returned to his radar/sensor seat, which had remained empty. “The Empire and the frontier are part of the same galaxy, but the laws of physics and constants that apply to them are not exactly the same.”

“You must be kidding.” Marika shrugged her shoulders at the joke, which sounded like something she'd heard on public television or in a social education documentary. “If that's true, intelligent life forms should gather in places where space travel is easier.”

“That's why we all live in a galaxy full of stars. In intergalactic space, where it is difficult to find even a single hydrogen molecule, the laws of physics are even stricter, and it is very difficult just to survive.”

While joking, Hyakume began to wake up the electronic equipment that was idling at his seat, which was only displaying common information in the absence of its master. One after another, they were updated with the latest information.

“All joking aside, both the Silent Whisper and the Odette II are Imperial spaceships. Well, the Silent Whisper is a machine that was intended to be sold to the imperial fleets that are engaged in battles against the frontier so it has all the usual frontier formats in its catalog, but it doesn't copy the electronic warfare style of the pirates who are working on the front lines. Just as their electronic jamming is not very effective against us, our electronic warfare equipment must be adjusted to suit the location and the opponent, or it will not be as effective as in the catalog.”

“I understand that, but…” Marika stammered. “When we fought against the Allied Frontier Forces at Garnet A, we were able to fight well without having to worry about that. Even on the frontier, if it's not pirates but an independent star system's military, do they have electronic warfare equipment like those in the Empire?”

“This is just a guess based on circumstantial evidence.” Hyakume said, choosing his words carefully. “Although it may have been a matter of adjusting the number of members to maintain their influence, I think it was very important for the frontier star districts to have such a large force deployed in the Empire's territory. Although military spaceships can only be used for combat, they are extremely expensive, and it is even more difficult to maintain a uniformly skilled crew.”

“I've heard that, too.” Marika agreed in a small voice. There is a huge difference in degree from a poor independent star system to a wealthy imperial fleet, but it is generally said that the price per unit mass of a military spaceship is roughly ten times that of a civilian spaceship. If there were a battleship and a passenger ship with similar equipment, the price of the battleship would be about 10 times that of the passenger ship.

“There is no way that a frontier area that is struggling just to maintain such expensive military spaceships on its own would readily provide them just because they can expect huge returns or because they are backed by pirates. I suspect that guidance and instruction has been provided to enable a significant level of electronic warfare within the empire.”

“Who?” Marika thought for a moment. The answer came quickly. “Muller the pirate, or else Jackie?”

“I don't know if the red-headed con artist's main focus is on the empire or the frontier, but he would have had plenty of time and ability to teach the frontier side how to fight electronic warfare.”

“The Scylla's electronic warfare capabilities are also quite impressive.” Coorie displayed a list of the enemy forces they had just faced. “Electronic warfare methods in the empire are no secret, so if you're reasonably diligent, it's not too difficult to gather the latest information and update your equipment and patterns accordingly. The crimson pirate ship Chimera of Scylla is so well equipped for electronic warfare that it makes you wonder what kind of hypothetical enemy they have in mind, and it looks like they know how we do things on this side.”

“Fortunately, the pirate ships under their command are not as keen on electronic warfare equipment as they are on frontal equipment and armor, and they don't seem to be equipped with enough equipment to take advantage of the latest knowledge. It is possible that they are just gathering what they have on hand, but I doubt that there are many situations where electronic warfare equipment like the Chimera of Scylla’s is needed if you are a regular pirate on the frontier.”

“When the need arises, you can just run away.”

“Thanks to that, the Bentenmaru was able to take on eight ships at once.” Marika looked at the battle display while thinking about the reports from Coorie and Hyakume. “But next time, that probably won’t happen.”

“With this encounter, I'm sure they are aware of the frontal strength of the Bentenmaru and the Barbaroosa.” Coorie displayed a list of allied forces. “The rest of the pirate ships are not flying with their transponders turned off or ship names disguised, so it should be easy to find out what they are capable of and what they are good at by examining them. And this time, the Chimera of Scylla will have time to slowly put together a force and organize.”

“So, this is a remote area, and it's still a long way from the Cetus constellation.” It goes without saying that Marika spoke out about the current situation. “If that redhead was the one who taught the frontiers how to use electronic warfare, then Jackie, the teacher, is not here now. If the Scylla led the way, that means it's going to be a much different battle this time around.” Marika looked down at the console in the captain's seat. “It’s okay. With this many pirate ships on our side, I feel much safer than we did when we went to Garnet A.”

On the live view monitor, Marika saw the images of other pirate ships in close formation with the Bentenmaru: the Glamorous Lydis, the Sinbad, the Karyobinga, the Death Shadow, and the Barbaroosa. Although she has heard their names many times, this is the first time she has seen the Karyobinga and the Death Shadow in real life.

“Even in electronic warfare, Muller the pirate didn't show us all of her tricks, and neither Hyakume nor Coorie exposed all of our cards, did they?”

“Well, that's true.”

“That’s no surprise.”

“And if the Odette II has a FTL booster, it should make our movement much easier.” Marika checked the progress of work on the Odette II, which was adding a thick and short FTL booster to the back of its slender hull. “Besides, with the newly arrived pirate ships and their onboard aircraft, our capabilities have increased dramatically, too.”

“Well, they're all fogies just like us.” Official pirates with privateering licenses are made up of old ships due to their origins. Grinning, Hyakume pulled the radar/sensor seat closer to the console. “Probably the oldest pirate fleet in the galaxy in terms of average age. Let's take it easy on them and head for port.”

The speed of a fleet is determined by the slowest ship. Therefore, it is efficient to form a fleet with ships of the same type that have the same performance if possible.

When it comes to long-distance journeys, including FTL jumps, in a fleet, the situation is a little different. In this case, the speed of the fleet would be determined by accuracy, not jump performance.

The distance a spacecraft can fly in one jump varies depending on the spacecraft. Generally speaking, the more powerful a spacecraft is, the longer it can jump at once, but as the distance it jumps increases, its accuracy decreases.

Although there are exceptions, as far as FTL engines are concerned, civilian ships and military spacecraft generally do not have the same power difference as main propulsion engines. Although some civilian ships and military spacecraft are equipped with high-power FTL engines that enable them to jump extremely long distances, they are not mainstream. This is because the error in FTL jumps increases as the distance increases.

Whether it's a military ship or a civilian ship, the job of a spacecraft is to arrive at its destination on time. The situation is not much different for civilian ships, where time is directly reflected in costs, and for warships, where arrival to the battlefield requires precision down to the second.

However, even a fleet that was so close together at the time of departure that it could be seen by the naked eye and without time lag in normal communications can easily be broken up by a single jump. If it is a fleet that does not need to reassemble, each member will jump while correcting errors leading to the destination. It doesn't matter as long as the number of ships in the fleet is the same at the time they arrive at their destination, and even if the spaceships belonging to the fleet arrive at the same time, there aren't many ports large enough where they can unload and load cargo all together.

Route zones also have the role of keeping spacecraft, which must make continuous superluminal jumps that are always subject to errors, on a guideline route. The only way to keep the jump error within acceptable limits is to shorten the jump distance.

The accuracy of a FTL spacecraft's jump depends on how accurate its observation facilities are and how precisely it can control its FTL engines. This is because jumping requires accurate data including the current location, one's own mass and speed, and control to precisely aim at the destination.

In this regard, the performance of pirate fleets made up of old ships is surprisingly poor.

For civilian vessels, an error of up to half a day at the touchdown point at normal sailing speed is acceptable. However, some pirate ships, whose main engines have long since become obsolete by today's standards, have a policy that it is better to be able to jump as far as possible and that jumping accuracy is not a problem as long as the direction of the jump is correct.

For military spacecraft, jump accuracy is an important part of battle capability that is directly related to the speed at which the ship can rush to its destination. If a ship’s touchdown point, like a civilian ship, is half a day of normal navigation from its target, it would not be surprising if the battle itself is over by the time it arrives at the battlefield, where the battle situation changes at faster-than-light speed. When forming a fleet for battle, it is desirable to maintain a distance between them so that they can participate without any time lag when the battle begins.

And pirates do not usually act collectively in fleets. If two such pirate ships were to cooperate with each other's FTL jump capabilities, which they would prefer not to show if possible, would cause an uproar.

If it is just a matter of jumping, any pirate ship can jump a considerable distance at once. However, when the flight plan was simulated based on the assumption of traveling in a fleet with jumping accuracy as an issue, surprisingly, the least accurate starship was not the Odette II equipped with FTL boosters.

“It can't be helped, we're operating a damn heavy heavy battleship pretending to be able to do our job.” Marquis Krupp, the captain of the Death Shadow, the heaviest ship in the pirate fleet, babbled with his trademark pipe in one hand. “This is enough for normal work. I don't want to cause trouble to everyone because of the slowness of my ship, so I don't mind if you go first.”

“That's not going to happen.” Captain Kenjo of the Barbaroosa, who had joined the job earlier and, in his capacity as the direct point of contact for the other pirates, offered his luxury guest room as a conference room for the pre-departure meeting, rested his elbows on the round table as if disgusted. “Without the Death Shadow's class 110 main gun, we would not be able to repel the crimson pirate ship when it attacks. And only the Marquis' Death Shadow can serve as a shield against the Chimera of Scylla, which is equipped with a class 120 main gun.”

No one knows whether Marquis Krupp's title is real or not.

“We even dragged our battleships, the Barbaroosa and the Death Shadow, all the way to the frontier. Pirate Muller had only her own red battleship and a mishmash of eight other vessels at Meiya, but it remains to be seen how many more ships the guild would send out, or whether they would even request a regular fleet from the Frontier Alliance, which was to become their client. But if we were to disperse the fleet they have assembled, it would be a good example of how to destroy them individually, taught in the basics of tactics.”

However, licensed pirate ships do not have many opportunities to travel long distances in a fleet, let alone gathering together on the battlefield for cooperative operations. Following lectures and discussions from captains and XOs with experience working in a fleet, a formation was established around the Death Shadow and the Odette II, which was most likely to be targeted, and a scout ship was sent ahead before each jump to confirm the safety of the jump destination.

With the help of free mechanics from other pirate ships, the FTL booster was installed on the Odette II in a rush project. The installation and readjustment of the FTL booster, which was so large that a dedicated transport ship could not be arranged for it and which had to jump on its own, went more smoothly than the first time.

However, even though the booster installation on the Odette II was completed and it was decided that the test run would take place on the first jump after entering the Scholar route, the pirate fleet's consultation had not yet been finished. Captain Ririka, who had been in command of the Odette II and had left the preparation of navigation procedures to the ship's captains, impatiently went to the Barbaroosa's captains' meeting to blackmail the captains and easily drew up a flight plan with the help of her devilish air traffic control skills.

The pirate fleet entered the Scholar route much later than originally planned and began its journey to the Galactic Empire.

“I'm tired…” After completing the first jump on the Scholar route and preparing to cool down and recharge in normal space, Marika flopped down on the console of the captain's seat on the Bentenmaru's bridge. “Fleet operations are tough, aren't they?”

“Well, it's your first time.” As per the meeting, Kane kept the Bentenmaru at a fixed position in the fleet formation. “Pirates may share the responsibility at destination, but there are not many opportunities to make multiple jumps with a fleet of vessels. If it were a convoy or a regular fleet, there would be fewer opportunities for solo jumps.”

“I thought working in a fleet, where you only had to do what you were told without thinking for yourself, would be much easier than being a pirate, where you had to do everything yourself.” Marika slowly raised her upper body from the console. “I’ll never say that again. I never thought that jumping and moving in formation would be such a difficult task.”

If the Odette II is carefully position in the center of the fleet and maintains a fixed position during normal navigation, Marika's role is not so heavy. All she has to do is search for enemies in the assigned direction, pay attention to the movements of other spaceships sailing around the route, and conduct normal navigation while analyzing data provided by her consort ships.

The problem is the time it takes to get into that normal operating mode.

The operation of the fleet, which continues to make FTL jumps, was decided based on the jumping performance of the Death Shadow, which has the least flexibility in jumping. The Death Shadow's jumping accuracy was such that other ships would be able to perform FTL jumps with safe, reliable, and reasonable accuracy.

However, a schedule constructed based solely on theoretical logic differs from reality, even if it is supposed to be reliable based on past results.

The Glamorous Lydis, the first to jump as planned, transmitted data on its destination via FTL transmission. After final confirmation of the flight plan based on the data from the picket ship, the six ships in the fleet made simultaneous jumps.

Some confusion was to be expected. In order to avoid collisions at the jump destination, the touchdown point is set in advance with sufficient safety distance in mind. However, among the pirate ships that actually jumped, the Barbaroosa was the only one that was able to see the Glamorous Lydis, which served as a guide for the touchdown point, within its optical observation range. Although the Bentenmaru eventually touched down in a position where it could see the Odette II within its optical observation range, its coordinates were far off from the numbers indicated by the Glamorous Lydis. The Sinbad touched down in a position that was within the shipping lane but would take several minutes for normal communications, while the Death Shadow and the Karyobinga apparently landed in interstellar space outside of the wide shipping lane.

Once the touchdown point had shifted significantly, the question of which spacecraft to set the rendezvous point for became a bit of a problem. The Glamorous Lydis, which was initially thought to be the rendezvous target, turned out to have a subtle observation error in the coordinate data sent to the other pirate ships. As a result of the discussion, it was decided that the seven spaceships would rejoin and enter a formation in the shortest possible time, so the fleet regrouped with theOdette II and the Bentenmaru near the center of the scattered touchdown points as the standard.

“If I were the pirate Muller, I would attack right after the next jump touchdown.” As the fleet finally regrouped through somewhat acrimonious communications and started proceeding along the Scholar route in formation, Marika checked the surrounding situation with a frown on her face. “The fleet is falling apart and there is no leadership. We don't know when we will regroup, and we're at a point where we might end up fighting and parting ways.”

“Well, that’s the way it is with pirates.” Hyakume, who is in charge of communications with other pirate ships, excuses himself. “After all, isn't it just because we were lucky that the pirate Muller didn't attack us this time?”

“Aside from us who went to Garnet A, the other pirate ships may not have all the data yet, or they may be waiting to see how things go, or they may not have decided on a course of action yet. Well, I agree with the opinion that we were just lucky that the enemy did not attack us this time.” Hyakume said it as if it were someone else's problem. “If we were to be attacked by mistake in such a situation, our fellow pirates would quickly shoot them full of holes.”

“Will it work out that conveniently?” Marika displayed a list of various spacecraft, large and small, sailing near the fleet on her display. “I don't know which ones are the enemy's spaceships, but the whole situation is definitely pointing to the pirate Muller.”

“Well, I guess that's the basic idea here.” Hyakume nodded with a knowing look on his face. “This is enemy territory, a battlefield where you never know when you'll be ambushed. Everyone goes into battle with the intention of winning, so gathering information to win is probably the most basic thing.”

“Then why not take it a little more seriously?”

“I guess something like this is fine for now. Don't you think they’ll be relieved to see our pirates in such a mess?”

Marika glared at Hyakume. “Is it okay to reassure the enemy!? Aren't we in a battle right now!?”

“That's not a bad way to conceal military strength.” Hyakume turned to the console and checked the status of each ship in the fleet, as well as the current position and direction of travel of the spaceships sailing in the surrounding space. He couldn't find any spaceships that were fervently beaming their radar toward our fleet, nor were there any spaceships that were approaching while increasing their energy response. “It takes a lot of time for us to sail as a fleet, and communication is not smooth. If you make the enemy think that way, you can make them let down their guard, and you might be able to create an opening.”

“I didn't think that far ahead!”

“The captain may not be thinking that far ahead, but the crew is.” Coorie, in the electronic warfare seat, interjected. “We are building a robust network so that it will not easily be disrupted by a slight interference. There are still a few problems left here and there, but if we can stress test it properly and make sure it doesn't falter, we should be able to create a network that won't have any problems even if electronic battleships like the Chimera of Scylla try to interfere.” Coorie tapped the control panel. “I’m still having trouble with the mode where it looks like communications are disrupted by the enemy in a real battle.”

“I thought traffic was skyrocketing, so that's what happened.” Marika saw Coorie’s back at work with in the electronic warfare seat, with the display, console, and all the panels fully loaded. “So data for airspace that we are not in charge of is displayed without any problems.” After being told this, Marika reviewed the route data displayed in the captain's seat.

The pirate fleet, which includes the Bentenmaru, the Odette II, the Glamorous Lydis, the Sinbad, the Karyobinga, and the Death Shadow, who rushed in as reinforcements for the Barbaroosa, has a total of seven ships arranged in an egg-shaped formation. Centered on the Odette II, the Barbaroosa was in the front, the Death Shadow in the rear, and the Bentenmaru, the Glamorous Lydis, the Sinbad, and the Karyobinga at 90-degree intervals perpendicular to the Odette II, making a relatively simple double pyramid formation.

A single spacecraft navigating alone monitors space in all directions. When navigating in a fleet, the presence of spacecraft navigating in close proximity creates blind spots and often results in inaccurate data due to radar and sensor interference. For this reason, each spacecraft will set up an overlapping exploration airspace and will focus on monitoring the airspace it is responsible for.

Since each ship is responsible for less than half of the airspace, monitoring density will be higher than if a single ship were responsible for the entire sky, and the reliability of the data would be ensured by conducting multiple surveys. However, in order to share observed data, a thick and fast line that each ship can access safely and reliably is required.

While the FTL boosters were installed on the Odette II and the procedures for the fleet jump were being discussed with the Barbaroosa, communications personnel and operators from each ship worked together to create a powerful interconnected network. Since you never know when an enemy attack will occur, the network built between each ship needs to be strong and reliable enough to withstand electronic warfare.

Using the initial jump and subsequent regrouping as a testing opportunity, the ship's communicators established a network that was sufficient for immediate use.

“That's right.”

To the untrained eye, there appears to be no gap in the communication system that shares observation data of the surrounding airspace.

No matter how many people you collect, they will be useless in a crisis unless they can see and hear what each other sees and hears, and hear what each other is saying.

“Thanks to that, we managed to regroup and form a fleet.”

Marika looked at the other spacecraft on the display, which were proceeding in a neat formation through the shipping lanes. From the outside, the fleet was proceeding without incident, but over the communication lines, the navigators and engineers on each ship were engaged in heated discussion and verification of how smoothly and reliably they could make the next leap and correct any errors.

“If that's the case, since we weren’t targeted this time, the real danger will be right after the next jump.” Marika murmured to no one in particular. “The more prepared we are, the less room they have to take advantage of us.”

“I think the other side is still desperately trying to get their numbers together and make preparations.” Kane, in the helmsman's seat, lets the autopilot maintain a fixed formation position. “Even though each ship’s coordination and jumping ability is a mess, and the size of this ship is a little short of a battleship, if we include the Karyobinga, there are three battleships and a total of seven cruisers and other ships. No matter how powerful the Crimson Pirate Ship is, if you want to win against your competition, you'll want to have double the strength, or triple the number if you want to be extravagant.”

Marika looked uncomfortable. “Are there that many guild pirates?”

“There's a lot of them.” Kane replied. “However, it is unclear how many of the pirates who are members of the Pirate Guild are still alive and active. After all, it's a guild that you can join even if you don't have a spaceship, and there's no obligation to pay membership fees or attend regular general meetings. Even if someone suddenly disappears, I don't know if there is a way to confirm whether they are simply missing or have moved on, and even if there is, I'm not sure if it is recorded properly.”

“Are there that many pirates that are likely to be mobilized here?” Marika changed the direction of her question. “Just because the Imperial fleet isn't patrolling around the clock doesn't mean the frontier is full of pirates. Or is this area really easy for pirates to live in?”

There was no answer. Hyakume and Kane looked at each other as if expecting each other to answer.

“I honestly don't know how many of them are pirates who are members of the pirates' guild, or whether they are just registered with the guild and have a separate main job. In addition, I don’t know how many are part-time mercenaries or smugglers in addition to being pirates.” Kane, in the helmsman's seat, shook his head and crossed his arms. “I think that a spaceship that calls itself a pirate and only has a small caliber gun for self-defense mounted on a transport ship would only be useful for increasing the number of targets if used against us. However, I don't know if they would call out to those guys to increase their numbers and gather their forces, or if they would at least limit themselves to spaceships with military class weapons.”

“You don't understand.”

After hearing the conclusion, Marika nodded. “I think it would be better to look for a list of pirate ships in the frontier and pick them up in order of strength.”

“Have you decided who will be in charge of combat?” Coorie asked while she was working. “I told you to let me know when it's decided.”

When it comes to combat, a commander is needed. With seven spaceships working in a fleet for the same purpose, a combat commander is indispensable.

“It looks like there's some kind of dispute.” Among the captains of the seven spaceships currently here, Marika is the youngest. Of course, her career as a captain is also very short. Since she has little experience in commanding anti-ship combat as a captain, there is no way she can command a fleet battle where she has to command a large number of allies against a large number of enemies, so Marika had quickly declined candidacy for fleet commander.

In order to fight against a hypothetical enemy that may include pirates and frontier allied forces, you will need not only fleet battle skills, but also knowledge about the pirate ships currently participating in the fleet. Licensed pirates generally sail alone, and there are few opportunities to form a group to work together.

Captain Kenjo of the Barbaroosa, who has a lot of experience working with other ships, and Marquis Krupp of the Death Shadow, who operates a large ship with a large number of onboard aircraft, were seen as the most likely candidates for fleet command.

However, the person who was appointed as the commander was a captain that even she had not expected.

“You want me to be the fleet commander!?” Captain Ririka, who should have also turned down the nomination for fleet commander early and left the command selection to long career captains who should have been familiar with actual battles, was shouting loudly on the bridge of the Odette II. “Wait a minute, what on earth are you thinking? You couldn't reach a conclusion through discussion, so you rolled the dice and spun the roulette wheel!?”

“*I did come up with the idea that no matter who does it, it’s all the same, so we decided that way.*” Kenjo nodded with a conspiratorial look on his face as he conveyed the news of the command decision in a communication directly from the Barbaroosa to Ririka. “*There are many more reasons for this. Do you want to hear them?*”

“I'd love to hear them.”

“*For one thing, the captains agreed that they could trust the command of Kato Ririka, who is famous as the demon controller of the Sea of the Morningstar.*”

“Wait a moment!” Despite the fact that there were several members of the yacht club on duty on the bridge, Ririka was shouting loudly without hesitation. “There's no way a ground-based orbital controller is that famous, right? Who's talking about this?”

“*You’re the only one who doesn't know.*” Captain Blackbeard laughed happily, his teeth shining brightly. “*The previous Captain of the Bentenmaru, Gonzaemon, secretly circulated a letter about Captain Ririka that said to keep it from her, so she probably doesn't know this, but she is famous in the Cetus constellation as a demon of a controller who puts efficiency first, whether it's a star system army, a luxury liner, or scoundrel of a company and settles any kind of situation without incident.*“

“Nooooo…..” Ririka, in the captain's seat, dropped her shoulders in disappointment. “I thought I might be doing something that would attract attention from time to time, but I didn't realize that even the pirates knew about it.”

“*I don't know if it's because you're an air traffic controller or because you're a diligent student, but you're different from other pirate captains in that you give instructions that are appropriate to the performance and circumstances of the ship you control. You have earned an incomparable level of trust. The other thing is Captain Ririka's lack of mercy during her active days.*”

“When I was active...” Ririka let out a heavy sigh as she imagined what kind of topics were being discussed among the captains. “That was so long ago.”

”*Besides, the reason we have gathered is to safely return the Odette II, the former White Swan, to the Cetus constellation. There was no way we could send a sailing ship without proper armament, with only electronic warfare capabilities, and whose crew was made up of yacht club members from a girls' school to the front lines. Being at the top of the chain of command means that your job isn’t done unless everyone is safe until the very end, so having a sailing ship as your flagship is surprisingly appropriate.*”

“I see.” Ririka sniffed dismissively. “Even though each jump is so stressful, you're surprisingly able to make thoughtful decisions.”

“*After all, we all value our lives and ships. If you want to get pirates to think seriously, profit and loss is the best way.*” Kenjo on the communication monitor theatrically bowed with his fist on his chest. “*I'm flattered by the compliment. I'm sure the captains who are listening to this transmission will be pleased.*”

“I salute these glorious pirate captains for their wise decision.” With a sardonic smile, Ririka saluted the captains who were supposed to be monitoring the situation.

“*Of course, once the battle begins, I'm sure suggestions and proposals will come in from all the ships. I'll leave the choice to you, so do what you like.*”

“It's easier to leave it to me, isn't it?” Ririka shook her head in disgust. “So, the only authority I have is combat command? Or should I help you with fleet operations as well?”

“*I knew you would come to that. We all agreed that if it's the Cetus constellation's demon controller's command, we have to follow it. Feel free to direct the fleet as needed.*”

“Okay.” Ririka glared at Captain Blackbeard on the other side of the monitor.

“*I'll tell you something else. There was one other strong candidate for command, do you know who it was?*”

After a moment's thought, Ririka quickly answered. “It's your Nora, isn't it? The only Methuselah over here who has turned the pirate Muller against us.”

Kenjo chuckled and shook his head. “*Your girl, princess Gruier.*” Kenjo burst out laughing. “*After all, if the commander is a member of the royal family, she can get away with a lot of nonsense. Well then, please take good care of the fleet command.*”

“Roger.” Returning the salute once more, Ririka looked around the bridge, where only a few yacht club members were on duty. “You heard. This ship is now the flagship of the pirate fleet. We need to show them that we are good and motivate the pirates.”

Perhaps it was because the fleet's operation changed from a council system to the chain of command under the Odette II, or maybe it was because they had gotten used to it, but the second jump was completed without as much confusion as the first. The procedure of following the guidance of Glamorous Lydis, which led as a scout ship, remains the same, but thanks to the readjustment, the transmitted coordinates do not include any errors that would cause problems, and there are no spatial anomalies that could affect the jump were observed.

The following six ships also jumped, but the touchdown points were not as scattered as last time. Seeing that the fleet had touched down to the point where they could regroup in cruising formation after a few minutes of normal sailing, Ririka ordered all ships to recheck their jumping accuracy.

“If the enemy decides to take advantage of a broken fleet, we're not going to take a chance and put a ribbon on it and present it to them. If the enemy reads our jump pattern and ambushes us, it's a problem!”

“If you think about it realistically, I don’t think pirates from the frontier would jump with such a uniform pattern.” Lynn, who had returned to bridge duty on the Odette II from the Silent Whisper after taking a nap, waited until Ririka's scolding of the entire fleet was over to express her opinion. “Both our ship and the other ships have jump errors, so not everyone will jump exactly to the coordinates specified by the scout ship.”

“We don't know how many enemies there are.” Ririka projected a map of the Scholar route on a large screen on the bridge. “If the pirate Muller has enough spaceships to waste, and if she can get ahead of us by getting within our jump margin of error, that alone will allow them to take the lead. If the Odette II were to accidentally fly out alone and unarmed, she would be the target of a barrage of fire before our fellow ships could rush in for reinforcements.”

“If the enemy was capable of that much, I think they would have done something more when we were at Meiya.”

“I won't stop hoping that the other person won't have an easy time, but I don't recommend wishful thinking because it can prevent you from accurately understanding the situation.” Ririka looked up at Lynn. “It's better for you to be prepared to deal with the possibility that your optimistic predictions will be wrong.”

Lynn nodded with a disgusted look on her face. “Whenever you are involved in any kind of mischief, no matter how easy it may seem, you should always make sure you have an escape route first, so pirates and hackers are the same, aren’t they?”

“That's a criminal's perspective. Professionals are mostly the same though.”

“I was told to double and triple my security measures and exit routes when conducting risky negotiations.” Gruier returned to the bridge and joined the conversation. “The same goes for the royal family.”

“You can't continue any job if you just leave it to chance.” Ririka looked around the bridge of the Odette II, which was cruising along the Scholar route. “Now, if the enemy were to attack, when do you think it would be?”

At the captain's sudden question, Gruier looked at Lynn and then at the other members of the bridge crew.

“It's not a test. It's just an exchange of opinions.” Ririka said encouragingly. “However, I'm not playing a guessing game, so I'll ask you to tell me the reason.”

Gruier looked at Lynn again. Gruier, who was standing next to Lynn in the electronic battle seat and the captain's seat, raised her arm and pointed at a point on the route map on the main screen.

“It's the junction of the Scholar Route and the border with the Galactic Empire. Why?”

“Because fighting on the route could cause damage to third parties who do not have a direct interest in it.” Gruier answered smoothly. “Judging from the activities of the guilds and pirate Muller in the frontier, they tend to avoid battles that would cause unnecessary damage to third parties. Of course, there seem to have been some battles where they judged that a small amount of damage to others was acceptable, but the pirates and guilds' sense of duty, considering the aftermath, surpassed the military of the emerging interstellar nations.”

“The route I'm planning to use to return to Cetus constellation will enter the border airspace between the frontier and the Empire along the Scholar route.” Ririka illustrated the planned route, which the crew should be aware of. “This area is a buffer airspace between the empire, which aims to expand its frontier, and the frontier, which wants to defend itself. There are no good star systems or resources nearby, so blowing up a star or two will not bother anyone. Is that also Lynn’s reason?”

“Not only that.” Lynn shook her head. “Pirate Muller backed off once we were still on the frontier. If that's the case, he will surely prepare well to achieve his goal next time. The longer they prepare for that, the better. But if they keep preparing forever, we will escape into imperial territory. Then the difficulty of the operation would increase dramatically. No matter how they think about it, they want to finish the job while the Odette II is in the frontier, and if that is the case, she will choose the buffer zone that will give her the most time while still not entering imperial territory as her operational airspace.”

Once again, Lynn pointed to a buffer zone off the Scholar route. “If they are going to attack, it will be when they leave the Scholar route and enter the buffer zone during normal navigation, or after the first jump after that. There's still a chance that a stray bullet could hit a ship, so maybe after that jump. If you are off the shipping lane by one jump, you won't be noticed by people around you.”

Ririka nodded. “That's pretty much in line with my prediction. Next question. If the enemy were to ambush us in the buffer zone, how would they choose that location?”

“We predict that enemy pirates will be tracking us and steadily accumulating data about our fleet jumps.” Gruier reached over to the console in the observer's seat and displayed a list of spacecraft sailing in the vicinity. “Currently, we first jump the scout spaceship and confirm its safety before making the jump. If the enemy has enough spaceships in the shipping lane, we will be able to obtain the necessary information without having to track them at the same time, and we can make a flight plan based on the route information, so it may be faster to analyze it that way.”

Gruier turned her attention back to Ririka in the captain's seat. “If you can read the jump pattern, it will be easy to place spaceships there, and you will be able to choose the battlefield according to your convenience.”

“Do you think there is a battlefield that we should choose?”

At Ririka's question, Gruier and Lynn looked at each other three times. Gruier was the first to speak. “If we are only thinking about achieving our goal of returning home safely, I think our first priority should be to escape to the Empire without fighting.”

Ririka nodded, “not a bad suggestion. What exactly would you suggest I do?”

“I think if we break the jumping pattern of using the Glamorous Lydis as a scout and spread out the fleet, we can dazzle our pursuers.”

“The enemy is probably still tracking this fleet. If they have enough observation equipment, even if they can only track it up to the jump, they will be able to see that it has been scattered, and even beyond that point. If Odette II were to act alone, wouldn't the enemy be concentrating their forces there?”

“But we should be able to avoid an ambush, and if the enemy can concentrate its forces, we should be able to call up our allies.”

Gruier reviewed Ririka's face. “Does that mean a battle is inevitable?”

“I'd like to do it without fighting if possible. But then pirate Muller won't give up.” Ririka projected the buffer zone beyond the planned route on the main screen. “If I make full use of the arrangement of the stars around here and the equipment of my fellow pirates, I'll probably be able to let the Odette II escape into the Empire's territory. Hopefully, the rest of the pirate ships could also make it home safely. But then again, I wonder if frontier agents will try to get into imperial territory and take this starship’s bowsprit.”

“A frontier agent” Lynn made a sound of obvious disgust. “Are we going to see someone like that redhead again?”

“But wouldn't the result be the same even if we fought the pirate Muller and fled into the Empire's territory?”

Ririka nodded at Gruier's question. “I've been given the job of fleet commander, so I'm going to move the fleet, fight the battle, and return home. But if you can think of a better way to keep the frontier out of this, please let me know.”

Ririka looked around the bridge. “Of course, I don't have the option of giving the Odette II or the bowsprit to the enemy. I can't put Stella Slayer in enemy hands, and I’m not going to give it to someone in the Empire just because they're our ally.”

A harsh buzzer sounded on the bridge. Lynn immediately turned to the electronic warfare seat.

“What's going on!?”

An alert from the Barbaroosa and its contents appear on the display. Lynn immediately answered Ririka's question. “Electronic attack on our convoy. It appears to be aimed at interfering with communications and then infiltrating the network.” Lynn responded in a matter-of-fact manner, tapping on the console. “It’s okay, it’s not a problematic attack. It's more like the pursuers did a little reconnaissance to check on our electronic warfare capabilities and our status as a fleet.”

The electronic attack launched against the fleet from beyond artillery range was far from reaching full-scale combat in terms of scale and power. The fleet, which did not want to show its allies' strength to the enemy, if possible, responded by having the Barbaroosa supported by the Bentenmaru, and neutralized the identified enemy ships by using anti-electronic jamming.

Whether it was because we did not launch any further electronic attacks or because the enemy lacked the will to fight further is not known, but the electronic warfare in the shipping lanes ended without further development. The spaceship that had launched electronic warfare against the convoy, upon receiving anti-electronic interference, accelerated, moved to an upper navigation zone, jumped, and disappeared out of the effective range of radars and sensors.

From then on, the fleet was subjected to various indirect attacks, including electronic reconnaissance. This level of harassment, such as the approach of ships of unknown affiliation within gunfire range, powerful reconnaissance by high-speed ships that clearly ignored speed limits within the shipping lane, and fire control radar coming from multiple directions at the same time, is an attack that could easily lead to direct combat.

“Well, they're hardworking people.” Hyakume, who is in charge of electronic warfare in a two-ship team with the Barbaroosa under Ririka's instructions not to let other spacecraft determine their electronic warfare capabilities, said while conducting automatic anti-electronic attacks according to the pattern. “The information that can be obtained will be limited by using the same pattern of attacks, but they never get tired of repeating themselves.”

“Are we getting a little more information about our enemies?” Marika asked from the captain's seat. Coorie in the electronic battle seat shook her head.

“Not really. There isn’t much variation in what they are doing, whether it is jamming communications or the spaceships that sometimes approach to do reconnaissance. It seems as if there are three or four ships that are taking turns doing something.”

“Are they waiting for us to get tired of it and leave the fleet to attack them, and then they attack us?” Marika tilted her head. “They’re not that aggressive. They don't seem to be in a hurry, and if I try to fight back, they immediately run away.”

“I'm sure he's probably under orders from his boss, the pirate Muller, to keep an eye on us and collect data.” Hyakume is looking at the response pattern up until now. “Besides, the attack pattern is too monotonous. If this was an electronic warfare force that we had to deal with in a remote area as a virtual enemy, then my job would be easy.”

“There's an active attack via the network...” Coorie switched the display. “Well, if they can infiltrate the network, it will be easier to gather information, and if they can successfully penetrate the control system, they will have won the war even if they don't fight the actual battle.”

“How serious are network attacks?” Hyakume asked. “Is it just child's play, or is it at a level where it can be used?”

“Sometimes there are some simple attacks that make you wonder if it's some kind of mistake, but the level is pretty good.”

“Really!?” Surprised by Coorie’s surprisingly high praise, Marika asked again.

“Well, if they prepare a little more carefully and launch it with that intention, I think this level of net attack could be used in actual combat. I think it would be difficult to hijack the controls and make the enemy fleet move as you wish, but it would be useful for gathering information, and if you try harder, you might be able to get to the point where you can send disruptive information directly to the enemy's network.”

“That's quite a level, isn't it?” Marika nodded in admiration. “So, is the person who is launching the network attack the pursuer that has been following us for a while? Or…?”

“The attacker will probably be Chimera of Scylla, who is on the other side of the FTL line. I think the front pursuer who keeps getting in trouble is just providing a relay point.”

“Hmmm”

“He's a hard worker.” Hyakume repeated his impression. “I don't know where or what kind of preparations they are making, but at the same time they are doing their best to keep us in check. They’re someone you'd find difficult to get along with if you were in the same industry.”

“What’s the story from Ririka?” Marika asked Coorie and added “and what about the other captains?”

“I've already told them. For now, we and the Barbaroosa are in charge of handling the situation, so we're taking care of them, but it might be a little troublesome if another spaceship is inadvertently stepping in.”

“So you're saying that they're not going to be patient enough to wait for us to arrive there.” After receiving a brief report analyzing her situation from the Bentenmaru's Coorie, Ririka immediately gave instructions to all the pirate ships under her command. “The predicted enemy location has changed. They'll probably attack us while we're still in the shipping lane.”

“May I ask for an explanation?” Gruier asked as she prepared to send a direct message to the fleet's captains. “Wasn't it decided that the enemy would also avoid attacks in the shipping lanes as they could cause damage to third parties?”

“If the enemy really thought that way, they wouldn't launch an online attack just to mess with us.” Thinking for a moment, Ririka added. “Also, the enemy knows more about geographical conditions, route conditions, and traffic conditions. They probably don't have the ability to choose the battlefield. If I were in their position, I would set it in a place where they wouldn’t expect it.”

Ririka looked at the main screen showing the Scalar route. “If they have all the pieces in place, it's more convenient for them to move and use them far away from the Empire.”

“Will the enemy start a war without fear of harming third parties?”

“When we were escaping from Meiya, they used that move first in the hopes of doing so. If they think the same move will work again, they'll take advantage of that. You'd better be ready right after the next jump.”

Ririka gave her prediction to all the captains of the fleet via the communications connection. If the commanding officer inadvertently missed the forecast, she would lose credibility, but Ririka was unconcerned and told the Glamorous Lydis, the scout, that the scanning density of the surrounding airspace would be increased starting with the next jump, and that the subsequent jump schedule would not be changed even if an anomaly was detected as a result.

The results were immediate.

Just before the final jump on the Scholar route, the Glamorous Lydis, which had preceded us, reported that the density of spacecraft in the vicinity of the scheduled jump coordinates had decreased by half compared to the previous jump. Since there were no major relay points or junctions before or after the route, there was no reason for the traffic to suddenly decrease.

“I see, that's how you’re doing it.” In response to the report from the Glamorous Lydis, the Odette II's Captain Ririka explained to the other captains that the pirate Muller had regulated traffic on the Scholar route to clear the area around the planned touchdown point. “If our reading is correct, the pirates will attack as soon as we touch down. Be prepared for that.”

The prediction was correct.

After making several jumps as a fleet, the jump error, which was unacceptable at first, gradually improved. Although they are far from being able to touch down while remaining in formation like a regular fleet that has been trained with a variety of ships, the time it takes to regroup and form a fleet has definitely been shortened.

However, even after minimizing the safety distance to avoid collisions after the jump, the pirate vessels are still usually too spread out immediately after the jump to be called a fleet. The battle then began at the same time as the touchdown.

“I had hoped that since they had set the stage, they would at least make a surrender or extradition request.” Hyakume said as he read the exact locations of the enemy ships, putting off counterattacks against long-range gunfire. “How nice of them to start the battle without any questions or answers.”

“I guess they thought it was a waste of time to negotiate.” Coorie is blocking their radar, which is incomparably denser than before, so that they cannot be targeted. “Also, have we assembled enough forces to be confident that we can absolutely win?”

“Do you see all of the enemy's forces?” Marika asked.

“Our flagship is tallying them up right now.” Hyakume replied. “We’re a motley crew of pirate ships, and if they've been tracking us up until now, they should have known that the touchdown points would be spread out quite a bit. Of course, the coordinates of the Glamorous Lydis, which preceded us, would be the reference point, but the enemy would have had a hard time positioning their spaceships to ambush us. After all, it's an ambush against pirate ships where you don't know where they'll jump. All you can do is scatter your forces thinly and widely, and then concentrate your forces on where they appear.”

“I wonder if they went out of their way to designate battlefields by making certain airspaces along the shipping lane off-limits.”

Around the Bentenmaru, long-range artillery battles had just begun. Leaving the task of searching for enemies and dealing with battles to veterans like Hyakume, Schnitzer, and Coorie, Marika rechecked the surrounding route status. At the very least, there are no civilian ships or third-party spaceships unrelated to the battle that have failed to escape the battle within the range of the Bentenmaru's radar and sensors.

“I think they had advance warning that this area would be a battleground.” Coorie said. “If you look at our fleet's jump pattern, you can probably predict where and when it will jump, so if you set up an airspace and broadcast a battle notice, at least civilian spaceships won't come close.”

“If a spaceship wants to sail peacefully, it would not go out of its way to enter a previously announced combat airspace, would it?” Marika looked around the route zone, where only a few spaceships could be seen in contrast to the previous traffic situation. “It would probably be easier to change their jump pattern or adjust their schedule to avoid this area, rather than getting caught up in a battle and taking unnecessary damage.”

“*Notification to all ships from the Odette II.*” The voice of Captain Ririka of the Odette II was heard on the Bentenmaru's bridge. “Here is the current enemy ship placement, take it! While defending themselves, each ship will regroup with the Odette II as their goal, and destroying all of the fleet ships!”

A comic page of a cartoon

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“Ohhh…” Luca, in the navigator's seat, exclaimed as she looked at the navigational data compiled by the Odette II, which indicated not only the enemy ships’ positions but also the planned trajectories for regrouping the fleet, based on each ship's current position and situation. “It's not just a matter of thinking that the enemy was waiting for us and preparing for an ambush. It's good that we touched down as close to the flagship as we did, but she has also included enemy ship placement and planned orbits for pirate ships that are far away like the Death Shadow and the Sinbad. As expected of the demon controller, she is not only good at controlling traffic but also commanding battles.”

“Until we regroup, we will prioritize securing a course over destroying enemy ships. After regrouping, if there is a spaceship that is under attack, we will rescue it, but if not, we will destroy ships depending on the enemy's placement.”

Schnitzer checked the tactical data sent to him. “It's a concentrated operation of military forces that is faithful to the basics. If everything goes as planned, the difference in strength between the two sides will not be a problem.”

“That's good.” After first counting the movements of the Bentenmaru, the number of enemy ships expected to meet with it, and the number of battles to be fought before regrouping, Marika confirmed the number of enemies currently detected. “Twenty-eight ships? That's four times as many as we have! Pirate Muller and her guild have staked out the place again!”

“To make matters worse, I can't find the all-important crimson pirate ship.” At Coorie's words, Marika reviewed the list of enemy vessels, which was also conspicuously empty in terms of ship names.

“Really… it isn’t there?”

“It's a conspicuous spaceship, so there's no way they couldn't find it if it were in a visible location.” Coorie reviewed the results of several all-sky scans. “At least there's no reaction like that within the range of the cannons. I wonder if it's disguised as another spaceship, or if it's trying to control the battlefield from a distance in accordance with its duties as an electronic battleship.”

“Is this a formation that is mainly focused on electronic warfare?” Marika reviewed the layout of enemy ships sent by the Odette II. In order to surprise targets whose touch down may not be known, enemy ships are dispersed and arranged according to their onboard strength and armor. However, the arrangement is only in response to direct combat and does not appear to be considering electronic warfare. “If this were true, a battleship specializing in electronic warfare would not be the type of ship that would be fighting on the front lines. You want to use it to provide electronic support to the front line from the rear while directing operations.”

Schnitzer sent the order to fire the main guns at the three pirate ships approaching at high speed. Marika looked up at Schnitzer, who was in command of the battle.

“Do you think that silver-haired Methuselah pirate is someone who is faithful to the basics?” Schnitzer's lips curled into a smile. “I don't think so.”

“That's right.” Marika, in the captain's seat, folded her arms, deep in thought. “Generally speaking, even if you have more fighting power, you won't be able to win the battle if you don't place and use it properly.”

Marika looked at the status of the enemy ships that were positioned in the shipping lane and moving steadily. Perhaps it was because the battle had just begun, or perhaps it was because Marika herself was not accustomed to reading battle situation displays involving numerous spaceships, but she could not understand the enemy's ultimate objective.

“Is this it?” On the bridge of the Bentenmaru, which had begun combat maneuvers toward the rallying point indicated by Odette II, Coorie said, not very confidently.

“What?”

“The 28 enemy ships listed earlier is the number of spaceships that are currently nearby and participating in direct combat, but if you remove the short-range electronic interference and look into the distance, it appears that there are still some ships a little further away.”

“How many ships? Are they enemies? The Pirate Guild's reserve force?”

“We're trying to see far away from this airspace where the battle is going on, so the data isn't reliable and the visibility is poor. It appears and disappears, and it seems to be a spaceship with equipment like the Chimera of Scylla. Are they trying to create a fleet that doesn't exist?”

“It's fine if it's a fleet that doesn't exist.” Marika looked at the route zone far from the current position charted by Coorie. There is no sign of any civilian vessels, neither enemy nor friend, in that area.

“Right now, the enemy pirate ships are using tactics to block our rendezvous with the scattered fleet.” Coorie is twisting her head, feeling that this is different from when they left Meiya and were attacked with electronic warfare in the ensuing route. “It seems to me that this time they have a plan, a goal, and they're moving their spaceships accordingly.”

“I agree.” Schnitzer said. “It doesn't look like they are running a very disciplined fleet operation, but at least each individual spacecraft seems to understand the intentions of the whole and acts accordingly. We're doing communication interference and electronic interference as usual, right?”

“I think we can interfere with direct communication and data exchange, but when the combat airspace is so wide open, it only affects nearby spaceships.” Coorie displayed the battle airspace, which had expanded to the extent of the touchdown area, on the battle display at once. “We can't take care of all the distant ships, and if the enemy has a solid objective and is well prepared, they can just divide us up.”

“Isn't the only purpose to divide us?” Marika thought further. “Should we think about jumping again and running away?”

“Even if we jump and run, they'll catch up with us soon enough anyway.” Ririka, who is in command of the fleet from the Odette II, easily rejected Marika's opinion. “What's more, no matter how synchronized the jump, there will be errors, so it will take time to regroup. During that time, you won't know where the enemy is and how they will gather.”

“*I see.*” Marika, on the other side of the communication monitor, was easily convinced. “*Even if you jump after regrouping, if you jump while fighting, you're bound to fall apart again, and if you jump before regrouping, you're only going to fall apart even more.*”

“There's a lot of enemies out there.” Ririka continued talking, intending to let the Odette II's bridge crew hear it as well. “Running away now will only make the situation worse. In that case, it would be faster to settle the matter here.”

“*Settled?*” Marika looked around in surprise. “*Are you thinking of ending it here? How?*”

“Either we inflict enough damage to make them give up, or we fight them until there are no more enemies left.” Ririka gave a terrifying smile. “Please get back into formation as soon as possible. If we stay scattered, we'll be divided and destroyed individually, which is what the enemy wants. Regardless of their direct fighting strength, the enemy overwhelmingly outnumbers us.”

As maneuvering to regroup continued, our few to their many, the enemy's strength became more clearly visible.

It seems that the frontier pirate ships deployed in pursuit of Marika and her crew this time were not the ones which made it in time, like those used in the escape at Meiya. Last time, the majority of the ships were converted merchant ships and high-speed transports that had been forced to install shipboard guns, and only a minority of the pirate ships were capable of withstanding a full-scale anti-ship battle. This time, however, most of the pirate ships were full-fledged combat vessels that could engage in maneuvers against ships, or pirate ships that could only be considered military vessels.

“As expected, they have seen that we are a full-fledged warship, and they are getting their spaceships ready.”

As the number of engagements with enemy ships increases, the list of enemy ship details, which was full of blank spaces, gradually fills in.

The Death Shadow is a heavy battleship, the Barbaroosa is a light battleship, the Karyobinga is an experimental battleship, and the Glamorous Lydis is a heavy cruiser.

Each was a military vessel long ago and has been modified for piracy over the years. Although it is difficult to generalize because of the updating of equipment over time, most starships tend to reduce their onboard armament after becoming pirate ships, and no pirate ship retains the hedgehog-like armament of its active service days.

“The Sinbad was originally a multi-purpose work ship, so its structure was sturdy, but the Odette II wasn't even a warship in the first place.”

Marika saw the Odette II being protected by Karyobinga, which was closest to her after the touchdown. The Barbaroosa joined her shortly after, making a three-ship formation. The Odette II, protected by two battleships, is directing anti-ship maneuvers and avoiding intermittent guild attacks.

“Bentenmaru to Odette II.” The Odette II should already be able to see the Bentenmaru's current position. “From now on, we will be your line of defense.”

Instead of a response, a huge amount of maneuvering data came rushing in.

“What's this!?”

“Wow, it’s fleet formation maneuvering data.” Kane spoke up. “What, the commander wants us to stay in formation with the Karyobinga and the Barbaroosa and have a dogfight!?”

Marika couldn't understand Kane's words for a moment. “A dogfight in formation...a maneuver battle!?”

For small and highly maneuverable fighter aircraft, fighting in pairs has been the norm since time immemorial. However, this means that while one aircraft is engaged in a frontal battle, the other aircraft provides support, or switches positions depending on the situation; it does not involve combat while maintaining formation.

“You want me to be in formation with a battleship and engage in combat?” Marika, finally understanding Commander Ririka's intention, raised her voice. “Is that possible?”

The Bentenmaru is one of the most maneuverable ships in the fleet, but the Barbaroosa and the Karyobinga, whose prototypes are battleships, are not so maneuverable. When it comes to the Death Shadow, her main gun's striking power is quite impressive, but her large, heavily armored body may be inferior to even the Odette II's in terms of maneuverability.

“Of course you can do it, since that demon air traffic controller is asking you to do it.” Kane superimposed not only the maneuvers instructed to the Bentenmaru but also those instructed to the Karyobinga and the Barbaroosa, who had already joined them, on the predicted trajectory. “Haha, the Barbaroosa's maneuvering is obviously more moderate than ours, and the Karyobinga is not as detailed as ours. Instead, it requires us to move so much. Is that okay, Sandaime?”

Combat maneuvers place the greatest burden on the engine power system.

“This will be difficult.” After muttering in a daze, Sandaime began to move his hands furiously. “Captain Ririka, when did you last check the status of our ship? You're really pushing the power demand to the limit!”

“Ririka would at least check the performance of the ships at hand.” Marika murmured somewhat apologetically. Then it occurred to her. “…so this is what you mean by being relentless.”

“The Odette II has started moving!” Kane announced while turning the rudder wheel vigorously. “We'll be the direct line of defense!”

“Do what you have to do!” The maneuver data from Ririka not only includes instructions for combat maneuvers, but also the enemy placement and firing timing depending on the situation. Marika superimposed the data sent to her on the battle status display in front of her, trying to at least understand the developments in front of her. “Giving verbal instructions from the captain's seat every time would be too slow!”

The Odette II, with the Karyobinga and the Barbaroosa on its wings, began to accelerate rapidly. Since there is no star system nearby that can be used to add thrust, the acceleration that can be obtained with normal propulsion is limited even when inertial control is fully opened, but to compensate for this, the Karyobinga, which has more power, changes course while moving out first.

Three light cruiser-class ships jumped out in front, circling and attacking in waves. The Bentenmaru launches a vertical assault, which is a blind spot for the light cruiser's main guns, which have begun firing salvos at the Odette II.

Fire control radars that would make it known what you are aiming at will not be used. They conducted instrument fire relying only on data from the Karyobinga and the Barbaroosa, which had gone out first and started firing back.

The three light cruisers were surprised by the Bentenmaru's Class 40 beam salvo, which was fired from a direction that had no radar coverage, and disrupted their course. Instead of advancing to the firing position against Odette II, they spread out to engage the Odette II in a three-ship formation and the Bentenmaru from the vertical direction.

“As expected, there aren't any air traffic controllers over there who can pull off tricks like this.”

Schnitzer performs continuous instrument firing, relying only on the data he receives. They take a few hits, but the light cruiser shows no signs of retreating. Naval gunfire from the other side is avoided with minimal movement thanks to Courier's electronic jamming and Kane's ship handling skills.

After passing the point of closest approach to the light cruiser headed for Odette II, the Bentenmaru made a hit-and-run and turned around for a second attack. She now changes her target to the two mobile cruisers chasing after her, and uses the firing data from the Barbaroosa to attack them with a beam.

A melee ensued.

The pirate ships on Muller's side didn't seem to be thinking of any strategy beyond relying on numbers to intercept them. In contrast, the fleet led by the Odette II, which had rejoined the fleet, engaged in a melee battle, outnumbered by enemy ships while still forming a fleet that could transform at will, and succeeded in causing damage.

The amount of maneuvering and firing that the Odette II instructs the pirate ships to do under her command are far greater than in normal anti-ship combat. This means that there are more opportunities to attack a single enemy, which makes it easier to achieve results. The enemy, relying on numbers, was unable to concentrate its forces on the limited attack opportunities and was unable to achieve any effective results.

“As expected, Muller's frontier pirates aren't all that stupid.” Ririka groaned as she looked at a list of battle results that often resulted in minor damage to enemy ships, and occasionally moderate damage. “They are all smart people who run away before they get seriously injured and avoid fatal injuries. If they were a little more stubborn and tried to get at me, I could beat them up until they were unable to fight.”

“All the enemy ships seem to change their patterns on their first, second, and third attacks.” Gruier reported from the observer's seat. “It's not going to be easy.”

“Well, I think they're thinking the same thing because their plans that were supposed to be based on numbers went awry.” Ririka looked at the guild's force distribution, which seemed to be divided into several fleets, keeping their fleet at a distance. “But they wouldn't want to keep fighting like this forever. We can't just keep on fighting with these small fry.”

“Pre-jump phenomenon!” Lynn announced from the electronic warfare seat. Ririka checked the galactic standard time on her chronometer. It has been quite some time since the battle started.

“Did a civilian ship get lost?” Ririka asked, thinking about how she could use it if it wandered into the fleet, and Lynn answered.

“No, there is one ship with that registered pattern… It’s the Chimera of Scylla.”

“Were they in a far location so they could jump here!?” Ririka peeled her eyes away. “Well, if you're in a place where you can see the battlefield in real time, maybe you'll be able to give smarter instructions. Location!?”

“Ahead of course, further behind the enemy pirate fleet.” Lynn displayed the captured pre-jump phenomenon data on the on the main screen, supplementing it with observation data from other ships.

“If it's battleship class, it's within gunfire distance.” Ririka did a rough mental calculation of her current location and the location of Chimera of Scylla's touchdown. “Is it within reach of not only the Death Shadow's class 110, but also the Barbaroosa?”

A crimson space battleship touches down in a position where it can see the battle airspace right in front of it. The Chimera of Scylla, which had ripped through space with its powerful output and returned to this world, slowly began to spread its wing-like antennas on both sides of its hull, keeping its bow pointed straight at the battlefield.

“The main group has come out, which means that they have come to take command of the field because they realize that they can't win by sheer numbers.”

If you want to achieve results by organically operating a large fleet, you need to be able to provide command while immediately getting feeding back from individual ships. To that end, the best command center is the front line, where you can grasp the enemy situation and the battlefield in real time.

However, according to Ririka's preliminary research, there is no record of a pirate guild in recent years having assembled such a large number of ships for a fleet battle. “I would expect an electronic warship of that size to have a fleet command function.” Ririka saw the crimson pirate ship spreading its wings as it prepared for battle behind the enemy fleet. “How much you can actually move your fleet and whether or not you can achieve results are different questions. The bigger the fleet, the more difficult it becomes to have them do useful work without they don’t become idle. Lynn, listen to what orders the Scylla gives to their fleet.”

“Roger, and there’s more pre-drive phenomena.”

“What?”

Lynn transferred the information she was getting onto the main screen. “Pre-jump phenomenon has been detected for several more vessels behind the Chimera of Scylla.”

“No.”

The computer quickly begins matching the observed patterns.

“Expand your observation range!” Ririka instructed. “I'll leave it to the Barbaroosa and the Bentenmaru to keep an eye on the enemy fleet in front of us for a while. Observe if there are any other spaceships jumping nearby, as soon as possible!”

“Roger.” Lynn expanded the observation range at once, knowing that observation accuracy would decrease. “No way!” A large number of pre-jump phenomena were detected, in formation, surrounding the airspace around the Odette II. After a quick count, Lynn reported. “There are many pre-jump phenomena in the surrounding airspace! Some of them have already touched down, and are just outside the range of gunfire, but this one...”

“What type of ships?” Ririka asked sharply. “Do you know who jumped?”

The computer displayed data matching the first detected fleet that had appeared behind the Chimera of Scylla. “The Glensmith-class battleship Dark Lady, the Aggregate-class attack cruiser Nanclade, the Besmoth-class mobile cruiser Garveyron, and two more of the same type!” Lynn read out the types of ships that were identified with a guarantee of over 95%.

“They’re not pirate guild spaceships, they are a unified military fleet of the Seven Stars Federation deployed at Garnet A!”

It was not only the united forces of the Seven Star Federation that jumped onto the Scholar route one after another. Not only ships belonging to the Federation of Star Systems, which had sent a fleet to Garnet A, but even the convoys of the Trade Federation, which has great power in the frontier areas, were appearing one after another, filling the route zone.

“I didn't realize that the frontier area could afford such a mass operation.” Looking around at the large fleet of distant pirate ships that seemed to have stopped in formation, Kane marveled. “No, does that mean that the Pirate Muller was doing business that extensively?”

“With such a difference in quantity, there is almost no need to worry about damage just by mobilizing the fleet.” Schnitzer reclassifies the large fleet that has appeared by type and affiliation. “There are two mobile fleets made up of the battleships of the Seven Star Federation and the Trade Federation's escort fleets, as well as a few that seem to be independent star forces, defense fleets, and guerrilla fleets of military companies. The chain of command is probably disjointed, so no matter what kind of bait the pirate Muller throws at then, I don't think such a large fleet is entirely under the command of Chimera of Scylla, but...”

“What are we going to do?” Marika let out a sigh as she looked at the fleet, which made it seem foolish to even think about the difference in strength. “Even if we jump and run away, we probably won't be able to escape when there are so many of them.”

“It'll buy you some time, but it'll just be a bit of a waste of energy. You might be able to struggle a little, though.” Schnitzer looked at the Odette II, the flagship in the center of the formation. “The result won't change. What are you going to do, Ririka?”

“The total number of enemy ships has exceeded 200. Still increasing.” Gruier informed in a calm voice. Ririka glares at the display as the fleets appear one after another.

“Radar is coming from almost all directions.” Lynn informed. “There are some holes on the southern side, perpendicular to the navigation channel.”

“That's not much of a hole.” Ririka quickly ran her hands over the console in the captain's seat. “With such a large fleet concentrating on us, even if we jumped and ran, they'd catch up to us in no time.”

“It's not like the entire fleet will attack at once.” Lynn listed the details of the enemy fleet, which was still growing, on the display. Most of them are strike fleets in anti-ship combat formations, and there are also attack fleets consisting mainly of aircraft carriers and mobile fleets consisting mainly of cruisers. “If we launch electronic warfare all over the sky and cause chaos…”

“The best we can do is buy a little time until our forces are reduced and we are annihilated.” Ririka confirmed the location of the unmoving Chimera of Scylla behind the enemy pirate fleet. “Even if the queen were to be sunk, there is no guarantee that the remaining ones would withdraw since they are not under the command of the pirate Muller.”

Ririka tried to imagine all the possible developments using the strength and pieces she had. The results were immediate. “...get ready for monomolecular bowspirit separation.”

At the command, which seemed to be squeezed out in a low voice, the bridge of Odette II fell silent, leaving only electronic and circulation sounds.

After a pause, Gruier spoke. “Are you going to give the monomolecular bowspirit to the enemy?”

“I’m going to use it as a decoy.” Ririka answered briefly. “They're not after us, they're only after the monomolecular part attached to the bow of the ship. If the pirate Muller is trying to sell it to a frontier nation or coalition, shoot the part right past their nose. There will be a scramble for the prize.”

“Can you recover it?” Gruier asked the difficult question. “Can you lure a fleet this large into a melee using the monomolecular bowspirit as bait, and then retrieve it and run back home?”

“It's going to be difficult.” Ririka replied, sinking into the captain's seat. “But we don't have any good choices. The reason why the red one remains silent and doesn't move her spaceship is probably because she understands the situation here.” Ririka glared at the crimson pirate ship with its wings spread behind the frontier pirates on the display. “Hold on a minute, I'll think of a good trick.”

“*Hey hey, it looks like you're in trouble.*”

A pompous voice came over the dedicated line connecting the pirate ships in formation around the Odette II. The voice was so devoid of any trace of tension that it was hard to believe that they were in the middle of a battle, and Lynn involuntarily checked the source of the call. He didn't seem to have any intention of hiding it, and the source of the call immediately appeared on the display. The Lunar Lion, a small spaceship of West Kyria registry.

“Jackie!?” Marika shouted to the other party, who could only hear audio. Marika grabbed the headset while instructing Coorie to pinpoint the source and current location with her fingertips. “How in the world did you get on this line?”

“*Oh, I'm so happy that you can tell who I am just by my voice.*” Jackie replied with a hint of a smirk in his voice. “*Uh, should I really explain how I'm talking to you first?*”

“...What are you doing?” There is almost no time lag in normal communication, so there is no doubt that they are close. Marika continued, thinking about whether or not Jackie would appear within gunfire range. “What in the world do you want?”

“*Well, it seems like you're in trouble, so I came here to see if I could help. Do you need any help?*”

“What are you doing here?” Marika bared her fangs and bit into the headset's microphone. “What did you come back for now!?”

“*Well, I didn't really have any intention of coming back, but after I ran to the other side of the galaxy, I found something that might be of use to you guys before something as big as this happened. It would have been better if I could have delivered it secretly, but it’s too late now.*” Jackie said, sounding like he was about to burst into laughter. “*Well, maybe I made it just in time?*”

“So, what are you talking about?”

“*I brought you something good.*” Jackie said happily. “*An antimatter bomb. It is an antimatter bomb with a warhead that weighs exactly the same as the monomolecular crystal of the White Swan, which is the core of the Stellar Slayer's targeting system, as described in this document. Don't you want it?*”

“An antimatter bomb, huh?”

Antimatter, which causes an annihilation reaction that converts the entire mass of an object into energy, is also the most efficient means of energy transport in the galaxy. It generates energy equal to its mass when it comes into contact with normal matter, is difficult to maintain, but it is also carried on the Bentenmaru as an emergency energy source and warhead. “Where did you get that…”

Antimatter itself is not all that rare in the galaxy. Most of it was lost in annihilation reactions during the formation of galaxies, but antimatter also exists naturally and can be created artificially.

“*It would be too long to go into detail, but…*”

“Be brief!”

Jackie quickly responded to Marika's deadly voice. “*The materials and tools of the workshop that conducted the basic research of Stellar Slayer before the Revolutionary War were sold off and made their way to the other side of the galaxy. You know that when you manufacture a monomolecular component, you also create a monomolecular component with the same mass of antimatter. Because it is a single molecule with a considerable mass that it could not be divided, it was used as an antimatter warhead. After wandering around various camps, companies, and research institutes, it was sold to a junkyard for cheap. I don't think it would be of much use to anyone else, but I thought you guys would be able to use it, so I brought it all the way. Don't you need it?*”

“*I'll take it.*” Ririka's voice came over the communication line.

“Ririka will take it!” Marika couldn't help but shout. “What are you going to do with such a thing?”

“*I'm going to annihilate my monomolecular bowsprit in front of the pirate Muller and the frontier coalition forces.*” Ririka declared loudly. “*How much will it cost? I'll pay your asking price. Although it may not be possible right away.*”

“*I am indebted to Captain Ririka, the crew of the White Swan, and the pirates of the Cetus constellation.*” Jackie laughed happily. “*How's that for great service?*”

“*It's expensive.*” Ririka's response sounded chillingly intimate. “*It's all right. I'll be grateful to the red-headed scammer for this one moment.*” After a pause for a breath, Ririka continued. “*Come on, Jackie, the other side is listening to this transmission anyway. Before the pirates from the frontier attack with the idea of stealing the monomolecular crystal before the annihilation reaction, please quickly deliver that antimatter warhead!*”

“*Let's agree that we don't have time for leisurely negotiations. Please don't shoot me, okay?*”

“The Lunar Lion has appeared!” Coorie exclaimed. “Wow, he was this close!?”

Although it was a rough space filled with electronic interference from friends and foes, the Lunar Lion, which had not been detected by the seven pirate ships' radars or sensors, revealed its distinctive silhouette. With its active stealth removed, the Lunar Lion was at the front of his formation, halfway between them and the frontier pirates.

“*You have some nerve flying right in the middle of the engagement zone.*”

“*It’s my only redeeming feature.*” The Lunar Lion lowered its bow slightly as if to greet the formation centered around the Odette II. “*Now, can you see it?*”

The Lunar Lion floated up, separating only the warhead portion of the conical pyramid that was held by the numerous landing legs on the underside of the hull. “*As you can see, surrounded by a holding shield, this is the antimatter side of the monomolecular crystal created for the Stellar Slayer's targeting system.*”

“*I see it.*” Ririka's voice carried a smile. “*Release the holding shield. I’ll check the actual item.*”

The conical holding shield splits into four parts and flies in four directions. From inside it came a long, slender member that looked exactly like Odette II's monocrystalline bowsprit.

“*This is faster.*”

From the center of the formation, the Odette II accelerated and jumped out alone.

“Wait a minute, Ririka, where are you going?”

Ririka replied to Kenjo, who hurriedly called out to her. *“I'm going to take care of our monomolecular bowsprit. Be careful not to get caught in it.*”

The Odette II aligned her axis precisely with the monomolecular antimatter released by the Lunar Lion and fired the monomolecular bowsprit. The Odette II's emergency separation system gave the monomolecular bowsprit additional acceleration and released it at the target.

After confirming that the bowsprit had separated, the Odette II turned around and retracted the masts that had been deployed. The monomolecular bowsprit, which inertially flew in a straight line along the shipping lane, collided with the same shaped part left behind by Luna Lion.

A single molecule, which can only be annihilated by colliding with antimatter of the same mass, was converted into light and heat through an annihilation reaction. An explosion of light, like a star appearing, illuminated all the ships in the surrounding airspace.

“Pre-jump phenomenon confirmed.” Coorie, who had filtered out the anti-matter explosion in front of them to avoid affecting the sensors and radar, noticed a new fleet emerging in the surrounding airspace.

“Another newcomer!?”

It was Kenjo who answered Marika's scream. “*No, this time it's on our side.*” The Barbaroosa sent a list of the names of ships scheduled for touchdown. “*This is a cavalry force that was assembled by the Imperial Fleet Command, telling them that it was an opportunity to wipe out all the pirates on the frontier.*”

“It’s the Seventh Fleet!” Nora reported after confirming the affiliation of the large fleet that was coming in for touchdown. The Empire’s Seventh Fleet operates in frontier areas outside of the Empire's territory. “They’re late.”

Kenjo, who looked as if he was chewing a bitter bug, looked at the fleet on the display. The pre-jump phenomenon was still continuing. “I told them to jump earlier, but they’re just showing up now.”

Kenjo confirmed the scale of the Seventh Fleet as it touched down. There are a total of four mobile strike fleets for anti-ship combat centered on battleships and mobile cruisers, and although the number of ships is not comparable to the frontier pirates and allied forces that are currently gathering in this airspace, the force is sufficient.

“Well, the reason for chasing us around for the Odette II's monomolecular bowsprit has disappeared. What will you do now, pirate Muller and the Frontier Coalition?”

“*I'll send you the bill later.*” Jackie's cheerful voice came over the communication line. “*I have a bounty on my head not only from the pirate Muller, but also from the Seventh Fleet. With that in mind…*”

“Jackie!” Marika shouted into the communication line. “You're just going to run away after all the trouble you've caused!?”

“*Oh, I thought Captain Marika would be more pleased. Is the service still lacking?*”

“I'm grateful for it!” After shouting, Marika involuntarily clamped her mouth shut. A voice responded with a hint of a smirk.

“*That's great. It was worth coming all the way back.*”

“The Lunar Lion has disappeared.” Coorie calmly informed them. “Because the space situation is unstable due to the antimatter explosion, it's tough to be completely stealthed at this distance.”

“Jackie?” After taking a deep breath, Marika called out. “I have one last question, if you don't mind.”

“*Please be brief. I don't want to stay in a place where the 7th Fleet gets serious and engages in ship-to-ship combat.*”

“Your name is actually Jackie Kelvin, isn't it?” Instead of an answer, laughter erupted across the communications line.

Instead of an answer, laughter erupted over the communications line. “*Tell me, why do you think that?*”

“I learned about Celsius and Fahrenheit in science. I still get good grades in school.”

“*Unfortunately, I have never met such an honor student. I am sorry, but I have no comment on that. Anything else?*”

“Yes, there is.” Marika took a deep breath and yelled into the communication line. “Remember what I said!”

“*I won’t forget. Tell everyone that the voyage isn’t over until you get home.*”

The Bentenmaru's sensors detected the reaction of a small mass jumping from a short distance away.

The antimatter explosion that annihilated the Odette II's monomolecular bowsprit and the arrival of the Seventh Fleet changed the course of the war.

The frontier fleets moved away to keep a safe distance from the Seventh Fleet, which entered the battlefield in a battle stance and fired high-powered combat radars in all directions.

The Chimera of Scylla had her fleet, which had been deployed against the emerging Seventh Fleet, fall back to battle formation.

After a short confrontation, the pirate fleet led by the Odette II jumped to the protection of the Seventh Fleet.

The Odette II, which belonged to the Hakuoh Academy, returned to the Cetus constellation system slightly after the scheduled number of days of the voyage.

At the Sea of the Morningstar relay station's dedicated dock, an old bowsprit, which was supposed to have been replaced during the War of Independence, was delivered with a ribbon from somewhere. The accompanying receipt, with no amount of money written on it, was signed only as JK.

Then, a week after the Odette II's return to port, a bright crimson envelope arrived addressed to the Hakuoh Academy Yacht Club.

The impenetrable paper envelope with no electronic device added, delivered after security checks, did not have the sender's name on it. The mail was thoroughly inspected and analyzed in a box in a completely closed environment with the cooperation of the Chemistry Department, and was opened in the Yacht Club room after it was confirmed that there were no booby traps containing latent pathogens.

“Who is it from?” Gruier asked president Lynn, who took out a crimson letterhead identical to the envelope in front of the club members gathered in the clubroom before the usual simulation training.

“There’s nothing written.” Lynn showed the club members a document that had many blank spaces. “However, we received something incredible. This is an application to join the pirates’ guild.”

After a moment of silence, everyone in the club room spoke up. “What?”

That evening.

“The crimson envelope is exactly the same color as the Chimera of Scylla’s hull, even after spectral analysis.” Ririka, who had already returned to air traffic control the day after Odette II returned to port, answered easily after hearing Marika's story. “I know. It came to my place too.”

“What!?” Marika couldn't help but shout. “To the Shin-Okuhama Spaceport control department!?”

Ririka nodded as if it was obvious and pulled out a crimson envelope from her clutch bag. Marika compared her mother's face with the crimson envelope.

“What are you going to do?”

Ririka covered her lips with the crimson envelope. “I'll keep it as a souvenir. I'm glad it's expanded my range of career choices.”

Marika looked again at her mother's face. “What!?”

Afterword (Asahi Novels edition)

I managed to finish it. No, I don't know if it's really finished, as there are still scenes that need to be added, galley checks, and checks to make sure there aren't any fatal oversights, and I still have some lingering anxiety as I wait for the release date. But being a writer is a profession.

Actually, I'm currently sitting in the lounge at Haneda Airport waiting for my flight to Los Angeles. Just 10 days before I was writing this ‘afterword,’ I received a call from Tokyo saying, “I would like you to interview the director of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, would you be able to come to Los Angeles at the beginning of March?” Well, at that time, the siege battle was in full swing in the northern lands of Kochitora, just before the deadline.

The first schedule I was presented with was to fly to Los Angeles in the morning and return to Japan in the evening, according to the director's already established schedule. Three days and zero nights!? I don't think I'll be able to do a proper interview job unless I stay at least one night the day before, even though there will be simultaneous interpretation.

However, since this was a rare opportunity, I discussed it with the person in charge. Since it was the end of the term, we could not postpone the month of publication, and the next schedule that was presented to us was a little better: the editor would be relieved if we could finish the book on that schedule.

Thus, Sasamoto was forced to do the usual work of a writer before a deadline: he had to work diligently according to his ostensible schedule.

At this time of year, I have to prepare my tax return, have my car inspected, and even if I sit in front of a computer all day, if I want to work efficiently and continuously, I can only concentrate for a few hours a day, so I have no choice but to cut down on my chores (mainly escapism) and do it seriously.

“No! I'm not this hard-working character!” ⓒ Moreau

I received a meeting memo asking for an interview with Director Elachi of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), and I responded by writing a story about recent findings in the solar system and beyond, and now the manuscript is about a fleet battle. Well, it's the 21st century. It would be nice if it could automatically simulate a battle situation just by inputting the settings, but unfortunately the computer in front of me was not that advanced. Of course, as usual, I can't really see what's going to happen next, but I move on with the story, believing that the next line will become clear to me.

If possible, I would have liked to have at least finished the last scene the day before I left for the United States, but there is no way that Sasamoto, who even waited until the deadline to submit his summer vacation homework, possessed any kind of superpower that would allow him to ‘proceed with his work as planned.’ On the day of departure, I wrote the final draft in the morning and sent it to the editor before noon, and after lunch I flew into Tokyo to edit it and discuss what to do next. Mr. I, the editor in charge, is forced to walk a tightrope every time. I'm sorry.

So, I read the galleys, wrote additional drafts, submitted them, and did a final check without wasting any time when I got back, which was a very tight schedule of 3 nights and 6 days, which was inhuman. No, that's not right! I am such a hard worker. (and so on)

Yeah, of course you can't put a date on it. Please enjoy Volume 6 of ‘Miniskirt Space Pirates’, ‘Crimson Pirate Ship’, which expands the stage to the frontier and features new pirates.

Yuichi Sasamoto

So, after returning home, the plan is to launch a rocket for Team Summer's Rocket in Taiki-cho, Hokkaido, although the target altitude is 500 meters. By the time this book reaches the eyes of readers, all the results, including the performance of this book, will have been revealed. Please look forward to it.

Note that some of the first drafts of the book were signed in red ink at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's Von Karman Auditorium.

The second galleys were checked with the original soundtrack of "Moretsu ♡ Space Pirates", which is currently under production, as background music.

So luxurious.

Afterword (KADOKAWA version)

The Crimson Pirate Ship after eight years.

The previous edition of “The Crimson Pirate Ship” was released in March 2011.

As Sasamoto wrote in the afterword of the Asahi Novel edition, he managed the JPL interview in LA just before the deadline on a tightrope schedule, and returned home safely, having already checked it with the editorial department, submitting the manuscript and making further revisions.

The year 2011 was a terrible year, with the Great East Japan Earthquake occurring on March 11th. At that time, Sasamoto was at Taiki-cho Aero Park preparing for the launch of ‘Haruichiban,’ Japan's first private rocket known to the world as the Horiemon Rocket, and the first rocket launched by the Summer Rocket Team.

The day before the scheduled launch date on the 12th, preparations for the launch of a liquid oxygen/ethanol rocket are steadily progressing in a corner of a winter-dead meadow, with the target altitude conservatively set at 500 meters as it is the first launch. Suddenly, the ground begins to shake.

The shaking, which I had perceived as if my body was being shaken by the strong wind, soon becomes a clear and massive shaking. The shaking, which is like being on a boat, lasts much longer than usual earthquakes, as if you can feel that the solid ground is just on top of the mantle, which is the liquid phase on a global scale.

After the earthquake ended, a red fox came out from behind the bushes in the distance, so it must have been a big earthquake, which is rare even for wild animals.

Launch preparation work resumed after the earthquake. The main topic of discussion is where was the epicenter of the current earthquake?

Horie was using a smart phone at that time, and was fortunate to be able to connect to the Internet at an aviation park in the town of Taiki-cho in the Tokachi region, where he immediately began gathering information.

The epicenter was near Sendai (information at the time. Morioka, which is close to the epicenter, was hit directly, so the initial information was delayed), and the launch was carried out amidst unbelievable tweets warning of a massive tsunami with a wave height of 10 meters. While we were still preparing, we received an evacuation order.

Not fully understanding the situation, I returned to the hangar at the Taiki-cho Multi-Purpose Air Park where the headquarters was located and turned on the CRT analog TV to which a digital receiver was connected, to find that the TV was showing scenes of the Pacific coast of the Tohoku region being hit by tsunami after tsunami.

This is how the officially named 2011 Tohoku-Pacific Ocean Earthquake began.

The launch site where the launch operations were being conducted is about 5 meters above sea level, and the hangar at the aviation park is 15 meters above sea level and far enough from the coast to be designated as a nearby evacuation site.

A major tsunami warning was also issued for the coast of Hokkaido, and as a result, we were unable to return to the launch site where we had evacuated, leaving our tools behind.

The next day's launch was, of course, cancelled. For a while, the archipelago will be filled with news of the great earthquake.

The program on which Sasamoto interviewed JPL was broadcast on BS in mid-March as planned, but it did not garner much attention and was aired before the news coverage of the Great Earthquake. Well, it can't be helped.

At this rate, I thought it might not come out this month, but The Crimson Pirate Ship was published as scheduled.

The Summer Rocketeers' first rocket, "Haru Ichiban," was launched on March 26, after some reworking, and successfully achieved its target altitude of 500 meters. We could have aimed for a higher altitude, but since it was the first launch, we were given a slightly lower target altitude, and we said, "Okay, let's achieve it exactly and show our control technology.”

After the first launch, rocket development has continued. The development organization has changed from Summer Rocketeers to Interstellar Technologies, a company established in the town of Taiki-cho, which, at the time of this writing, is building an observation rocket to reach outer space.

Just as the new book was fortunately published on schedule, the production of the anime also proceeded as planned.

I received word quite early on that the voice-over recording had begun and that I should come to the studio. However, as Sasamoto was working in the northern region of Japan, my schedule for coming to Tokyo did not match the schedule for the telecast until the Golden Week holidays of 2011.

The recording schedule is episode 5. I heard that the first episode will be dubbed on the same day, so I will adjust my schedule so that I can go there to watch it.

Dubbing is the process of adding not only the pre-recorded audio to the image, but also the music and sound effects to the image as a whole. The screen will be closer to the finished state, and it will include not only the recorded audio but also BGM and sound effects, so it will be easier to see and imagine the finished state than the pre-recording state.

Sasamoto saw for the first time what happens in the recording studio, and his mentor Takeshi Suto tole him to “keep smiling.”

Original authors sometimes feel very uncomfortable when they are shown something that has been converted into other media, whether it's manga or anime.

I don’t know why.

When converting an original work into other media, whether it's a novel or anything else, the usual process is to first understand the author's intentions, and then have the staff add various things to it.

In other words, the more faithful the media adaptation is to the original work, the more likely it is that what the original author intended will be reproduced in another medium.

At this point, it has been about three years since the author wrote the original story. As you can see, Marika, the yacht club members, and the transfer student have all grown up to a certain extent and have completely changed since then. I can tell you a story about a time when I had completely forgotten, and he grabs me by the neck and says, “This is what you were thinking!'” in a situation where there is no way to escape.

Yes, I wrote it. Yes, I did write a story like this. If I had known this would happen, I wonder if I could have worked out the settings a little more or thought about the development a little more. But I can say that by looking back on the past from this future, and I must have been working with all my might back then, so I guess the results won't be that different.

However, since I declared that I would leave everything to the client and that everything would be OK no matter what, for the sake of the staff who believed in me and worked for me, I'll keep my excuses to myself and only to myself. Yes, I wrote this story. I wrote this story, so it can't be helped that it came out the way it did.

In fact, as an original author, I am fortunate to be able to say, “Yes, I did write this of story.” Only those involved and the people concerned know how many dead bodies are piled up behind the old saying, “the animation and the original work are two different things.”

Dubbing started in the morning. I thought I was just going to give instructions on dubbing and check the results later, but I was surprised to see the work progressing so quickly right in front of my eyes.

The recording will start in the afternoon. Thanks to director Sato Tatsu and the recording director, a great group of voice actors have come to the studio one after another. Oh, it's dazzling.

I had heard about the start of the voice-recording session from the editor in charge of the project, who was there to observe it.

“The main character is a newcomer, so she seems to be having trouble with technical terminology.”

Well, since it's Sasamoto's original work, there are so many technical terms thrown around that it would have been better to have subtitles. I'm sure he went easy on them in the beginning. But they were only going easy on the readers, not the characters who knew what was going on in the story.

After all, the original author is so lazy that he didn't even check the recording script that was sent to him in advance.

In the modern day, the voice actors are given not only the scenario but also a DVD of the video for the voice-over in advance. The DVD is called "White Taste," which is a screen DVD that has almost no screen similar to the main story. After recording, it is collected by the studio to keep the content of the work confidential.

Since the videos are in production, the videos that contain the white taste for the telerecording will, of course, be discarded. Oh, no, I should have gotten a set of those, they would have been valuable materials during the production! It was not until long after the film was finished that I realized that it would be a valuable source of information during production.

The procedure for the voice-over recording has not changed much in the past. The opening title, part A and part B are confirmed and shown in the studio as a rehearsal. Next, each part is recorded.

Even if you have not checked the recording script in advance, you can get a general idea of what will happen by watching the first rehearsal screening with the script in hand.

The story is almost at the end of the first volume, and is about the battle between the solar-powered sailing ship Odette II and the Lightning 11, a delinquent transport ship that has been messing around with them.

I was surprised. Because almost all of Part A is an explanation of the electronic warfare that we will be doing.

Sasamoto has long been an aspiring writer of space operas. When it comes to space battles, it's the flower of space operations, and up until this point, I've done a lot of research and put together a space battle that is realistic, convincing, and fun to read.

The white taste for recording and the voice actors practicing while checking their parts during rehearsals show us electronic combat in outer space, which Sasamoto has written a lot about, but which he has never seen before.

Even now, when I think back to that time, it makes me happy.

In outer space, where there is a clear line of sight, battles can be started from far away that cannot be seen with the naked eye. Even if you can only see your opponent on radar, if they are also equipped with radar, sensors, and communication equipment of the same technological level, you should be able to assemble some interesting and exciting battle scenes. I wrote the battle scenes with this belief in mind, and the director and staff portrayed them on screen exactly as I expected, and the voice actors performed them with voices I had never imagined.

Not just anime, but if you want to depict a space battle in a video work, it is almost always required to have a screen where there are both enemies and allies on the same screen. However, in the vastness of outer space, it is almost impossible to arrange a spacecraft that can maneuver at speeds ranging from several kilometers per second to more than several tens of kilometers per second so that they can all appear on the same screen. However, if you think about it realistically, this is how it should be, and you should still be able to make some interesting space battle scenes.

The director and staff portrayed the battle that they believed in on screen with their outstanding skill and taste. At that time, Moretsu♡Space Pirates suddenly rose to the top of the world for its depiction of space battle scenes.

I thought, I won. For so many things.

Since I was working with director Sato Tatsu, I was never worried about his policy of not checking the original author and leaving everything up to him. However, at the recording session, Sasamoto received the wonderful dividend of an anime that satisfied the original author.

I think Sasamoto was probably grinning at the scene when Mr. Shuto told him to smile.

I would like to thank the director and staff who created that screen, and the viewers who accepted and enjoyed it.

After that, the original author who was present at the voiceover for episode 5 felt at ease and no longer bothered to check. And the deadline for the next work is approaching. What’s wrong? Has nothing changed? That means things are going well, I guess (self-suggestion).

January 28, 2019

Yuichi Sasamoto

I announced that I would pass the film as "all OK" without any checks by the original author, and I actually did that, and I did not even look over the script and storyboards I received.

The situation where the original author does not check is beneficial not only to the animation staff, but also to the author of the original work. After all, although the original author may have written an animation script before, they are usually an amateur, and it takes time and effort to decipher the script and storyboards. Moreover, if they find any discrepancies or inconsistencies with the original work, it is not good for their mental health and productivity to worry about the consistency.

Anime is supposed to be a work created by the director and staff based on the director's interpretation, so if that's the case, then it's fine to leave it to them. According to director Tatsuo Sato himself, the work belongs to the producer who raised the production costs. You could say that it was the top management who decided to make this kind of anime!

And I think one of the keys to getting staff to do a good job is to make them think that the work they're making is their own.

This book is a new edition of “Miniskirt Space Pirates 6: The Crimson Pirate Ship” published by Asahi Novels in March 2011 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. Currently, his main activity is manga. His representative works include "Rin - Noriyuki Matsumoto Art Collection" (Enterbrain), "Tsubame Yodamari Shoujo Kiko" (Tokuma Shoten), and "Minami Kamakura High School Girls Bicycle Club" (Mac Garden).

A cover of a video game

Description automatically generated

1. TL note: The text says they are contacting the Bentenmaru. However, the ship is actually the Odette II. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)