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PROLOGUE

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Design by Shindosha

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"Contact from the Black Swan "　The calm voice of the old man in charge of communications, Rock, echoed on the bridge.

"All pirate ships are in position. The enemy fleet also seems to be in position on the ecliptic."

"Thank you."

　Captain Suzuka, who had just officially taken over the White Swan three days ago in place of her father who had been seriously injured and was unconscious, looked down at the main display in the captain's seat. The high-precision display, which she had already reviewed an unknown number of times, was supposed to accurately show the current position and vector of the red giant star Garnet A and all the enemy and friendly spacecraft deployed around it.

　There were no more events to wait for. All ships were in position, waiting for the signal to begin operations.

　Suzuka shuddered as she realized that the fate of the stars was in her hands. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them.

"Then it's time to begin."

"Already?"　Old Rock, the oldest man on the bridge, looked back at the captain in a low, clear voice.

"The volunteer force hasn't been deployed yet, has it?"

"The volunteer force has not yet arrived here in the operational airspace. The starships are fast merchant ships, cargo ships, private cruisers, and civilian spacecraft without electronic fire control equipment. Even if we wait for them to arrive, we can't expect them to be a force to be reckoned with."

　Suzuka looked down at the main display once more. None of the symbols on the display indicated that the ship belonged to the regular fleet of the Independence Army.

"Besides, as pirates, we have never fought a controlled fleet battle before. It's a relief that at least our opponent is not a regular fleet, but the people running the fleet are definitely military. So, if we want to win, we have to play as many hands as we can to win.”

"What specific steps are you going to take?"　At the question of old man Rock, Suzuka realized that her own qualifications were being questioned, as she was about to take command of not only the White Swan but also the entire pirate fleet for the first time as captain.

"We have never fought a fleet battle, but instead have fought through the entire war situation as a single ship. From searching to interception, from attacking to cleaning up, we have done all the work that a regular fleet of ships would have had to do, but we have done it alone. That is why one pirate ship can do the work of a whole fleet."

　Suzuka looked around at the familiar faces on the bridge.

"As long as you do what you need to do without losing sight of the mission's purpose, no matter how many there are, there's no way you can lose to a hodgepodge of work fleets."

"Since the beginning of time, combat has always been a numbers game. The one who puts as much force as possible into the necessary time and place wins. If you could win by achievement and conviction, there would be peace in the world."

"Just one more reason why we can beat them."　Suzuka pretended to be relaxed and forced a smile.

"It's time."

　After a pause, she continued. "If they make a move now, we will definitely have the lead. The volunteer army, which cannot be counted on for its strength, will be left to clean up and rescue the victims after the battle is over. If we start now, we won't have to worry about the rescue ships getting caught up in the fighting."

　Smiling, Suzuka stared at Old Man Rock in the communications officer's seat.

　He raised one hand to indicate that she had passed the test.

"It's okay, I didn't think our last major task as pirates would be a fleet battle, but if the commander's spirit is that strong, we have a good chance of winning."

"Of course we're going to win."

　Suzuka's mouth twitched in a sulky grin, and she looked around the bridge.

"Let's go. White Swan, begin final acceleration. No change in mission procedures and hold off on electronic jamming until the last minute."

　Suzuka opened a channel to all ships participating in the operation.

"Come on, pirates!　Let's get to the last big job!"

　The White Swan, with its nine masts spread out on three sides and its solar sails fully extended to catch the Red Giant's sunlight, began to accelerate as if it were being repelled by its hull, which had been made lighter by maximizing the power of its inertial control system.

　The War of Independence ended three days later.

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"Parts cost, transportation costs, dock rent, work facility rent, food, clothing, weapons, ammunition, fuel, medicine, and office supplies!?"

　No matter how much she checked, the endless list of items kept coming up, and in the yacht club room, which was supposed to be empty, Katou Marika screamed.

"No matter how important it is to check the books, is this really a captain's job?　Did generations of pirate captains really do this kind of work?"

“What's all the fuss?”

　Without warning, someone peered into the expanded notebook display from behind, and Marika froze, slowly turning around.

"...... President?"

　The door to the clubroom was indeed still closed, but Lynn Lambretta, the president of the yacht club, appeared before I knew it and was eagerly reading the numbers on the display.

“Is this Bentenmaru’s household account book?”

"Yes, well, it's something like that."

　Marika turned her attention back to the display with a complicated look on her face. The truth is, it's not really allowed to show this information to outsiders, but since I explained the situation to them and asked them to help me operate the Bentenmaru, there's no point in hiding it now.

"Bentenmaru is a pirate ship, but until the spaceship is scrapped we need money in order to fly around the universe, so we have to keep a tight financial account so we can continue our work. Fortunately, I am not the accountant, but as the captain, I have to know and approve all the money coming in and out of the ship before I can submit the books to the administrative office that issues the pirate license."

"Do pirates nowadays have to submit their books to the regulatory authorities to get a license to operate?"

　Lynn rolled her eyes and compared Marika's profile with the display.

"May I see it?"

"It's not that interesting."　Marika turned the notebook display toward Lynn.

“The number of items is a little bit more complicated than on the Odette II, and the books are thicker because the number of voyages is off by a few orders of magnitude, but the books of a starship are basically the same for all of us.”

"Hmmm."

　Sliding her finger across the display, Lynn flipped through the stack of pages.

"No, it's interesting. I see, insurance is an annual contract. It must be a lot of work to have to fill out a spreadsheet for every job you take on."

"It's a lot of work," Marika nodded.

"I'm glad I'm not the one doing it, but it's so hard that I think that someday civilization will be destroyed by unnecessary paperwork."

“By the way......"

　Lynn scrolled through the rows of numbers on the display at a fair pace.

"I've heard that pirate ships don't pay taxes, is that true?"

"Where did you hear that!?"　Marika couldn't help but shout.

"That's a lie!　If you buy propellant, you have to pay fuel tax and VAT, and if you accidentally dock at a station, the bill for all the taxes you pay will come after you. Who said pirate ships don't pay taxes?"

"No, I mean..."

　Laughing at Marika's tirade, Lynn waved her hand in the air.

"That's not the only tax on spaceships. There is also a weight tax, a thrust tax, and if the ship is equipped with a FTL engine, it will be taxed under some incomprehensible system, and the cost of stamps for a safety certificate and fees for application documents is ridiculous. But I heard that pirate ships are exempted from taxes because they were made up to take advantage of the wartime mess and are treated in the same way as warships."

"Aren't warships taxed?"　Marika asked curiously, a question she had never thought of before.

"Warships are the property of the state. If the state taxes its own property, it will only be an extra hassle for both the payer and the receiver."

"The taxation bureau is the most merciless of all state agencies, so I don't think it's surprising that they would impose taxes on property regardless of whether it belongs to you or someone else and seize it if you can't pay it.”

"Even warships are operated in accordance with the law, and in peacetime, they are required to operate in accordance with navigation laws and undergo periodic inspections as required by law. However, as long as it is the property of a star system nation, it is the same for taxpayers to take taxes from their own property as it is for taxpayers to take taxes from their own property, and the tax bureaucracy also wants to avoid extra hassle. So, although there is an operating budget in place, warships are not taxed the way they are on the home planet. I thought state-owned spaceships weren't taxed for the same reason, but I thought pirate ships weren't either.”

"Is that so?"

　To begin with, Marika is not aware of all the taxes that are being paid by the spacecraft of the Sea of the Morningstar registry.

"I heard somewhere that pirate vessels are exempt from taxes because they are both legal and outside the law. Well, I guess it was a long time ago during the war that pirate licenses were established, but I thought they were exempted from periodic inspections and everything."

"I don't know."

"Wasn't there any talk about the Bentenmaru going in for periodic inspections after Marika became captain?"

"We're a poor spaceship, so our ship tries to avoid that as much as possible."

　Marika thought about it.

"Of course, our crew is not the kind of people who would spare the necessary time and effort, so I'm sure they do their maintenance and inspections right."

　All spacecraft are required to undergo periodic inspections according to their various classifications, such as commercial and private use. No spacecraft may legally fly in galactic space unless it passes a periodic inspection conducted by the Bureau of Shipping and its commissioned docks and inspection stations, mainly to check safety equipment and necessary updates.

"May I try a search?"

　Lynn stopped moving her fingers on the display. Marika nodded.

"I have a backup. It's fine."

"I'm not going to rewrite it."

　Lynn selected only taxes from a seemingly endless number of numeric items and put them on the display.

"Oh my, that's a lot."

"That's all the payments for one ship for the current year."

"The port entry fee, the VAT on propellant, food, and spare parts, and the navigation fee."

Scrolling through the list on a sheet of paper at high speed, Lynn quickly reached the last line and turned to Marika with a triumphant smile.

"Look, there's no weight tax, no property tax, and no tax on engine output, which a normal spaceship would have to pay. Is this all the taxes?　Are they all in one place, or are there any missing?"

"That should be all of it."

　Marika answered, feeling something unaccountable.

“Pirate ships are not taxed?　Really?　That should make things a little easier, but why is it so hard?”

"Well, isn't it because the pirates in Marika's company do nothing but unprofitable work?

"Well, I admit that it's not all lucrative work."

　Marika looked at the rows of numbers on the display with a discouraged look on her face.

"After all, even if you say you're a pirate, there's a lot of things like things like loyalty jobs, people-related things that make it hard to make money, and things like that."

"If they know that much and exempt them from taxes, then the administration is doing a great job."

"I don't think they are thinking about it, they just don't know it."

　Marika thought about whether there were any other spaceships whose accounting situation she knew, and remembered the yacht club's training ship.

"Huh?"

　Marika looked up at Lynn.

“Is the tax on a spacecraft the same whether it's a Category I or a Category II?”

"If it is a Category II spacecraft, which is not capable of FTL, its power output will be an order of magnitude smaller, and it will have little effect on the spatial structure as it flies around, so taxes should be a little lower. But there are a lot of common utility bills, so it shouldn't be that much different."

"Our spaceship, the Odette II, pays taxes too, doesn't it?"

　Lynn pondered for a moment.

"If a public institution like a school owns a spacecraft for educational purposes, there should be various exemptions, but our school is private, and the Odette II is owned by our school and registered to the Sea of the Morningstar, plus at that size, it should cost us more taxes than we would want to pay privately."

"That's right."

　She set up a second-hand information terminal from the department next to her notebook.

"I think I found a place in the tax bureau that explains ship-related taxes......."

　Typing the relevant terms into the keyboard and searching, she easily found the Taxation Bureau's public relations page. Marika began searching for the tax-related item she wanted to look up.

“No, not a ship that floats on water, but a spaceship. Let's see, our training ship was originally a cargo ship, wasn't it?”

"An experimental merchant ship that prioritized economy, then a fast transport, but now it's a training ship, right?"

"Oh, that's right, a training ship is ......."

　Marika's hand stopped tapping on the keyboard.

"There is no such type of ship."

"I'm not sure if there are any other training ships in our star system other than the military."

"Maybe an aerospace school or research facility would have a training ship."

"Training ships owned by research institutes and companies are probably used for recreation and research, not for training only, so there would be very few spacecraft for training purposes. A Category II cargo ship would probably cost about the same, so why don't you look for a model case there?"

"Yes, let's see, a spacecraft of the same size and power output as our training ship and with similar taxation would be ......."

　Although it is called a weight tax, the tax on a spacecraft is generally determined by its effective volume, not by its hull mass or dimensions. In addition, there are detailed regulations and variables such as payload weight, engine power, life support system capacity and number of passenger cabins for passenger ships, and they also vary depending on the number of years of operation and depreciation rates , so even mass-produced spacecraft of the same type rarely have exactly the same taxes.

"The ship is almost 200 years old, so not only is depreciation long gone, but depending on where the ship is registered, it may be subject to additional property taxes to encourage replacement."

　Lynn looked at the information terminal in front of Marika.

"May I ...?"

"Please."

When it comes to handling electronic devices, Lynn's skills are a few steps ahead of Marika's. She readily surrendered the control panel and watched the display as it spun out the screen she was aiming for, even though her typing speed was not that different from her own.

" A Category II cargo ship, similar in class to our ship, would probably be somewhere around here.”

　After inputting the appropriate numbers into the model case she had so easily found, Lynn put up the annual expenses for a standard Category II cargo ship on the display.

"Wow."

　Marika couldn't help but groan at the amount, which was an order of magnitude more than she had expected.

"Just to be clear, this is the amount of money it would cost to keep a cargo spaceship afloat in some non-financial space for a year. If you actually want to operate a cargo ship, you will have to pay for engine maintenance, propellant, port taxes, crew salaries, food, and other necessary expenses in addition to this."

"I know, I've seen it for the Bentenmaru." Marika sighed.

"If I wanted to work in the transportation business, I would need an office and a place to receive work, and when I think about the upkeep of that, I feel overwhelmed."

“Space is a place that takes money for whatever reason.”

　Seeing Marika's disgusted face, Lynn laughed.

"I guess if you build an intergenerational spaceship with a completely closed system and go out to an outer galaxy where the Galactic Empire can't reach you, the taxpayers won't come after you, but even then there might be an officer with a letter of demand ahead of you at your destination."

Marika also laughed and looked at the list of standard taxes for a cargo spaceship of the same class as the Odette II on the display.

“With a spaceship like this, the tuition at Hakuoh Academy should be expensive......... Huh?”

　Marika tilted her head.

"What's wrong?"

"Before, Kane -- Kane-sensei -- , was surprised to see that the Odette II had a private pier at the relay station. How could a training ship from a private school have exclusive use of a closed system of docks?"

　Marika manipulated her notebook to show the Bentenmaru's port-related expenses on the display. No matter how pirate ships are, they may occasionally dock at the open-system wharf of the Sea of the Morningstar Relay Station with their ships, not just their ferries.

"If they charge such an astonishing fee just for leaving a spaceship on an open dock for half a day, I wonder if just connecting the Odette II to a dedicated dock at a station will soon cost as much as a new spaceship.”

“That's ...... right.”

"Our school is wealthy, but I don't think it's that wealthy"

　Marika began tapping on the information terminal again.

"What now?"

"This is the occupancy fee for the closed system dock at the relay station. I wonder if there is a long term discount or something that would make it cheaper."

　However, no matter how many times she turned over the public relations page of the Sea of the Morningstar Relay Station, she could not find the occupancy fee for the closed dock.

　Although there are examples of the star system military using some of the closed docks exclusively, I could not find any data on how much the military pays to the relay station for annual usage fees.

"The military and the Port Authority, which oversees the airports and relay stations, are all part of the Sea of the Morningstar Administration, so I wonder if there is no charge for the military to use them."

"That's unfair!"

"I told you that it is more reasonable since both the military and the station are operated by taxpayers' money. However, the occupancy fee schedule for a closed system, even for a short period of time, can be quite frightening."

　A dock to accommodate a huge spacecraft must, of course, be larger than the spacecraft. The fee schedule for a closed, pressurized dock that is entirely enclosed and filled with a breathable atmosphere was surprisingly high, even for a shared one in the upside Bay Area.

"If you're talking about long-term occupancy of a dedicated section, this is the kind of money that makes you want to get rid of the ship and take the necessary expenses with you."

“Even if there might be a long-term discount, a private pier would be more expensive than a shared pier.”

Looking at the price list for the pressurized dock, Marika played around with the numbers displayed there.

“No matter what it is, it's something we don't want to think about. So why is our school keeping the Odette II?”

"Have the relevant budgets have been published?"

　Lynn took out her own special computer, which she calls HAL-bou, from her desk in the club room and immediately began to operate it.

　Marika rolled her eyes when she watched her casually breaking through the security system decorated with the emblem of the Hakuoh Academy.

"What are you doing?"

"I thought I'd take a look at our school's budget execution and what's publicly available. Well, I was wondering where the budget for replenishment and maintenance came from, when we embarked on the Odette II before and during the training voyage before that. Marika, did you pay extra club fees for the training voyage?"

　Marika shook her head.

"I didn't pay it. I don't think it was added to the tuition afterwards."

"I didn't either. That means the expenses required to launch the training sailboat, including the renewal fees for the equipment, are paid out of the yacht club’s budget."

"Is our yacht club that rich?"

"Even you know that isn't true."

As she typed, Lynn looked around the large, salon-like club room, which was decorated with ancient décor.

"At first glance, it may look like we have a lot of equipment, but our school just uses what we have with care. Sometimes second-hand equipment comes in from somewhere, but it is either given away by the supporters' association or given to us by alumni, so we know that we are not as wealthy as we appear to be. Even though we have practice voyages, our club's expenses have not changed that much from the year before last to the year after last. But the fact that the budget related to Odette II was easily approved without any proper confirmation means that there is probably a record of it somewhere in our school."

　Lynn's hand stopped as she easily broke through security and entered the data server of the Hakuoh Academy.

“None ......?”

"What?"

"I can't find any Odette II-related items in the budget... What's going on here?”

"Is it under some other name?"

“Such as?"

“Like the ...... White Swan, for example?"　Marika said, remembering that the yacht club's training sailboat was once called by that name. Lynn typed quickly.

"I don't see it. The amount of money for the maintenance and operation of an entire spaceship that big is not that small......"

　Marika fearfully peeked into the display of Lynn's favorite modified computer.

"Well, if the Odette II pays the same taxes as the cargo ship I just mentioned, and maintains its own dock on the relay station, then perhaps our school's budget is not even enough ......"

When she was told this, Lynn looked again at the budget chart of Hakuoh Academy on the display.

"The school is a mammoth school with integrated elementary, middle and high school education and a large number of students, but the per-student tuition fee is very small, and the donations from corporate sponsors and supporters do not generate any surprising income when you look at the performance of the asset management company."

"Th… this isn't a surprising amount of income?"

　Marika looked again at president Lynn’s profile. "Hmm?　I'm used to seeing this many digits when I'm helping Jenny."

"Is that so... It's a different order of magnitude from the pirate ship business."

"It's not by an order of magnitude, but I bet it costs more money to maintain one of those training ships than it does to maintain a pirate ship. And yet, I can't find a related budget anywhere I look......"

“Um, our school has branches on other planets, doesn't it?"

　Hakuoh Academy has opened schools not only in Sea of the Morningstar but also in several other star systems.

“If you put them all together, it would be quite large, wouldn't it?"

"It's not so easy to accept the idea that a school from another planet, with which we have little connection, is paying for the sake of one of our yacht club's training ship. It is more natural to think that there is some other way to account for it."

"Separate account?"　Marika asked again. Lynn nodded.

"The fact that the expenses related to Odette II do not show up so neatly makes it more acceptable to think that there is a separate budget for a separate account somewhere other than our school."

"Where?"

　Marika tilted her head further.

"Why?"

"Who knows?"

　Lynn turned off the display and closed HAL-bou.

"I wonder if it has something to do with our yacht club being disproportionately well-equipped."

　The clubroom door opened, and the club members entered laughing.

"Good day!"

　Marika hurriedly jumped to her notebook, which had been left open projecting Bentenmaru's ledger and closed it.

"Maybe if I check somewhere, I can find out something."

　After quickly putting away HAL-bou, president Lynn stood up as the club members entered the clubroom.

"Hello there, you've come to the right place. Help me install a new program in the simulator before the underclassmen arrive!"

"How did the White Swan get to be the training ship for the captain's school, you ask?"

　On the bridge of the Bentenmaru, which had entered FTL navigation and had no immediate work to do, Marika, still in her captain's uniform for business purposes, asked Kane, the helmsman, about the ship's operation, and he turned around on his seat.

　Marika, in the captain's seat, nodded.

"I thought a professional pirate might know about the situation."

"I'm not the one who checked out the training sailboat's history. Hyakume, weren't you the one who found out that the training ship was a pirate's antique?"

"Yes, I did gather information when I heard that the captain, before she became our captain, was about to embark a sailing pirate spacecraft that had been lying in bed on the dock of the relay station for twenty years."

　Hyakume, in the radar/sensor seat to the right of the helmsman's seat, raised his reclining seat and began operating the control panel.

"I just laid out what I could find out by looking it up, and now, where did I put it, I'm pretty sure I sent that report to Misa, so there's a record of it being sent. Here it is."

　Hyakume confirmed the contents of the report by showing it on the sub-monitor, which was just an easy-to-understand arrangement of the information he had gathered.

"Do you want to see it?"　As the report is forwarded to the captain's seat.

"I'm afraid it probably won't meet your expectations. After the Revolutionary War ended, she voluntarily disarmed, gave up her pirate license, reverted from a temporary cruiser to a transport ship, and was a cargo ship for a while, but then she was registered as a training ship at Hakuoh Academy."

“He gave up his pirate's license .......”

Marika muttered bitterly and frustrated at its maintenance.

"The pirate licenses issued by the independent government at that time were not only for professional pirate ships, you know."

　Looking for materials omitted in the report, Hyakume searches data storages scattered all over the place.

"Pirate licenses were also issued in cases where independent-spirited spacecraft pilots rushed to the scene with their spaceships. The poor colonial forces at the time of the Revolutionary War are still famous enough to be the subject of many stories, but what on earth were they expecting from a spaceship that carried only small arms for self-defense, let alone anti-ship armaments?"

"Even if you can't count on them as a fighting force, they add to your numbers."

　Coorie, in the electronic warfare seat, joined the conversation.

“Even research ships and transport ships that don't serve as a fighting force could add to their numbers by announcing that they have joined the war effort, but even if they openly become enemies of the Stellar Alliance, their pirate licenses will expire if they do not actually pirate.”

"Thanks to this, the colonists at the end of the War of Independence had a force that could match the space forces of the Stellar Alliance in numbers, so they were not at such a disadvantage when negotiating with the bureaucrats, according to history books, but I wonder how it really was. Well, that is why those who applied for pirate licenses in case of emergency or just to make up the numbers, returned them at the end of the war, or let them expire. Pirates in their own line of work and those who changed jobs after waking up to piracy kept their pirate licenses, though."

"Do you know what happened to the White Swan after it stopped being a pirate?"

　Hyakume answered Marika's question by looking at the list of documents on the display.

"I haven't looked into anything more than the documents available at the shipping bureau and the academy. Since the actual documents are right in front of you, why don't you take a look at them directly?　Isn't there at least a logbook in the captain's club?"

"Oh, right."

Marika nodded with a glum face as she recalled that there was also a voyage log in the form of a paper book in the clubroom's storeroom from the days when the Sea of the Morningstar was still a colony star.

"But it's an archaic language, and the handwriting is hard to read in places."

"Why don't you just think of it as a learning experience and try to decipher it?"

"I'm not good at classics."

Marika looked away from Coorie. She could picture the face of a princess who seemed to know not only the classics but also ancient languages. Marika shook her head hurriedly.

“If I rely on Gruier again, she will eventually take over the pirate ship.”

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

　Marika scrolled through the 100 year history of the Odette II since she became a training ship. There are records of several short training voyages per year, but no other notable entries. Perhaps it is because the ship is located on a closed dock, where a new ship could be built if they wanted to, not to mention heavy maintenance, but there is no record of any steady updates or modifications.

"It's time to get back to normal space."

　Turning to the cockpit, Kane moved his seat forward and assumed the steering position. Flipping through the monotonous chronology of Odette II, Marika responded animatedly.

"Roger that, I'll leave it to you."

The solar sailing ship, bathed in the cocktail light of the ageing C68 pier, was in the same neatly folded mast and retracted position as when we last saw her.

"I was told that this dock was designed exclusively for the Odette II and that it was inexpensive because it couldn't be used for anything else."

　Lynn, in her uniform, who had come up to the relay station from school after school via the airport, looked around the huge space that housed the sailing spacecraft from the weightless entrance.

"It may be true that there may be some waste if a spacecraft of a different shape is inserted, but that doesn't mean that the shape is so special that no other spacecraft can be inserted, does it?"

"I’m sure the president thinks so too, right?”

Marika softly kicked off the pier and floated up to Odette II, which was fixed in the center of the pier, and turned around in midair.

"The port facilities are not the latest, but they are well-maintained and there are no inconveniences, and I don't think they will be lacking even when dealing with modern spaceships. It would be expensive to just keep equipment like this at a relay station, so I think it would be strange to leave it idle just because it's on a closed pier that's not in use."

“What are you talking about?" Gruier asked, soaring into the enclosed space of the private dock to follow Marika. Seeing the thoughtful princess's face, Marika turned her body toward the training ship lying on its hull in front of her.

A cartoon of a person with long hair

Description automatically generated

"I'm talking about how much it must cost to maintain our training ship."

　Gruier's face clouded.

“Is the club's budget not enough?”

　Marika waved her hands in panic.

"No, no, no. I'm not talking about that, I'm talking about the fact that it would be very difficult to have such a big spaceship for private use, even though it can't go FTL and it doesn't have a high-powered engine."

"It would be hard without being in some kind of business."

　Gruier looked around the 200-meter-long sailing spacecraft from bow to stern, even though it was classified as a medium-sized ship.

"Okay."

　Marika, after a clean leap and landed on the center hull, attached herself to the access panel next to the small cargo bay on the port side of the Odette II, which had been locked up.

“So, Gruier, will you take the middle school sailing crew for a spin around the spaceship?”

　Marika put one leg over the side of the access panel and pulled on the lever that unlocked and opened the cargo door. Inside the dock, the internal power of Odette II, which is wired and supplied with the necessary energy from the outside, comes to life, and the hatch, which is too large for human access, slowly begins to open.

"Some of the new students may have never been in such a large weightless space before, so be careful."

"Ok, I understand."

　Gruier, who had jumped out slightly earlier than Marika, spun around and landed with the port side of the Odette II under her feet, then jumped back onto the outer wall.

　Most of the upper school yacht club members, including president Lynn, were already leaping toward the Odette II, which was fixed in the center of the enclosed space, while most of the upper school freshmen and middle school yacht club members were still stuck on the outer wall near the entrance, looking around helplessly.

　Marika entered the cargo bay through a gap that was open enough for one person to slip through, although it is a common warning for beginners not to approach the cargo bay door until it is completely open and secured.

"......I'll have to do something about this too."

　On the port cargo deck, which would have easily accommodated the school's ferry on the previous voyage, a slender, small spacecraft was fixed in a retracted position, its silhouette looking ferocious. The Silent Whisper, a state-of-the-art electronic reconnaissance ship, is too much to be carried on a training ship, but it has been left on the hangar deck of the Odette II because there is no other place to put it.

"She's the latest model that can be launched from the ground and easily get into orbit, so she should be left at the airport and used as a ferry exclusively for our department."

　Marika shook her head as she imagined the state-of-the-art electronic reconnaissance ship, which even the star system military was not planning to introduce because it was too expensive, parked in the private ship area of the Shin-Okuhama Airport.

"But if a high school student were to board the plane and launch it, it would be noticeable, wouldn’t it?"

“Is it safe while I’m away?"

Lynn slid in through the cargo door, which was not fully opened yet.

“I haven’t opened all of them yet.”

　Marika tapped on the panel of the airlock control box leading into the cabin. The display, which had come up automatically while the hatches were being unlocked manually, began an automatic check of the ship's interior.

“It seems ok for now.”

'Well, I guess you don't have to worry about someone sneaking in at a private dock where they only keep antique training ships.”

“No, now, I'm thinking that maybe this one, which my senior brought with her, could be worth a lot of money.”

After running her eyes over the Silent Whisper, which occupied the storage deck with only one slender hull, Marika opened the airtight hatch. She carefully sniffed the air coming from inside the closed hull but did not detect any unusual smells.

“I'm going to take care of something on the bridge first. “

　Grabbing her schoolbag containing her beloved HAL-bou, Lynn entered the Odette II's cabin through the open hatch. She moved along, turning on the ship's lights one after another, which she had remembered to turn off last time.

“OK, I'm going to check the engine room and then go to the bridge.”

　Marika returned to the fully opened cargo bay door and waved to the crew members floating around her.

“The middle school will circle around the outside of the spacecraft and begin a visual inspection of the exterior!　The upper class will check the exterior and contents of the spacecraft, and the assignments will remain the same as before.”

　There was no such tradition when Marika was in middle school, but after the Odette II was revived as a training ship, the middle school and high school clubs began to conduct joint dockside exercises.

　Most spacecraft have a simulator function that allows them to reproduce navigational conditions without actually moving. Using this feature, exercises can be conducted using a real spacecraft without actually going into space.

　Even when Odette II was still tied up at the dock, training camps were held in some cases with the crew staying on board. Now that Odette II is actually able to sail, on a smaller scale, on-the-job training is being conducted involving not only upperclassmen, but also middle school yacht club members as apprentices.

　　After checking the normal propulsion system in the engine room and the power system it transmits, Marika entered the bridge of the Odette II, leaving the second and third year students in charge of the engine room.

　The main bridge, where all the necessary panels were lit just as they were when underway, was crowded with more members than operational personnel. The steps of the launch sequence, which started after the completion of the inspection of the normal propulsion system, were progressing unexpectedly fast, although they were somewhat far from the normal operational procedures because of the well-trained personnel working together.

“It seems like everyone is improving their skills in areas that are not useful in normal life......”

　Marika looked for president Lynn, who was supposed to be in overall command.

Lynn was in the electronic warfare seat, which was not supposed to be needed for the launch sequence exercise, and was busy working with her own computer, which was connected to a control panel for three people.

“President!"

　Marika jumped between the club members who were attached here and there to the electronic warfare seat.

“The equipment there shouldn't be needed this time!　What are you doing in a place like that!"

“They kicked me out of the captain's chair to train the crew.”

　Lynn looked at the captain's seat in the center where Yayoi, a sophomore, was sending instructions this way and that with a bright red face.

“I was going to assist her if she needed it, but this was the only seat I could find that would be safe from the intruder.”

“Um..."

　Marika looked around at the electronic warfare station, seating three people, equipped with electronic warfare equipment that, although old, could compete with active ships depending on the way it was done.

“One ship could easily take down this station, don't you think?”

“I know. Don't worry, the main engines aren't running right now, and if they were powered by an external source, the breakers would trip before any serious electronic warfare.”

“Are you really thinking about trying it out to see if it really works?”

　Marika put her hand on the backrest of the seat next to Lynn, who was buckled in the electronic warfare seat, and looked around at the control panel.

“Why? There's no point in trying when you already know the outcome without even trying. It's bad enough to stand out as an all-girls school training ship, but if we do anything to draw attention to ourselves, it'll just make it even harder for us to make a move.”

"You're thinking like a criminal.”

“But I'd like to modify some of the equipment if I could."

　Stopping her hands, Lynn looked around the electronic warfare seat, which was half lit with displays and consoles. Marika asked again carefully.

“What do you mean?"

“No matter how much software you rewrite, no matter how many parts you replace and power up, Odette II is still an antique. As it is, it is not possible to make full use of the reconnaissance ship functions that Jenny brought with her.”

“Why on earth do you intend to use a reconnaissance ship that can only be operated by an electronic battleship?”

“Because it's a reconnaissance ship that has spent all its budget on expensive electronic weapons and parts! It has a radar system with more power than this one, and its processing power is comparable to that of a battleship, so a simple calculation shows that the effective range and accuracy are more than 100 times greater.”

　Although not as powerful as the Bentenmaru, the Odette II is equipped with electronic armament that is too good for a training ship. She may be 200 years old, but her capabilities far exceed those of any civilian ship in service.

“That much."

　Marika sighed as she realized that the numbers were much higher than she had imagined.

“It is natural that the Silent Whisper is designed to deal with such enemies, but even against a stealthed enemy ship, if it knows the general direction, it can cross-search and locate its position with a single ship.”

　Normally, it is difficult to search for a target that does not reflect radar waves. The only way to find a target that does not reflect radar waves by conventional means is to use inefficient all-sky scanning or infrared detection by optical sensors.

　One exception to this rule is to use radar beams from multiple directions to look for the slightest unusual response. Most stealth radar systems do not completely absorb radar waves, but rather do not reflect radar waves only in the direction of irradiation, so they may not be able to respond to irradiation from multiple directions and show a slight reaction.

　In the case of a stealth ship that completely absorbs radar waves, the irradiated radar waves are converted to a different frequency or heat and radiated, resulting in a weak infrared response. If a stealth ship is propelled by normal propulsion or anti-gravity engines, it is easier to detect it because it can observe propulsive plasma and gravity shift.

“What exactly does it mean to cross-search with a single ship?”

To detect stealth ships, multiple radars at a sufficient distance must illuminate a specific airspace. If a radar can receive and analyze not only its own radar waves, but also other radar waves emitted by its allies, the system can achieve the same results as a huge radar with an aperture equal to the distance apart.

“All right, why not place it around unmanned radar and control it?”

"That kind of move has been around for a long time. Besides, if you're going to deploy a radar, it can't be a single ship. I don't have a complete understanding of the Silent Whisper’s electronic system, so I can't explain it with certainty, but it seems to me that the radar is not only a phased array that only changes direction without moving the antenna, but it also beams a kind of ‘raft’ of radar waves that are pre-shifted in phase, frequency and polarization so that they reflect in different directions."

　Marika's eyes widened, not understanding Lynn's explanation.

"What is that?"

"So, against a stealth ship that sends radar waves in the forward direction, you send out modulated waves that reflect back in the reverse direction. Of course, you don't know in which direction the reflected radar waves will go, so you have to periodically launch radar waves that reflect in various directions. We don't know what exactly the radar antenna is doing, and if it were to do that, the number of reactions would probably increase to an alarming degree, but it is said that it is doing real-time processing to pick out anomalies by comparing them with the reactions of normal waves."

"It's not fair."

　Lynn laughed at Marika, who expressed her honest feelings as she felt them.

"So, you know, it would be a waste of a good reconnaissance ship if we don't have a system that allows us to at least share the data, wouldn't it?"

"I agree that it would be a waste, but if Silent Whisper can detect such a stealth ship, how in the world are we going to deal with it?"

　Marika looked around the bridge where the simulated departure procedure was about to open the pier.

"What are you going to do with our training ship against a serious stealth ship that can only be detected by the Silent Whisper?"

"Once you know the location of the person who thinks they're hiding, there are many things you can do, like pretending you've been caught and applying electronic jamming, or alerting the military, or setting a trap."

　Lynn began to move her hands again.

"I think the battle is decided ninety percent of the time before it even starts. If that's the case, I think it's the duty of those in a position of responsibility to bring the fight to a point where victory is assured."

"If you are in a responsible position, the first thing you should do is avoid a situation that could lead to a battle!"

　Marika's voice trailed off.

"The Odette II isn't a warship or a pirate ship, and we're all just schoolgirls, not soldiers or anything."

"Who was it who forced those schoolgirls to become pirates?"

"I don't like to call it 'forced'. I just asked them to help me. I've been sick to my stomach, wondering what I would do if we had to fight a real battle."

"Well, that's the captain's job, so it's no wonder. As the captain, I'm also very nervous."

"You're full of lies."

　The opening of the pier was confirmed on the simulator. The operation to release the docking arm, free the hull, and depart from the relay station under their own power will now begin.

　Marika's voice went even quieter as she confirmed that no one on the bridge was paying attention to them.

"'So, did you find it?　A clue as to how the White Swan became our training ship."

"No."

　Lynn replied in a whisper, moving her hands in the same manner.

"The truth is, I've been trying to access the Odette II's data management area from time to time since I was in middle school, but there are a lot of files and hidden data that I can't figure out how to open. The storage space that holds the data is so old that if I accidentally messed with it and it self-destructed, I wouldn't be surprised if it were to be sent to the manufacturer, but the manufacturer itself had disappeared and the data would be lost forever."

"Is there any data that the president can't open!?" Marika couldn't help but shout. Lynn shrugged lightly.

"I don't know how many keys I have. I think I have more keys than most."

　Lynn ran her eyes over her HAL-bou fixed on top of the console. The modern computer, wired to the Odette II, was scanning quietly so as not to disturb the system.

"But if the author has no concept of a key, there is no way to open the file, no matter what kind of key you provide, and if the creator does not expect someone to open the file, it will remain sealed forever. The data that is still usable is still accessible because the format has been updated, but when it comes to mere records, there are so many old standards that are not even archived and have long since given up on compatibility that it took me years just to look them up."

“...... So, president, are you familiar with the strange old standards?”

Marika looked at the HAL-bou display, which was continuing to scan files at high speed.

"Fortunately, Odette II has a large storage space with an absurdly large capacity and has such a long history that if you search by date, you’ll find records of it being under construction. The amount of data that seems to be meaningful is so large that it is tedious, and even data that seems to be meaningless noise may actually be encrypted battle data that is just pretending to be so. ...... If I had a more powerful computer, I would be able to analyze it a little easier."

　The HAL-bou that Lynn uses looks like a rugged military computer, but its insane modifications have made it faster than the latest models. If you use it at full throttle, the dedicated battery runs out of power very quickly, so if you want to make it practical, you have to connect it to a power supply.

"But you're looking for a file that's more than 100 years old. ......"

"Just because it's an old file doesn't mean that the keys are simpler or that there are fewer compression methods than there are now. As long as you don't know whether the key exists or not, you have to be careful not to step on a trap and self-destruct."

"Just a moment, please."

Marika looked around at the control panel of the electronic battle seat, which showed only a quiet, non-combat-ready display.

"Are there really that many locked files in the world of Odette II?"

　Lynn nodded.

“It's disgusting. Of course, data for everyday work, ancient star charts, and navigation records are neatly arranged without any compression or encryption, but other data is scattered discreetly here and there in an inconspicuous manner. I think it's data that needs to be kept intentionally, because if the spaceship is still alive, it can be backed up and rewritten periodically, but I don't know what it is, and I don't know why they are doing it.”

"When is the data from?"

　In addition to the title, the date of creation and size are usually appended to the data.

“Apparently, they even modify the date properly when they rewrite it. I think the real date can be displayed properly if you use the key for it. Currently, even if you find the hidden files and put them in order, they seem to be dated randomly between the time they were created and today, which doesn't help.”

"It's suspicious."

"Sometimes they even put files with dates in the future that aren't even here yet. I think they're just trying to make fools of us."

"Docking arm released!"

"Course clear, check!"

"Odette II, departing port!"

　Yayoi, in the captain's seat, shouts out after confirming that all stations have completed their final checks and are safe, and the Odette II, still anchored at pier C68, enters a simulation of its departure.

“Well, the situation outside is, uh...”

　Lynn ran her fingers over the control panel in the electronic warfare seat. The display showed the ship's position in the surrounding airspace as reported by the relay station's control station.

　Marika took her place next to Lynn in the electronic warfare seat. Odette II's planned route was a short one, circling within the relay station's control airspace and returning immediately. Because it was a simulation, no permission for departure or route schedule had been submitted to ATC, but the route was set in accordance with real-life conditions, and the ship had to move around so as not to obstruct the routes of other spaceships.

"Oh, we are rather lucky."

　Marika murmured in a whisper when she saw that there were no large ships or fleets that would cause detours along the scheduled departure and arrival routes.

"If this is the case, we may be able to return almost on schedule."

"Since it's a simulation anyway, it would be better for training if there were various unplanned accidents."

"What kind of accidents are you expecting around our planet?"

“Odette II, departing port.”

　Repeating this, Ai in the helmsman's seat applied slight pressure to the old-fashioned control sticks mounted on either side of the seat. The Odette II, freed from its docking arms in the simulator, floated softly using its attitude control thrusters and began to move.

“As expected, when the bridge is staffed on a rotating basis, we can't break the previous record.”

　Lynn looked at the record this time, which left the pier in a time not much different from the previous pier drill within the margin of error. Marika laughed.

"I told you, we're not a warship, so we don't need to train for an emergency launch."

“Just because it's a civilian ship doesn't mean there won't be emergencies, so I don't see any harm in training for when they do.”

"You don't need to train for emergency situations until you are ready to do your regular job. You can think about such things after you are able to operate a spaceship properly."

　Without warning, a sharp alarm pierced the bridge.

The voices on the bridge, where short status reports and private conversations had been going on, died out. Marika looked at Lynn's face, wondering if the president had set something up. Lynn, who looked at Marika as if thinking the same thing, shook her head with a strange look on her face and then opened her mouth.

“Report!　What’s the alarm?　Who's in charge?”

“Y… Yes!”

　Marii, in the communications seat with the monitor flashing red in front of her, raised her hand.

"I'm in charge here! Emergency communication from outside, this is, um, SOS...."

　The tone of Marii's voice jumped as she searched the sub-monitor for a compatible communication pattern.

"It's a distress signal!"

"I didn't set that trap in the simulation."　Lynn said, as if to let us know that this was not the drill in the scenario.

"If it's a public distress signal, let ATC handle it. What's the other ship, what's its position, what's its status?"

“It's just a standard distress signal, so we don't know what's going on. The other ship's name is the Black Swan, and its position is ...... Antares!”

"Garnet!?"

　Lynn repeated unintentionally while checking the same signal in the electronic warfare seat.

"Thirty light years from here, the red giant star Garnet A?!?"

"No way!"

　Marii, who had read the more detailed data, raised her voice.

"This SOS is a normal transmission!　It is not a FTL transmission!"

"Where is the originating position!?"

　Marika raised her voice as she fiddled with the electronic warfare panel, wondering if it would be possible to locate the received distress signal as if it were an enemy ship. The distress signal contains location information, but it does not necessarily mean that the coordinates of the signal's transmission correspond to the location information.

“I'm calculating now. ...... it's outside!　It's a signal from outside the Tau system!”

"An SOS in normal communication, which only flies at the speed of light, has arrived from outside the star system ......?”

　The alarm that had been sounding suddenly stopped, just as it had started. Marii was stunned and mumbled. " ...... it's disappeared."

　The bridge of the Odette II was filled with nothing but electronic beeps and the faint sound of wind from the circulators. Only the breathing of the yacht crew crammed into the bridge and the reception record left on the communications monitor indicated that the current distress signal was no illusion.

　Seeing that the bridge had stopped moving, Lynn clapped her hands.

"Yes, continue navigational operations!　We've only just left the dock, if we just drift around here inertially navigating in a daze, we'll only be a distraction to the other ships, the starship is still moving, so everyone keep working!"

"I will inquire with the control station about the current distress signal."

Marika backed the president's instructions and continued "We, as a training ship, can't handle distress calls from outside the system. We're all wondering what happened, so we'll check that over here."

"If the training reflects real life, even the distress calls are received in the same way."

　Gruier, who was on the bridge with her junior high apprentices, flew leisurely to the electronic warfare seat.

"It's not just distress signals. We can receive the same route information and normal communications, but since they are less important and you’re not being called by name, they don't ring a bell, much less sound an alarm."

　Marika switched the mode of the electronic warfare seat in front of her to check the details of the distress signal they had just received.

　She tilted her head when she noticed that several places in the detailed data on the display were in color-reversed text.

"Hey, why are there so many caution signs?"

"Because it's not a proper distress signal."

Lynn, who seemed to have already started analyzing the same signal, said in a small voice. Marika and Gruier looked at Lynn's profile, who was running her fingers at eye-popping speed, without understanding what she meant.

"The SOS we just received was sent from the direction of Garnet A in the ultra-short wave region with strong directionality. But it's not a distress signal by today's navigational standards. This is a distress signal in the old format used before the War of Independence, when this area was still a frontier planet before it became the Galactic Empire."

Marika looked at Lynn's profile as she read the characters flowing on the display, then looked at Gruier. "Is such an old distress signal still alive and in use?"

"It is not just new spaceships that need rescue. Unless there is a very special standard, it should be able to respond to most distress signals, but the fact that it even sent out an alarm in response to the current SOS is probably because it was an old signal used when this spacecraft was in service."

Lynn eyebrows furrowed.

"If it's an old standard, it could be ignored as mere noise by an unfamiliar spacecraft. What's ATC's response?"

"Oh, I'll look into it now."

　Marika inquired about the latest information from the control station that was responsible for the airspace around the relay station. The air traffic control station is continuing its normal operations and there is no special information for the airspace around the relay station.

　It is the job of the military to be the first to respond to distress signals. Thinking that the star system military, which covers the surrounding airspace, might be dispatching a rescue ship, Marika checked the latest information on accidents and distress.

"What is it?"

"What's wrong?"

"No, it seems that neither the control station nor the military is active ...... maybe the information just hasn't been updated yet?"

"It's an SOS that set off all those loud alarms. How is it possible that neither ATC nor the military is active?"

"Neither of them releases information in real time, so I thought maybe it just hasn't come out yet......"

　Marika checked the control station’s distress signal reception status again. In the airspace around the Tau system, there are no published distress signal receipts other than the fast ship failure report from half a day ago.

"Is it too far away to respond because the location information is from another star, and the transmitting location is outside the star system?　Or has it already been rescued by a passing Imperial fleet?"

"Well, if there's nothing there, that's good."

　After completing her analysis, Lynn stopped.

"There's no way we can help her right now, and if no other information comes out, she probably made it out safely."

　However, after Odette II completed a simulated practice voyage around the relay stations’ controlled airspace and back to the dedicated dock, the results of her inquiry to the control station were surprising.

"The SOS was not logged?"

　Thinking that she had made a mistake in her inquiry method, Lynn briefly informed everyone on the bridge of the result while turning the public data upside down.

"The control station's receiving record doesn't record the distress signal we just received ...... what's going on?"

　A suspicious murmur spread across the bridge, which was busy with processing after the ship was secured to the pier.

"Is there some reason it’s missing from the record?"　Gruier said carefully, staring at the display Lynn was operating.

"You said it was a distress signal of a standard that is no longer in use. Does that mean there was some kind of error that caused an unnecessary distress signal to be broadcast?"

"The SOS signal may be old-fashioned, but this is a modern standard communication system that has passed the ship's inspection."

　Lynn checked the distress signal reception record again. The alarm that everyone on the bridge heard was not an illusion.

"It had to be a valid distress signal, or the alarm would not have sounded so loudly."

　Lynn examined other data on the received signal.

"It's not a strong signal, sure, but it's an SOS that even a training ship, still in the dock, could hear. A control station with more sensitive antennas deployed all over the sky couldn't have missed it."

"But there's no record of it."

　ATC's reception records cover all official communications, including distress signals. Although there are requests for permission to enter the relay station immediately before the distress call and reports of route crossing afterwards, only the distress signal received by Odette II remains unrecorded, as if no one had heard it.

"We'll find out what happened here." Lynn declared, looking at Marika and Gruier.

“If we take the record of the distress call and inquire at the control station, they will tell us what happened. Well then, that concludes today's club activities, let's start cleaning up!”

"What is the name of the spacecraft that sent the SOS?”

　In response to Gruier's question, Marika pointed to a piece of data on the display with a troubled look on her face.

"The Black Swan?　Are you familiar with it?"

"I don't know this spaceship."

　With an even more troubled face, Marika showed the data she had looked up while the members of the department were working on the port entry.

"There are lots of spaceships with similar names, but there is only one ‘the Black Swan’ with the identification signal that was in the distress call. It was also listed in the Odette II databank."

"Well, it's a spacecraft that you know."

"Acquaintance, or whatever you call it."

　Marika's voice trailed off further.

"The Black Swan that sent the distress call is a pirate ship from a long time ago, from around the same time that the Odette II was still an active pirate ship."

"Ah. So where is the Black Swan now?"

"It was lost in the last battle of the Revolutionary War and was never seen again."

　Seeing Marika's face, Gruier reviewed the data on the display.

"...... 120 years ago?"

　Marika gave a small nod.

“So that's it!”

　Lynn exclaimed in a small shout, running her fingers quickly over the control panel.

“The data that comes in, whether it is normal or FTL communication, should also have the date and time of the transmission recorded on it. The date and time of the transmission of the data just now is ......0079.12.28?"

　Ignoring the time that followed, Lynn looked at the year on the display.

"Not the galactic standard calendar?"

"Isn't that the unique calendar of Sea of the Morningstar?" Gruier said casually.

“Didn't the pre-Independence Sea of the Morningstar use its own calendar because it didn't want to be bound by the Stellar Alliance's calendar?''

"I see...the pre-independence lunar calendar."

　Lynn tapped the control panel again. Marika looked at Gruier's face with an astonished look on her face.

"Are you familiar with the history of other planets, not just your own?”

"It's fundamental to know where you are." Gruier answered curiously.

"Is it really that surprising?"

　Marika nodded frankly.

"Yah, I'm surprised."

“Wow...... I see.”

　The president's voice was soft and quiet, and Marika and Gruier looked at Lynn. Her hands stopped.

“I understand now why the control station didn't respond to the distress call earlier.”

“What is it?”

“The time and date of the signal was 120 years ago......, just before the end of the War of Independence. There's no way they could have responded in time to a distress call that long ago.”

"A distress call from 120 years ago ......?" Marika repeated.

"If it were a normal signal, it would have spread out long ago, and there is no way that Odette II's antenna would be able to receive it!　Besides, even though the transmitting location is outside of the Tau system, it should be close enough for normal communications to reach it......”

"The standards and date of transmission were long ago, and the ship that sent it is missing, no matter how you look at it, it's not a legitimate distress signal.”

Lynn showed the distress signal on the display, which itself was only a small amount of data.

"Who in the world could have pulled off a prank like this?"

"Mischief......."　Gruier muttered to no one in particular.

" ……What'll we do?”

　After the port entry simulation, the Hakuho Academy Yacht Club completed today's pier exercise by working to berth Odette II, which remained moored at Pier C68, cleaning her up, and making sure the doors were locked.

　After confirming the departure time of the school-owned shuttle returning to Shin-Okuhama Airport, Marika remained alone at the portside dock control to check the status of Odette II's berthing. After confirming that there were no problems with the connection of the closed environment system, which requires constant energy supply, and the communication system, which requires automatic response to any communication from the outside, she cut off all unnecessary energy.

　The cocktail rays that had been illuminating Odette II from all directions slowly disappeared.

　Marika looked out the window with a clear view of the dock, where only the small star-like lights that are always on in case of an emergency remain, and looked around the dock control, where only the light from the display and control panel glows magically.

　There is quite a bit of time until the departure of the shuttle flight owned by Hakuho Academy, since the departure application was late and no priority application was submitted, so it was put on the back burner.

"I don't really want to use the station's equipment, but I guess it can't be helped."

　Muttering, Marika switched the channel on the dock control communication system. She opened the mobile terminal she had taken out of her pocket inside her uniform and connected the FTL communication to one of the many dummy lines that had been prepared in advance.

“Let's see, today's password is .......”

Entering the password that was sent to her at regular intervals, Marika put on the headset.

She didn’t have to wait long before getting a response.

"*Yes, this is Bentenmaru, Hyakume speaking.*"

"This is Marika."

　Marika answered the voice-only transmission with the microphone on her headset.

"Present location, Sea of the Morningstar relay station C68 dock control. Is everything okay now?"

"*A little busy, but no problem.*"

"In the middle of something?　Hey, did you have any work today?"

"*No, I'm not working. I just have to go around to prepare for the next military exercise. There shouldn't be any work that would bother the captain, but, uh, an unscheduled signal came in, so I'm just taking it in right now.*"

"An unscheduled signal?"

　Marika wished she had a communication monitor so she could see Hyakume's face.

"Isn't that a distress signal from the Black Swan?"

"*Bingo!*" It was an immediate answer.

“*What, you heard that, too?　If it wasn't an old spaceship, you wouldn't be able to hear that signal. Were you running a simulation on the training ship?*”

"Bingo."　Marika stuck out her tongue.

"The signal was dated 120 years ago, and even though the spaceship was underway, we were still tied to the dock, so we couldn't do anything about it.　Did you receive it there too?"

　Marika ran her eyes over the communication panel. The exact location of the other party was not displayed because the communication was through a dummy line.

“Bentenmaru, where are you?”

"*Current position, outside the orbit of Kita-no-hate-hoshi.*”

"Isn’t that the outermost part of the Tau system!?"

In the eight-planet Tau system, the eighth, outermost planet, is the frozen white planet Kita-no-hate-hoshi. Astronomically, the system is in inner space until the solar winds from Tau reach it, but there is only a thin Oort cloud outside of the planet. And as far as Marika knew, Bentenmaru had no plans to go that far.

"Wait a minute. If you’re flying outside the star system, that means that's where the distress signal was sent from earlier!?”

“*Ah, the captain has improved her skills too. You're very quick on the uptake. That's right. The Bentenmaru is now flying to the location where the distress call from the Black Swan was supposed to have originated.*”

“What's wrong?"　Marika asked enthusiastically.

"*I'm not sure. We’re scanning the location where the distress call is believed to be originating for the third time, but I can't find a single transceiver, not even a piece of a component, let alone a spaceship calling for rescue.*"

"Oh, so ...... it’s not a real distress signal, but a prank?"

"*I hope we can confirm that it was a prank, but until then we'll just do the best we can. I've been in touch with Barbaroosa, which is in the neighborhood of Garnet A right now, so I'm going to have them jump over there and check it out as well.*"

"Barbaroosa?"　Marika exclaimed as she thought of Chiaki's pirate ship and its captain's face.

“Is this important enough to contact other pirate ships?”

“*Even it if wasn’t important, it’s the best thing to do, but it’s the Black Swan. Are you familiar with the Black Swan?*”

"I saw it for the first time in the SOS."

After a stunned pause, Hyakumei's voice came again, "*Well, it's not surprising for young people these days who are not interested in the war of independence or pirates. The Black Swan is one of the original seven pirate ships that received the first pirate licenses and was lost in the last battle of the Revolutionary War.*"

"That much was in the Odette II’s data."

"*Then, what about the fact that pirate ships, which are basically an independent single-ship operation, had only one cooperative operation, and the only ship lost at that time was the Black Swan?*”

“That's the first I've heard of it ...... what happened?”

“At Garnet A, against the final weapon of the Stellar Alliance. The battle started just three days before the war ended."

　The timescales of battles in space vary widely. Some are completed in an instant, while others are fought for thousands of years and are never won. For fleet-to-fleet battles, battles lasting several days are not uncommon.

"What is the Stellar Alliance's ultimate weapon?" The tone of Marika's voice jumped at the mention of a history she had never heard of.

"What happened in the battle between the pirate ships and the fleet?"

"*Well, I think we managed to do well enough to say that we won, and even though the colonies of the time were swallowed up by the Galactic Empire, we successfully won our independence and the world has become a place where we can continue our pirate business.*"

"What happened?　I know the Bentenmaru participated in the last battle, so tell me what happened!"

"*Give me a break, it's true that Bentenmaru also took part in the Garnet battle, but that was 120 years ago. Do you think there are any long-lived enthusiasts still around who have been on board since then?*"

Marika thought of the faces of the crew of the Bentenmaru. There were several of unknown age, but she could not think of any old-timers who had been on board since the time of the Revolutionary War.

"Who is the oldest person on the Bentenmaru now?"

'*'Give me a break.*''　Hyakume raised his voice pitifully.

"*If I tell you, he'll kill me.*"

“...... what?”

"*Anyway, the Black Swan is the last lost ship for us pirates. Even if we know it is gone, if you get a distress call in its name, you have to find out who or what is doing it and with what intention. That's been the top priority of every captain for generations. Hasn't the captain checked?*"

"Did you see ......?"　Marika mumbled, unable to remember.

"What?　A lost ship is a ship that has disappeared, right?　Why do we have to come together so closely to investigate a spaceship that sank 120 years ago?"

"*The Black Swan is only missing. Its sinking has never been confirmed. So, to remove the Black Swan from the pirate ship registry, we need to either confirm its sinking or prove that the Black Swan no longer exists in this universe.*"

　Hyakume's tone suddenly softened.

"*Well, the ancestors who fought the War of Independence aboard the Bentenmaru must have had their reasons for wanting to do so. That's why I'm dealing with it. But if not only the Bentenmaru, but also your training ship, which used to be a pirate ship, received the same SOS, then this is ...... Hey, I got it. A message from Coorie. Just to be safe, please send a copy of the SOS you received there to the Bentenmaru, along with a record of the reception.*"

"That's fine, but ......."

Marika opened a communication line from the control room at the dock to Odette II. From today's communication records, she extracts the records before and after the SOS reception and sends them to Bentenmaru as raw data, including the reception status.

"So a distress signal from the Black Swan is such a big deal that the pirates are going to throw out their schedule?"

"*That's what I mean.*"　Hyakume replied. "*Pray this one doesn't turn out to be too big for the captain to handle.*"

''Chiacchi-chan.''　After saying it, Marika continued.

"When can we expect to hear from Barbaroosa after their jump to Garnet A?"

"*Well, they are also making a detour on the side of their regular duties. They said they'll do their best to hurry, so I'll send a report to the captain as soon as possible. I may have to wake you up instead of calling you at the regular time, but is that okay with you?*"

"...... I’ll leave it to you." Marika answered, thinking that it would be a bit difficult if she received an emergency call at school, let alone when she was sleeping at home. "If you have to leave immediately, wake me up. If not, regular contact is fine."

"Of course it's a prank."

Katou Ririka, Marika's mother, replied as she drove manually down the night freeway from the airport to her home as usual. Ririka, who was on ground control, had also heard about the unrecorded distress call.

"Even if it is not an SOS transmitted in the current format, if it is a distress signal, you have to go rescue it. It’s a universal rule, both now and in the past. It's annoying, because even if it's a pirate ship that went missing a long time ago and you know nothing will turn up even if you check, you have to send a rescue ship according to the regulations."

"Did you go to the trouble of sending out a rescue ship?”

　Marika rolled her eyes. Ririka shrugged her shoulders as she gripped the steering wheel.

"If there were no spaceships in the vicinity, I would have asked the military to dispatch a fast ship. This time, the Bentenmaru happened to be in the vicinity, so they asked them to check the site."

　Space is vast. If an urgent rescue is needed, the control station will request a spacecraft in the vicinity to change course.

"Did you know about the Black Swan, Ririka?"

　Marika looked at her mother's profile. Ririka gripped the steering wheel and stared at the freeway illuminated by the lights.

"There was a pirate ship like that, and it sank in the last major operation of the Revolutionary War, that's all I know about it."

　It has been more than a decade since Ririka was an active pirate aboard the Bentenmaru. It has also been 100 years since the War of Independence.

"If it was a prank, who did it and for what?　And who would go to the trouble of sending a distress signal that only the pirates would react to with such flamboyance?"

　Garnet A, a giant star with a mass two orders of magnitude greater than that of Tau, was entering the final stage of its long life.

　The star, which had fused enormous amounts of hydrogen with its supergravity, was now mostly helium, burning dull red and swelling up to the former orbit of the inner planet. According to records, Garnet A swallowed two inner planets and a gas giant, the last glow of a red giant star that would last for tens of millions years.

　Red giants have never been habitable. When the Garnet system was a stable white star, life arose on planets in the Habitable Zone, but now it is a dying star system with only an uninhabited observation base.

　The surrounding space has been surveyed all the way down to the asteroid belt, and there are no wildcat miners wandering into the system for mineral resources.

"How could such a useless star, so far from not only the Tau system but also from other colonies, become the site of the final battle?"

　The main star, Garnet A, projected on the screen of the main bridge of the pirate ship Barbaroosa, glowed red and venomous even after being processed to be visible to the naked eye.

"Because the Stellar Alliance, our enemy at the time of the Revolutionary War, tried to use the ultimate weapon."　Kenjo Kurihara, better known as Captain Blackbeard of Barbaroosa, answered his daughter's question.

'In a place like this?'　Chiaki showed a space map on the display in the observer's seat.

“Even the nearest frontier star, let's see, Luitin, is twelve light-years away. The star is 80 light-years away from the Stellar Alliance.　I wonder how they were able to reach such a distance with their primitive FTL engine before they made contact with the Galactic Empire.”

"It took a lot of work, but it seems that the FTL engines of the time were comparable in performance to the standards of the Galactic Empire. You know that once you jump into hyperspace, spatial distance is no longer an issue."

"Yes, yes, I have learned that the most important thing to keep in mind when jumping is not the distance but the accuracy."

　Chiaki looked up again at the red giant star on the main screen.

"Even so, why was the final weapon placed here, far from both the main planet and the colony, in order to force the colony to give up its independence?　Even if they were to place a base for FTL missiles or something, I think it would be easier to place it in the vicinity of a strategic target so that it would be easier to aim at."

"It would have been a lot easier with such a cute little weapon."

Kenjo let out a sigh as he looked at the long-lived vice-captain standing by his side.

“Nora, I believe you were also part of the operation to destroy the final weapon here on the Barbaroosa, weren’t you?”

Nora nodded slowly, much older than the Barbaroosa, a pirate ship that took part in the War of Independence. Her planet of birth was lost long ago and her clan is now scattered across the galaxy.

"Yes. At that time, it was already certain that the Galactic Empire and the Stellar Alliance would make contact in the future, so the Stellar Alliance tried to activate the Stellar Slayer, which they intended to use as a threat to their colonies, as a show of strength against the Empire."

"Stellar Slayer?"　Chiaki turned to face the tall, slender Nora.

"The one that cuts through the stars?　Is that the name of the ultimate weapon?"

"The original idea was to create a network that would transmit stellar energy through hyperspace. At first, it would supply energy to a fixed target, such as a star system, but in the future, they were going to create a system that would be able to replenish individual spacecraft."

"That's dubious…"　 Chiaki raised an eyebrow at such a network, which even the current Galactic Empire had failed to realize.

"In general, if you're going to make something like that, wouldn't it be better to have a main-sequence star with a better life than a star that's about to burn out?"

"It’s a convenient system that not only extracts energy, but also sends it through hyperspace to wherever you want. If it worked, they were planning to use a white dwarf or neutron star with even higher energy density as a power source."

"How can you build such a thing and lose a war of independence against a colony star?"

"If they hadn't wasted so much resource on such things, they might have defeated the colonies before the Galactic Empire intervened, and the political structure of the system around here might have been a little more coherent."

　Nora puts on her signature archaic smile.

"Was such an energy network the Stellar Alliance's ultimate weapon?"

"No."　Nora shook her head slowly, keeping her archaic smile.

"The hyperspace network was a long-lived project that should have taken much longer and, if successful, would have spread energy throughout the galaxy. But before they could even begin to see the success of the experiment, the colonizers were no longer able to hold back their colonies, and the Stellar Alliance, aware of the Galactic Empire, decided to convert the infrastructure for the experiment into the ultimate weapon. That is the Stellar Slayer."

　Nora looked up at the red giant star on the main screen.

"It's a supernova bomb."

"...... what?"　Chiaki's basic knowledge of supernovas flashed through her mind.

"...... were they trying to make a red giant star go supernova?"

"Yes. It's not how it was originally intended to be used, but it could be easily realized by simply changing the roles of the experimental plant and the work ship."

"But even a supernova explosion here, twelve light years away from the nearest frontier star, the light wouldn't reach us until twelve years from now."

"What happens when the light from the supernova explosion reaches a planet?"　Kenjo asked in an amused tone. "The night sky will become as bright as daylight. Of course it would, but you know that light isn't the only thing a supernova explosion can scatter, don't you?"

"It releases a gamma-ray burst."

Chiaki froze as she thought about the words. "All inhabitable planets in a radius of thirty light years will be wiped out, and even fifty light years will be hit hard......"

"That's what I meant."　Kenjo nodded.

“Of course, even if you let the red giant in front of you go off, it will be a dozen or so years before a gamma-ray burst or some such murderous ray reaches a star system light-years away. But it will surely reach the planet and burn up its surface. The Stellar Alliance will have no reason to bother with the colonizers, who are guaranteed to be destroyed, and the colonizers will have no time for a war of independence. They will have to make a great exodus before the final judgment, or think of another way, or abandon their pride and appeal to the Stellar Alliance. Well, it would be very effective in terms of stopping the war in front of us once and for all.”

“That's horrible......”　After mumbling, Chiaki began to rant.

"It's worse than the planet-destroying bombs and stellar bombs!　Not only were they going to burn down the colonies within the blast radius, they were going to burn down the entire planet around them!"

"The war for independence of the colonies alone was a headache, and with a much more powerful galactic empire as an opponent, the Stellar Alliance must have been getting desperate. There is nothing more frightening in the world than a bureaucratic organization that has lost the meaning of its existence and whose survival has become its own goal.”

"So, what happened?"

　Chiaki's voice brought laughter to the bridge of the Barbaroosa.

"The conclusion is that the Stellar Alliance's plan to turn Garnet A into a supernova was completely defeated by the work of the colonizers, mainly pirates, who sensed it just before it was to go supernova. That is why Garnet A is still shining in the sky as a red giant star."

"I didn't know that." Chiaki muttered in shock.

"Why was there was such an operation during the Revolutionary War.　Why is such an operation, which could be the subject of so many movies and stories, so little known?"

"The supernova bomb is the worst strategic weapon ever, banned not only by the Galactic Empire, but also by the Rebel Army, which has even signed a treaty against it."

　Kenjo took over Nora's explanation.

"As technology advances, weapons of mass destruction are developed that are more and more powerful and of a worse nature, but a strategic weapon that indiscriminately burns not only its target but also the surrounding stars is no longer a weapon but a disaster. For the Galactic Empire, if a system it is trying to annex has a track record of using such a weapon, it would be a good pretext for a final solution that included ethnic annihilation. For a galactic empire that wants to create a unified universe full of love and compassion with idealism, it would be a development that they would want to avoid politically and emotionally."

"So officially, there is no record in the military history of the War of Independence, nor in the history of the Galactic Empire, of any attempt by the Stellar Alliance to supernova this star."　Nora said in a quiet voice.

"It seems that the Stellar Alliance fully understood the political danger of supernova bombs, and the operation was carried out without using the regular army. One of the reasons for this may be that they could not afford to devote their forces to such a red giant star, which was of little tactical significance, while the independent forces far away were making all sorts of noises."

"It's not fair!"　Chiaki exclaimed briefly.

"Thanks to the delay in learning of the operation, and the Independence Army, which had its ships running at a snail's pace, could not afford to send in regular troops, so a hodgepodge of pirate vessels, not even experts in fleet warfare, had to take on a fleet of work ships from the Stellar Alliance trying to turn Garnet A into a supernova. And so, this was the last and biggest battle of the pirates in the War of Independence. What do you think, Boggs?"

　Kenjo called out to the robotic-like cyborg covered in exposed mechanisms that controlled Barbaroosa's sensor and observation systems.

"The coordinates of the Black Swan's distress call must be in this area. Besides the ruins of the former great naval battle, did you see anything else that we should be aware of?"

"No......."　A synthesized voice, almost like a human voice, answered.

"The station's records show that Garnet A's fluctuations are well within its natural range, and there is no evidence of artificial gravity shifts or unnatural infrared radiation in the surrounding space."

　If a spacecraft had flown through nearby space in the near past, it would leave some kind of wake. However, Barbaroosa's sensors, tuned and deployed with high sensitivity, failed to find any anomalies to confirm in their search over the wide swath of airspace centered on Garnet A.

"It's strangely quiet."

　Kenjo asked again at the last impression Boggs added.

"Does that mean someone did something and then went to the trouble of covering their tracks?"

"I can't be sure of that yet, but I'd like to examine the station's data and scan the surrounding space."

"It should be easy enough to get data from the station."

　Garnet A, a red giant star, has little value in terms of assets, including the planetary system that surrounds its home star. It is a conspicuous star, so it is useful as a lighthouse for spacecraft navigating in the vicinity, but there are no inhabited planets or mining bases, so there are no relay stations.

　Although it is a stable red-giant star, unmanned observation stations are deployed to observe it, and changes in its status as a star are observed in real time and sent to various parties via FTL lines.

"We cannot rule out the possibility that the observation data has been rewritten."

　Kenjo looked up at Boggs's tone of voice. "What did you say?"

"The observation station here receives information from observation probes placed at multiple coordinates at the station, organizes it, and distributes it to the outside world."

　It is a method used to reduce the amount of data sent by FTL communications.

"The probes here are accurate enough to identify asteroids that have wandered in from outer planet orbits, as well as Category II slow-moving vessels. Despite this, there have been no records of external planets, comets, or spacecraft in the last year or so. This is unnatural for such a large gravitational source being observed over such a wide area."

"I see."　Kenjo dug his fingers into his ample beard.

"If there was nothing natural flying around, it could still be a coincidence, but if there are no pieces at all, it means that the records of the spaceships that flew over could have been erased."

"Permission to access the original data recorded at the station."

"Wait a minute. The relationship with the SOS of the Black Swan is still unknown, but if someone somewhere is rewriting the entire observation data of Garnet A with some intention, he must be able to see us too. If the station has already been hijacked, how can we access the original data without them noticing?"

"Not impossible."　Boggs's voice was more cautious now.

“But if there is a possibility that the station has already been hijacked, it would be unnatural for Barbaroosa to make a data inquiry to the station right now. If we value the possibility that the captain is right, it would be preferable for us to pretend that we have noticed nothing and leave this star’s area.”

"That's what I mean. We will pretend not to notice anything and fly away from here without doing anything. But if there's any information we need that's around here, we'll have to snatch it up any way we can. Can you do that?"

"Let's try."

　Boggs's fingertip indicator, wired directly to the observation system control, began to blink rapidly.

"How many more minutes until it seems unnatural to stay here?"

"A few minutes, at least, if the flight pattern is to make a cursory scan, then jump to the next location for analysis later."

"That's enough."

　Boggs mobilized all of Barbaroosa's already deployed observation systems to begin a thorough examination of Garnet A and the surrounding space.

　An anomaly was immediately detected.

"Gravity anomalies?"

"Optical observations showed a number of distortions in the background stars"　Boggs reported in his usual calm tone.

"Local distortions are not uncommon in high-gravity binary stars such as black holes and neutron stars, but they should not occur in red-giant stars like Garnet A. In fact, there is no such gravitational anomaly in the station's past data.”

"That means there is little chance that this is a natural phenomenon."

　Kenjo went around the gravity anomalies in the sky around the Red Giant star on the display and confirmed their arrangement. Although the accuracy is low because it is only a visualization of passive observation data from Barbaroosa, the gravity anomaly can be seen surrounding the equatorial plane of Garnet A from all sides.

"What are the possible causes?"

"Interaction by multiple high-powered anti-gravity engines.”　Boggs replied, flashing the indicators on his hands and head at high speed.

"That's the simplest."

"High-powered anti-gravity engines!?"

　Nora asked again, and flew to the sub-control dedicated to the XO, who was rarely there. In a single motion, all the control panels and displays came to life, fingers running with a speed that belied their usual leisurely movements.

"Gravity anomalies in the form of hexagonal vertices on the equatorial plane surrounding Garnet A?"

"Yes."

　Boggs sends the data to Nora's seat before he is interrupted by the observation system.

"A localized source of high gravity is positioned on the equatorial plane of Garnet A. It's not an ordinary antigravity engine. It's got the power output of an artificial black hole plant ship."

"Give me the radar!"

　Without waiting for Boggs' reply, Nora seized the main controls of Barbaroosa's radar system.

"And as much energy as I can get!"

"Hey, we've limited ourselves to passive observation, pretending that we're not here for anything, and now suddenly we're in a combat stance and using radar?"

　Kenjo, in his capacity as captain, called out to Nora, who had increased the power of the main engine and was pouring it into the radar.

"If there are any bad guys in this space who are planning to do something, won’t our ship's location and type will be leaked?"

"The Stellar Slayer will supernova any red giant star with sufficient mass."　 Nora said as she pointed the radar antennas, maximally deployed above and below the hull, at the poles of Garnet A and applied a full power scan.

"All it takes to force a supposedly stable red giant star to go supernova is enough mass to collapse its core under its own gravity. And the technology exists in this universe to manipulate gravity without mass."

"You think this anomalous gravity is what's needed to make Garnet A go supernova?"

　With his tone as flat as ever, Boggs readjusted the sensor's target to space above the red giant's poles, the same as Nora's radar.

"Are you saying that someone is trying to turn Garnet A into a supernova?"

"While controlling a row of work ships equipped with anti-gravity engines as powerful as plants on the equatorial plane, a black hole bomb that acts as a spark plug will rush into the center of the red giant from either pole."

　After setting up the radar, Nora superimposed a three-dimensional gauge with a complicated cursor over the red giant star on the main screen.

"It's the activation procedure for the ultimate weapon, the Stellar Slayer. I was here when it happened."

　A FTL radar wave revealed the shadow of someone above the north pole of Garnet A.

"I found it!"

　Nora narrowed the FTL radar, changing her attitude to face the target space in the direction of the bow, which maximized the radar's aperture. The shadow of the ship emerged with a powerful energy reaction, receiving heat radiation worthy of its stellar name, even though it had turned into a red giant star.

"It really was there......"

　Kenjo mumbled as he looked at the maximum telephoto image on the main screen.

"The image is blurry because of the distance. Can you get the ships’ model?"

"Yes, we can. No electronic jamming was done to add noise in the observation data."

　Boggs concentrated his sensors in the space the radar had identified.

"If it's this clear in near-stellar space, we should be able to follow the light images from the past."

　Boggs analyzed the observation data obtained one after another to determine the type of distant spacecraft.

"It's not that big, with a low energy response...... inertial navigation. At this size, it seems impossible to mount a high-powered antigravity engine that would place a gravitational field around a red-giant star."

An anti-gravity engine becomes exponentially larger as the output increases. In order to generate the anomalous gravitational field that is currently being observed, a work ship the size of a small celestial body rather than a spaceship would be necessary, but Barbaroosa has yet to see such a giant ship.

　What was discovered in the polar direction of the red giant was a spacecraft that was larger than Barbaroosa in both mass and dimensions. After analyzing the data obtained, Boggs drew a rough outline of the spacecraft's estimated outline on the display.

"We don't have enough data to analyze the energy reactions, so we can only speculate on the engines, but we think it's an old warship or a fast transport."

“You don't need a big work ship in the polar directions. All you need is a command ship to control all the anti-gravity plants. Size doesn't matter as long as you have good communication facilities."

　Nora matched the obtained starship type data with the catalogs in the database. The result was immediate.

"That’s … That’s!"

With a scream, Nora stopped running her hands over the control panel.

"No transponder. At least, not that I can confirm."

"I don't need a transponder to know. That is the Black Swan."

　Nora pressed her hands over her mouth as she busied herself with the data on the display and the shadow of the ship on the main screen.

"The pattern matches the outline in the data to 70%, and the mass and dimensions are within the margin of error. The Black Swan sank at Garnet A with the enemy command ship in tow. Even if it had been salvaged, there is no way it would have been in proper shipshape."

"Lock target on the unidentified ship above the pole."　Kenjo gave the order.

"Approach and confirm its identity. If it is one of the original seven, it will be a former colleague of ours. I don't know how it happened, but we can't just meet up with them here and not say hello."

"I'll fly us there."

Helmsman Morgan raised engine power to maximum as soon as he made the announcement. Using its inertial control to its maximum effect, the pirate ship Barbaroosa, once a light battleship, turned its course in the direction of the Red Giant's pole.

"Do it."　Kenjo said, looking at the display, which jumped up with an acceleration that would not be done in normal circumstances.

"It doesn't seem right to me that these people are so prepared to mess with the observation station's data. Boggs, get all the data you can while you can."

"Roger."

　During heavy acceleration while inertial control is still in effect, observation accuracy deteriorates significantly compared to a stationary state. Even if the distance is shortened, as long as the ship is moving, it is as if it is stirring up the space around it, so it is impossible to obtain good data.

"Immediately, the gravity anomaly on the equatorial plane started rapidly decreasing. Someone has noticed our movement and is preparing to flee in a hurry."

“The main body causing the gravity anomaly still hasn't been found anywhere.”

　Kenjo, still sunk in the captain's seat, growled.

"If you want to cause a gravity anomaly on such a large scale, you must have some tricks up your sleeve, but I don't see them anywhere. Just make sure you catch that one old pirate ship we found."

"Before we decelerate, cut all propulsion, including inertial control, for ten seconds."

　Boggs informed Morgan, the helmsman, while compiling the information from the sensors, which were losing accuracy due to the heavy acceleration.

"You could cut the engines only at closest approach, without thinking about deceleration."

　Morgan answered while correcting the expected trajectory.

"If time is of the essence, it's faster to accelerate until the last possible moment, even if we pass by in a blink of an eye."

"The relative velocity will be very high, is that okay?"

Boggs' answer to Kenjo's question was slightly delayed.

"I can do it. No problem."

"Time is of the essence." Kenjo ordered.

"Stop acceleration five seconds before closest approach!　After passing through, make a 180-degree turn and synchronize speed. The relative distance at closest approach is up to you."

　Kenjo glanced at the silhouette of the Black Swan, which overlapped the predicted orbit of the Barbaroosa.

“Morgan?　I'm just trying to give you a good show, don't hit it."

"Aye aye sir!"

　Placing his hands on the control panel, Morgan re-set the relative distance at closest approach. The Barbaroosa charged at the spacecraft floating above the pole of Garnet A on the shortest possible trajectory, grazing the thermosphere of the red giant star.

　Thanks to the orbit, which approaches the surface of the red giant star while gaining speed by mobilizing the anti-gravity engine for inertial control in addition to the large acceleration of the normal propulsion, the data obtained will not increase much even if the linear distance is shortened. However, after the Barbaroosa's thermal protection screen, which protects the hull from the relatively low surface temperature of a Red Giant star, was operated at maximum output, Barbaroosa's sensing system began to accumulate observation data that were satisfactory for the adverse conditions of the acceleration.

"Even from this distance I don't see any significant energy response."

　Boggs gave a brief verbal report of what he considered the most important data.

"Unless it's completely drained of energy, we're going to assume it's dead."

"If the spaceship sank 120 years ago, it should have been long dead."

　The Black Swan on the main screen has become clearer, partly due to the addition of more data to the repeated image enhancements. Kenjo's face was grim as he compared the screen in front of him with an image of the Black Swan in service, retrieved from a spaceship catalog stored on Barbaroosa's data server.

“If the batteries are still alive, there might be at least an automatic distress signal left, but there is no way the energy system can survive without maintenance. But if it's a sunken ship, where did it come from?”

"The Black Swan is in polar orbit around Garnet A."　Boggs plotted a hypothetical orbit of Garnet A, perpendicular to the equatorial plane and around the poles.

“It's a stable orbit. It's not an orbit you can hide in. And, of course, no Black Swan or similar spacecraft has been seen in the surrounding space for the past century. If we fully trust the observational record, the Black Swan would have suddenly appeared there today.”

"And it sent out a distress signal to its distant home planet."

　Kenjo chuckled.

"That's great. It's much better than wasting your time running in only to find that they’ve disappeared. If by some chance our former companion ship returned to this world and used its last remaining energy to send out a distress signal, that's fine, but if not, I'm going to take my time and expose it for what it is. “

"...... it's distorted."　Nora said in a muffled voice.

“The hull is warped and there's a big hole in the engine room. The ship is still in shape, but the remaining 30 percent of the ship doesn't match because it's broken and lost its original shape.”

　The hull, projected even more clearly was, as the name implies, jet black. In the image that had been corrected to emerge from the background space, the Black Swan, with its starry sky inverted to white, was exposed in the decimated form that all the crew members of the pirate ship had become accustomed to seeing.

"A big sunken wreck."

　Kenjo, who had retrieved his prayer beads from somewhere, clasped his hands together at the sight of the ancient pirate ship on the main screen. The external movable turrets of the spaceship, which were built on the hull of a large cruiser, were floating in different directions, with only the joints remaining, and the antennas, which were supposed to be deployed in a geometric pattern, were tangled up in a mess and clung to the back half of the hull. It is not my imagination that the axis of the hull seems to be distorted, but it seems that the keel has been damaged to the extent that it was bent by the force applied somehow.

　Without a single light, the Black Swan was drifting through space under the radiation of the red giant star.

"What do we do now?"　Morgan said as he made minor adjustments to the planned orbit while maintaining the ship's acceleration.

"Should we continue to approach?　Even if we slow down now, we'll go a little too far, but if we want to rendezvous with them, we can do it faster."

"It's moving!"　Boggs shouted sharply. Everyone on the bridge looked up at the black wreck on the main screen.

“No, that’s not it!　The gravity anomaly has begun to move. The gravity anomaly is moving through space at much faster than the speed of light.”

"What the …?"

　Kenjo shouted at the result of the observation, which could not be a natural phenomenon.

"This means that this is definitely an anomalous phenomenon orchestrated by someone somewhere!"

“If multiple antigravity engines are operated to interfere within a specific space, spatial anomalies can easily be caused. If the output and control accuracy of the anti-gravity engine is high enough, spatial anomalies can also be moved by simply by shifting the interfering space. If we just change the angle of the anti-gravity engine, the propagation of the apparent spatial anomaly can easily exceed the speed of light.”

　The indicator next to Boggs's hand flashed furiously.

"Morgan, stop acceleration!　The gravity anomaly is collapsing to a single point, aimed at the space where the Black Swan resides!"

"Roger!"

　Omitting confirmation, Morgan immediately followed Boggs' instructions to stop the acceleration and inertial control of the Barbaroosa. Mobilizing all of the spacecraft's radar and sensor systems, which were now in inertial navigation, Boggs made his final observations in the cleared space.

　The wreck above the pole is motionless, as if unaware of the six spatial anomalies moving along the stellar surface to converge on a single point.

"A shockwave is coming."　Kenjo said after confirming that the moving anomalies did not intersect with the surrounding space, including Barbaroosa.

"High speed gravity waves are overlapping each other and generating localized high gravity. Prepare to activate the anti-gravity engines over here so we don't get caught in the middle of it and give top priority to the preservation of this ship!　What's the matter, Boggs, do you have the data yet?"

"We have it."　Boggs replied.

"But the gravity anomaly is moving toward the Black Swan. I want to see what happens when they overlap at that one point."

　Garnet A's diameter is 1.12 AU, and the giant star that once swallowed even the orbit of the third planet has swelled to more than 20 minutes even at the speed of light.[[1]](#footnote-1)

　The gravitational anomalies surrounding the equatorial plane of the red giant star were all moving at high speed toward a point at the north pole as if by design.

　Boggs concentrated his sensors only on the Black Swan and the moving gravity anomaly. If possible, he would have liked to explore a larger space to look for something manipulating the anomalous gravity, but there was not enough capacity in Barbaroosa’s sensor system to do so.

"There must be something manipulating the anomalous gravity within this star system."

　While continuing his observations, Boggs typed out a coarse prediction on his sub-monitor.

"If there were at least three large plant ships capable of controlling high gravity, they could create gravity anomalies at six points on the equatorial plane and still move them at will."

"We need to uncover the true identity of this wreck first."

　Kenjo stared at the black spaceship, which was becoming more detailed by the minute as corrections are made to the main screen.

"What's the matter, isn't it about time the anomalous gravity converged on a single point?"

　The gravity abnormalities struck the Black Swan from six directions, distorting the stars in the background with its condensed high gravity, and at a speed far exceeding that of Barbaroosa, which had stopped its massive acceleration and was sailing inertially.

　Although it was close, it was still far enough away to be measured in light seconds, so neither the naked eye nor optical sensors could see what was happening from the Barbaroosa's current position. However, the information captured by the FTL radar is analyzed, reconstructed, and projected as visual information on the main screen.

　Distorting the starry sky behind them, the abnormal gravity condensed into a spindle shape and overlapped with the black shipwreck as if it were directly aimed. The Black Swan was engulfed by the anomalous gravity, which could have been avoided if inertial control or anti-gravity engines had been activated, but which could easily compress the mere metallic mass of the spacecraft into a single point, causing it to lose its original shape.

　Everyone on the bridge anticipated a situation where what was once a spaceship would be crushed to a single point. However, the black wreck on the main screen shimmered and then disappeared as if it had been replaced.

"...... what?" "What was that?" "What just happened!"

"It's gone."　Boggs simply replied to the angry shouts and rumblings that swirled around the bridge with a single phrase.

"Not only the Black Swan, but the six other gravity anomalies overlapped and disappeared at the same time. If it was deliberate, it was an impressive feat of control."

“What was the purpose of the spaceship disappearing? Or did it really disappear?”

　Kenjo asked, looking up at the main screen which was displaying data on the spatial situation where even the traces of gravitational anomalies were spreading out.

"Was the Black Swan really even there in the first place?"

"The data is still there."

　Boggs projected the data of the Black Swan, which was on the verge of disappearing. Thanks to Barbaroosa's shift to inertial navigation, the unpowered spaceship appeared on the main screen in a clear, almost noiseless image.

"At least there is no doubt that there was a spaceship of this shape out there. Release the radar. Combine it with the sensors and scan the surrounding space again."

...... Oh, I'm sorry."　Nora came to herself and ran her fingers along the control panel.

“What about the gravity anomaly?　Do you see any other spaceships or anything?”

“No response.”

　Boggs scans the system with a radar that has a greatly expanded effective range.

"I see no gravity anomalies, work vessels, or wrecks. We're the only thing alive and moving in this space, except for the unmanned probes of the observation stations."

“It escaped, huh?"

　Kenjo leaned back against the backrest of the captain's seat.

"Let's go get the original data from the station. Then, compile what you've just seen and get it to the Bentenmaru.”

"Now what?"

　Nora slowly rose from the XO's seat.

"Are you going to tell other ships that a shipwreck that looks just like the Black Swan has disappeared right in front of your eyes?”

"It was the Bentenmaru that received the SOS message that looked just like the Black Swan. As pirates under the same flag, they have a right to know what happened here."

　Sinking into the backrest, Kenjo looked around at the display, which continued scanning without results.

"If we analyze it ourselves, we will probably only get the same results, but if you didn't see it in front of you, you might be able to come up with a novel interpretation that could be useful."

A black rectangular object with white border

Description automatically generated

　Marika was summoned by an emergency communication just as she was finishing putting on her pajamas and all she had to do was crawl into bed.

Marika sat down, cutting off the image from her side of the communication system, which was a rugged information terminal that, no matter how understated, did not look like it belonged in the living room of an average home.

"Sorry, I'm in my pajamas right now, so no cameras please."

"*No problem, we've identified you both by voiceprint and location.*"

　Hyakume, on the other side of the communication monitor answered, while talking with someone else. Marika looked at the galactic standard time displayed on the control panel.

"So, an unscheduled call at this hour means an emergency situation?"

"*It's not really urgent, but I thought it would be better to share information as soon as possible.*"

Hyakume looked at Marika from the front on the communication monitor, which should not show her face.

"*It's an urgent report from Barbaroosa. The Black Swan vanished.*"

"The Black Swan vanished?"

　Marika repeated, looking at Hyakume's face in the communication system display.

"So that distress signal was a real SOS?"

"*No, that's the thing, we just received a report from the Barbaroosa who has just returned to the neighborhood, and we are trying to figure out what happened or what is going on.*"

　Hyakume, who had exchanged something with another person, turned his attention back to Marika.

"*The crew of the Barbaroosa wants to talk to the captain directly. Can I connect them as you are?*"

“What?　I'm in my pajamas, and I'm not in a position to talk to them face to face.”

"*The other side is not the kind of person you need to worry about now. It's a class II encrypted communication, so you don't have to worry about eavesdropping. I'll take care of it.*"

"Wait a minute!"

　It was rude to use only voice to talk to another ship, so Marika decided to at least wait for a time to change her clothes, but the communication status was switched in front of her eyes. The communication from Barbaroosa was relayed by Bentenmaru and directly connected to Marika's home communication system.

“*Eh?　Is everything alright now?　Can I talk to you?*”

“Chiaki-chan!?"

　The voice coming from the headset made Marika involuntarily hold her ears.

“The Barbaroosa crew member is Chiaki-chan!?”

“*Ah, we're connected. Yes, didn't I tell Marika that I am a member of Barbaroosa's crew?*”

　With a delay in timing, the communication monitor showed Chiaki wearing a headset.

"*Huh? Voice only?*”

"Oh, sorry, I was just about to go to bed."

　Marika turned on her camera. Chiaki's eyes widened in the communication monitor, and her eyebrows furrowed as she held her head in her hands. In the background, I heard some groans. Chiaki looked away from the monitor and said,

“*I didn't tell you, but I'm on the main bridge of Barbaroosa. Your face is on the screen of our main bridge right now.*”

“What......?”

　It took Marika a moment to realize that she was being shown in her pajamas on the screen of Barbaroosa's main bridge.

"Eeeeee!"

　Marika exclaimed, then rushed to the screen on the other side, which was supposed to be coaxial with the communication monitor and pulled her face into a tight line.

"I beg your pardon. I'm sorry for showing you my unflattering attire, not realizing that the Barbaroosa people were here."

"*...... Why don't you turn off your camera?*"

“It's too late for that now.”

Marika shyly glared at Chiaki's face on the communication monitor.

"I'd appreciate it if you could just destroy the image recordings later, but that’s enough of that. Did you hear the Black Swan's SOS over there, too?"

She quickly switched the conversation to business.

"*No, no distress call was received by the Barbaroosa.*"

Chiaki, who had also returned to her professional face, shook her head.

"*The detailed data should have reached you via the Bentenmaru, but it just so happened that the Barbaroosa was the one who was closest to the location data in the outdated distress call, so we jumped to the location at Bentenmaru's request. Then, a pirate ship that was supposed to have sunk 120 years ago appeared.*"

　Chiaki looked over at Marika with a theatrical tone, and a smile appeared on her lips.

“The way they left. It’s as if the pirate ship were a ghost ship or something......"

　Marika recalled the first report she had heard.

“Does that look mean they're gone?'

　Chiaki made a "what?" face and then answered in a bored manner.

"*How did you know?*"

"Because I thought that if ...... the true identity was found out, people would start talking about what the true identity was, not that the Black Swan had left.

"*Of course, our captain was ready to expose him for who he really was. It wasn't just a battered, wrecked old battlecruiser adrift. Gravity anomalies were also observed around the red giant star, which disappeared along with the pirate ship.*"

"Gravity anomalies?"

It is not uncommon to observe gravity anomalies even outside of the high-gravity tangle of multiple neutron stars and black hole binaries. However, natural phenomena rarely appear and disappear suddenly.

"*Garnet A is a useless red giant star with only an unmanned observation station so it has very few visitors, but it seems that someone is doing something to rewrite the observation data of that unmanned station.*"

　Marika tilted her head.

"What can someone be doing with, let's see, an ancient pirate ship and a gravity anomaly in a place like that, if you use it to its fullest?"

"*If I knew that, I wouldn't be making such vague and uncertain calls.*" Chiaki said angrily.

"*Anyway, I'm sorry that I haven't finished the evaluation and analysis of the data on what I saw and examined, but I've sent the raw data to the Bentenmaru, so you can analyze it there as well.*"

"......I don't know, but I understand."　Marika nodded.

"You know, why did the Black Swan sink?"

"*Oh, that story.*"

　Chiaki looked at Marika in the communication monitor.

"*I heard that at the end of the War of Independence, the Stellar Alliance tried to use a final weapon, and we stopped them. The name of the final weapon is Stellar Slayer, a supernova bomb.*"

Marika, carrying the lunch box she had secured by running to the store during the third period break, was about to open the yacht club room when she put her hand on the doorknob to insert the old-fashioned silver key that has been handed down to yacht club members from generation to generation, into the keyhole.

“What?"

　The door, which like the key was made in the image of an antique and was now becoming a real antique, was unlocked. Marika opened the door to the club room with a greeting, wondering if the president had arrived earlier.

"Good day ......oh!"

　As if waiting, a red figure rose from a chair by the table.

"Hello, I've been waiting for you."

　A tall, slender, red-haired man with a bowler hat bent down and greeted Marika, who was frozen at the yacht club door.

The man, with his bright, bouncing red hair tucked into his bowler hat, spread his hands out with a wide grin on his face.

"Come on in, it's your club room."

　A man in a suit of questionable taste, a patchwork of bright colors, sat at a table with only one eyebrow raised and his long, gangly arms at his back.

“You're a member of the Hakuoh Academy's yacht club, aren't you?”

"Uh ......."

　Marika's smile was frozen in amiability.

"Who are you?"

“Oh, I'm late for this.”

The man, still wearing his white gloves, clapped his hands together and pulled out an ID card from his pocket inside his patchwork suit. The card slid open to reveal the three-dimensional emblem of the Star System Administration Bureau.

"I am from the Space Transportation Department of the Tax Administration. My name is Jackie Celsius."

"Taxation Bureau?"

　She has only seen the three-dimensional display of IDs used by state officials for identification in movies and TV dramas. With a big smile on his face, Jackie closed the ID before Marika could check the details of the three-dimensional display.

"Good day"　Lynn tapped Marika on the shoulder as she stood there and peeked into the club room.

“What's wrong?"

“Oh, um, we have a visitor. ......”

“What?”

Following Marika's hasty entry into the clubroom, Lynn stood at the clubroom door and saw a man in a patchwork suit with his hands on the table with a smirk on his face.

“Hi there, I'd like to introduce myself once again.”

As before, Jackie took out his ID from his inner pocket and quickly erased the three-dimensional crest he had projected in the air and took a bow.

"I am Jackie Celsius of the Taxation Bureau's Space Transportation Department, Spacecraft Division Two."

"I am Lynn Lambretta, president of the Hakuoh Academy yacht club."

　Lynn, who had just passed Marika, stood in front of Jackie and bowed her head in greeting and looked at his suit, which was decorated in a patchwork of rich colors.

"I'm surprised that a tax official could get into this place. This school is very nervous about outsiders entering."

“Oh, don't worry about it." Jackie nodded with a smile.

"I've gone through the proper channels to make my official business known, and I've been shown around by Dr. Greenbell, the vice principal of the Hakuoh Academy. Unfortunately, she had some other business to attend to and will be out of the office for a while, but she said she'll be back soon."

"Oh, I see."

Lynn, too, responded with a carefree smile. She looked around the clubroom, where only she and Marika had arrived, and motioned to Marika.

"Close the door. If he’s here at this hour from the tax office, it’s probably urgent business."

　Marika saw Lynn's mouth raised in amusement and reflexively ran to the door. As she was about to slam the door shut, she noticed a small figure standing in the shadows.

"...... Gruier!"

"Good day."

With a rather informal greeting, Gruier, in her middle school uniform, sneaked a peek inside the clubroom.

"Is he a visitor?

"He’s a guest, and a bit suspicious, but why are you here, Gruier?"

The yacht club room is in the high school as a matter of course. Middle school students don't often go in and out of high school buildings during school hours, let alone after school.

"I was wondering if you could tell me anything new about yesterday's distress call."

　Gruier's eyes, peering into the clubroom, were drawn to the unkempt patchwork suit in front of the president. She never stopped talking.

"I really wish I could have spoken to you this morning, Marika, but it seems you've been very busy."

"What's wrong?"

At Lynn's behest as the tax bureau official made appropriate conversation, Marika looked around to make sure the hallway was empty and pulled Gruier into the clubroom. Before closing and locking the door, she remembered and lowered the no trespassing tag outside the door.

"It's lunchtime now, so it's not possible to meet the entire club."

She then motioned to Marika, who had returned, and Gruier, who had followed her, to take their places at the table without changing expression, and Lynn recommended Jackie to take the chair she had been sitting in.

"As I mentioned earlier, I am the president of the Hakuoh Academy yacht club. I think I can at least listen to what you have to say."

"That's enough."

With a smirk on his face, Jackie looked over the faces of the three girls in their uniforms.

"I'm only here to greet you today, so it would be sufficient if the president could talk to all the members of the club. Excuse me, but who are you two?"

　Jackie looked at Marika and Gruier behind Lynn.

“I'm sorry, but the lunch break is not the normal activity time for the yacht club, so there are often no staff members. If you could wait until after school, all the club members would be able to meet you.”

"No, no, no need for such hospitality." Jackie waved his white-gloved hands.

"Unfortunately, we don't have time to wait until after school."

Jackie pulled a pocket watch from the pocket of his patchwork suit and looked at the time.

"Let's finish our business before Dr. Greenbell comes back. No, it won't take long."

　Jackie put the pocket watch back in his pocket with the lid closed and looked up at Lynn with a smirk.

"The Odette II, moored at the Sea of the Morningstar relay station, has been frozen by the tax authorities for non-payment of vessel, weight, and thrust taxes."

"Pardon?"

　Lynn asked again, tilting her head very slowly. Jackie looked around at Marika and Gruier, who looked as if they did not understand.

"The training ship Odette II, moored at dock C68, is registered with the Taxation Bureau as owned by the Hakuoh Academy Yacht Club."

Jackie turned his face back to Lynn.

"There's no doubt about that, right?"

"Yes, the Odette II is definitely our spaceship."

"The owner is obliged to pay the tax on the ship to the tax bureau." Jackie said as he reached into the inside pocket of his patchwork suit and pulled out a roll of paper tied with a ribbon.

"However, not a single credit for the taxes owed has been paid to the Taxation Bureau in the last seven years, which is not subject to the statute of limitations. I believe a letter of demand was sent to Hakuoh Academy, but have you seen it?"

"Unfortunately, I haven't seen it."

With theatrical movements, Lynn looked around the yacht club room, which was surrounded by antiques.

A black and white drawing of two people

Description automatically generated

"To be honest, the Yacht Club does not have very accurate data on Odette II's financial receipts. All the accounting and other details are left to the school."

"If that's the case, it's possible that the demand letter reached the office of Hakuoh Academy, but not the Yacht Club."

　Jackie also looked around the old-fashioned interior of the yacht clubroom, with a knowing look on his face.

"Well, there's nothing to worry about. The only thing that will happen is that Odette II's title will be temporarily frozen until the delinquent taxes are paid. As long as it is under the control of the Taxation Bureau, the students of Hakuoh Academy are not free to take the ship into space, but as long as it remains moored at the designated dock, they are free to come and go as long as they do not take any equipment from the ship, and there is no restriction on simulation. Well, a tax bureau official must be present as a supervisor, which may be a bit disconcerting or inconvenient for girls of that age, but I don't think it will be a big problem."

"Well, that's a problem."

　With a feminine gesture unlike her usual self, Lynn put her hands in front of her open mouth.

"Our Odette II is going to be confiscated by the tax office?"

"Don't worry, it's only a formality." Jackie shook his head, a smirk strapped to his face.

"It is not the intention of the Taxation Bureau to take away the Odette II, a memorial ship of the glorious Revolutionary War, from Hakuoh Academy. However, since we are also a government agency, we have to deal with the rules and regulations that have been set forth."

　Untying the neatly tied ribbon, Jackie flung the long roll of paper decorated with wax seals, pressed paper reliefs, and ribboned stickers onto the clubroom’s vast round table.

"The amount past the statute of limitations will be exempted, and since it's probably just a clerical error, you won't have to worry about additional taxation on unpaid taxes. As expected, we can't exempt you from the interest on the overdue amount, but if you can't pay the total amount in the demand letter in one lump sum, you can pay it in installments."

　Lynn motioned to Marika and Gruier, who were present at the meeting, with the fingertips of her left hand to look over the long scroll spread out on the table.

“May we see it?”

"Yes, of course, you are entitled to see it."

　Jackie left the table, leaving the long roll of paper spread out. Leaving Marika and Gruier to inspect the roll, Lynn turned to Jackie.

"So, what should we do?　It seems that the amount of delinquent taxes is quite large, so it would be difficult to pay it immediately."

“No, no, don't worry."

With a smile, Jackie waved his white-gloved hands in an exaggerated gesture.

"As far as we are concerned, all that is needed is to pay the delinquent taxes. Since it has been decided that we will negotiate this matter directly with Hakuoh Academy, not with the members of the Yacht Club, we will deliver a demand letter to the appropriate department at Hakuoh Academy again after greeting the members of the Yacht Club. It will be sufficient if the members of the Yacht Club understand that the Yacht Club will not own the ship until the delinquent taxes are paid, and that they will not be able to sail the Odette II for a while."

"Oh, dear!” Lynn said with exaggerated surprise. "That's a problem. I have a training voyage scheduled soon."

　Marika and Gruier split up and concentrated on reading the long scroll, trying not to burst out into laughter at Lynn's gentle tone, which was unimaginable given her usual behavior. The first half of the horizontal scroll quoted and explained the relevant part of the tax law, the basis for taxation, while the second half listed the types and amounts of taxes to be paid for the last seven years.

"Therefore, if Hakuoh Academy pays the delinquent taxes as soon as possible, the ownership of the spaceship at the wharf will immediately revert from the tax authorities to you, the Yacht Club. We, for our part, do not believe that a school as prestigious as Hakuoh Academy is planning to evade taxes on a training ship proudly moored at the station. Perhaps there was just some procedural discrepancy.”

"I hope so."

　Lynn looked carefully at the red-haired man's expression.

"So, as members of the yacht club, is there anything we can do to help?"

"No, no, it is enough if you understand the situation and follow our instructions when you need something."

Jackie smiled and looked at the two club members who were reading the scroll behind Lynn.

"I understand. As the president, I will explain the situation to all the members."

Lynn looked at the scroll spread out on the table. "Is it all right if we keep this?”

"Oh, no, I'm afraid I can't leave it with you, since this is the original document."

　Jackie quickly reached over to the table and picked up the roll of paper in a deft motion, then rolled it up as if it were a movie played in reverse.

"In truth, there should be no need to show the taxpayer the original documents that would serve as the basis for the tax payment, but the demand letter alone was too much so this is how we asked you to look at it. So, if you don’t mind......"

Jackie's voice trailed off as he dexterously tied the rolled-up roll of paper back together with a ribbon.

"Please don't tell the main office that I showed this to the president and members of the club."

　Lynn nodded knowingly.

"I understand. I will do my best to accommodate your request."

"One more thing, please."

　Jackie returned the neatly ribbon-tied roll of paper to the inner pocket of his suit pocket and looked around at Lynn, Marika, and Gruier.

"I would like to see the documents you have on the Odette II, if possible.　If you have any sailing records for that ship, we may be able to get a tax abatement or exemption."

"Oh, dear…"

　With a disappointed voice, Lynn looked at the model of Odette II in the display cupboard, which was in sailing configuration.

“I'm sorry, but our training ship is so old that we don't have a lot of data on her. I wish we had more data so we could do better ground exercises here, but unfortunately, we have no choice but to try various things with the actual ship. It's such a waste to have a training ship that we can't sail so easily.”

"Oh, I see."

With a sly grin, Jackie looked around the clubroom following Lynn's gaze. As if remembering, Lynn clasped her hands together in front of her chest.

"Oh yes, our advisor's office might, by some chance, have some Odette II materials and manuals. I'm sure the teachers are having dinner in the cafeteria right now, so if you'd like, you can go with them."

"No, that's not necessary." Jackie laughed and waved his white-gloved hands.

"I have to see Dr. Greenbell again after this anyway, and this time I have to visit the administration office and hand a reminder letter to the person in charge. I'll ask you to introduce me to your advisor, and I'll ask Dr. Greenbell directly to show you the documents."

Jackie greeted her with open arms to break the conversation.

"Well then, Sorry to disturb you. Thank you for your cooperation."

"It was nothing."　Lynn nodded, a wry smile on her face.

"I wonder if we will see each other again?"

"No, I don't think so." Jackie tapped the chest of his suit, where the rolled paper was stored.

"I may be a tax official, but my job today is just to show you this, and I'm kind of an errand boy. I don't think this matter will drag on for long, so I probably won't have to bother you any longer."

"I hope so. Well then, everyone, goodbye Jackie Celsius."

Lynn’s sharp glance at the clubroom door reminded Marika that she had locked it. She hurried ahead to the door, unlocked it and opened it without being noticed.

"Thank you for taking the trouble to be so courteous."

Jackie raised the brightly colored bowler that matched his suit, bowed to Gruier and Marika as well, respectively, and left the clubroom.

　After seeing off their colorful visitor, the three looked at each other in the quiet clubroom.

"Shall I call the security office?"

　Lynn stopped Gruier, who was walking to the information system on the wall.

"No need. He's at least prepared enough to walk in here and say hello, so he's not the kind of guy who's going to get caught if we call security now."

"What?"　Marika's gaze busily flicked back and forth between Gruier and Lynn.

"What do you mean?　Since Dr. Greenbell didn't come back, you're going to ask the security guard to show him the way?"

"Eh?"　Lynn looked at Marika's face in disbelief.

"Didn't you notice?　That fake tax official?"

"F.. Fake?"　Marika raised her voice.

"If you didn't notice, why did you lock yourself in the clubroom?　You didn't intend to lock us in?"

"No, it looked like a bad situation, so I at least tried to keep the other club members from coming in......"

　Lynn looked at Gruier as Marika kept making excuses.

"Um, at least call the security office now."

"It would be faster if I rang the emergency bell, but that would tell them that I had noticed that the pompous idiot who came all the way over to greet me wasn't really a tax agent."

"I think we should still pretend that we are being deceived."

　Marika looked with surprise at the president and Gruier who were nodding in unison.

"Oh, um, how did you know he was a fake?"

"If an outsider is on campus without a permit or a chaperone, it's normal to think it's strange, right?"

　Lynn went through the pockets of her uniform and pulled out the key to the club room, which has been handed down from generation to generation by her seniors.

"The flashy redhead wasn't wearing the badge given to outsiders at the security office when they enter the school, nor was there a vice principal to escort him. Another thing, who has the key to open the clubroom?"

　Lynn dangled an old key chain from her fingertips.

"The president, me, and who else ......”

　There are only a few keys to the clubroom that have been handed down in the yacht club for generations. Not everyone in the club has a key to the clubroom.

"Which teacher has the key to the clubroom?"

"......Only our advisor."

As she spoke, Marika looked up at the president as if she had suddenly realized.

"Yes. I’m sure anyone could break down a door like this by forceful means, but if you want to calmly unlock it and enter, the one you have to catch is not the vice-principal, Dr. Greenbell, but our adviser. In other words, the fact that he came with Dr. Greenbell and then left for some business was probably just an excuse that he had prepared in advance, and as proof, the redhead left by himself without even waiting to be picked up."

　Lynn put the key to the clubroom back in her pocket.

"It's a simple mechanical wardrobe lock anyway, so if you're used to it, you can easily open it with a pin or something and get in. Then, they'll come up with some plausible excuse, get their business done before we have to think about it, and leave."

"The question is not how he got into the clubroom, but how he managed to get into the school in such a conspicuous outfit."

　Marika turned to face Gruier.

"Did Gruier realize that too?"

"No, I just thought the president didn't trust him when she didn't give him our names." Gruier replied with a smile.

"That and the tone of the president. I thought that if the president was acting like that, they were someone I should never trust."

“I thought he was making it up.”

"Looking at that outfit and hair color, I decided that no matter how you looked at it, he wasn't a civil servant on this planet."

"Well, I didn't think he looked like a tax official." Marika mumbled an excuse.

"If I thought that he was really a suspicious person, he wouldn't have come into a highly guarded girl’s academy in such a suspicious outfit."

"I was convinced when I saw that roll of paper, which was the original demand letter."

Lynn nodded with a satisfied look on her face.

"Oh, how weird was that?"

"Yes, I know. The form is haphazard, just a bunch of articles and lists arranged in a plausible manner, but there are a few things wrong with the Odette II registration, which is the basis for the taxation. I think the article on the basis of taxation was probably just taken from the tax law and made to look like that. I am not familiar with the tax affairs of Tau Ceti, but I doubt that such a form was ever used anywhere."

"......I saw that part too......."

　Marika, who had seen the same roll of paper but had done her best just to read through the text, dropped her shoulders in disappointment.

"I'm starting to lose confidence in my ability to captain a pirate ship."

"I know you're not doing this with a lot of confidence to begin with."

"It’s okay, even if you don’t comfort me, I can recover on my own."

"So, Marika's here to use the communicator, right?"

　Lynn held up her lunch box to Marika.

"I'm going to pretend I can’t hear you, but if you don't finish quickly, you won’t have time to eat lunch."

"Ha, ha......"

　Locking the clubroom door from the inside for comfort, Marika started up the wall communication system.

"So, what on earth was that person doing here?"　Gruier asked Lynn, who opened her lunch box at the table.

"He wanted the Odette II, right?"

　Lynn also began to open Marika's lunch box, which was still on the table.

"I'll open it first. I bought a lot, so Gruier can have some, too."

"Oh, thank you very much. I'll make some tea."

　Gruier stood up to get a tea set that had been prepared in one corner of the room.

“If the Odette II is the target, does that mean the tax authorities are already involved?”

"It's not that difficult to hack into the tax bureau and temporarily freeze the ownership of a single spaceship, even if you know you'll be found out later."

"It's not that difficult?”　Marika screamed in front of the communication system while setting up the encrypted line to the Bentenmaru.

"It's a common scam, though it requires a certain amount of effort. In some cases, it is enough to forge documents without actually rewriting data, as is the case now."

　Lynn brought Marika's lunch box to the communication system.

"Would you like to eat there?"

Marika thought for a moment about the etiquette violation of communicating while eating as a student of Hakuoh Academy, but then she realized that she was using the equipment in the club room without permission and took the sandwich.

"Bon appétit."

　Marika set up the usual encrypted line and opened communications with the Bentenmaru. After the authentication process she had become accustomed to, Misa appeared on the communication monitor.

"*Yes, this is the Bentenmaru, I thought it was about time for your scheduled call.*"

“Hi, um, .......”

　Marika ran her eyes over the control panel to confirm that the encrypted line to Bentenmaru was working properly.

“Have you made any progress?”

"*We are analyzing the observation data of the Barbaroosa at Garnet A to find out what happened, and from the recorded phenomena, it would be impossible to pull off such a trick unless there were multiple plant ships with extremely high power outputs deployed. As for the data from the Black Swan, it would not be too difficult to obtain something similar in form if it were only optical observation data, and if we send the observation team back to Garnet A and re-survey the area, we might be able to find something, but since they have already seen the Barbaroosa moving around, we probably won't be able to obtain any useful data.*"

　Misa reported the current situation while looking around the bridge, and then turned her attention back to Marika on the communication monitor.

"*Did you notice anything unusual over there?*"

"No, nothing unusual here ......"

"Marika!"

　As soon as she answered almost as a conditioned reflex, Marika came back to herself when she heard Lynn's sharp voice, who should have returned to the table.

"No, no, there was!　Just now, some suspicious person came to our clubroom, claiming to be a tax official, to seize our Odette II!"

"*A suspicious person?　He claims to be a tax official?　How could he get into the club room of Hakuoh Academy during school hours? Do you have a camera record or something?*"

"Wait a minute, um, president, do you have the data from the surveillance cameras?"

　The yacht club room is secured 24 hours a day for security and various other reasons. The security system can be unilaterally lifted or disguised for the convenience of the club members, but among them is the data from the surveillance cameras.

"No, he got us."

　Marika turned to the president, Lynn, who had spread the information terminal on the table, stopped her fingers that were sliding over the touch screen.

"The surveillance camera image was replaced with a still image starting 30 minutes ago, probably right before he showed up in the clubroom. It must have been routed from the mainframe in the staff room through the security line in the security office, but it's even been set up to temporarily ignore the error in the name of routine checks. How the hell did he get the passcode for the security company?"

　Looking at the monitor showing only a still image of the empty clubroom, Marika turned to the communication system.

"It seems to have been erased. So, did they sneak in here with that intention from the beginning?"

"*If they were going to come into Hakuoh Academy, they must have been prepared for that. Just verbally, what did he look like?*"

"Well, a red-haired, gangly-looking, suspicious-looking guy in a patchwork-looking suit who had a Tax Collector's ID but didn't show it to me very well."

"*A patchwork redhead, huh? There are plenty of people suspicious abord the Bentenmaru, but did he give you a name?*"

"I know it's an alias, but he introduced himself as Jackie Celsius."

"There it is!"　Lynn raised her voice again.

"I searched for his name and it came up in one shot, Jackie Celsius!　Assistant Director of the Spacecraft II Division, Space Transportation Department, Taxation Bureau, Tau Star System Administration?"

　After reading out that much, Lynn clicked her tongue.

"I knew it! Even the tax bureau's data was altered."

“*Jackie Celsius.......*"

　Misa repeated the name on the other end of the communication monitor.

“Do you know him?”

"*I don't know. There are plenty of industries in the world where it is more better to keep your name private, and not many people have the guts to work under a known name, whether it is their real name or a street name. Can you tell me what you talked about, just so I can remember?*"

　Marika gave Misa as much information as she could remember.

"*I see, I have a general idea of what happened. I don't know what they want from the Odette II, but if they're hitting a pirate ship that received the Black Swan's SOS, there's a chance something could be coming our way.*"

“So?"

　Marika turned to the table after neatly erasing the encrypted line she had set up so that it could not be restored and noticed that Lynn and Gruier's eyes were focused on her.

"Eh?"

"If all we had done was to receive a distress signal from Garnet A at Odette II, then I could have ignored the rest. But it’s a different story when a suspicious person appears in our club room and tried to seize our spaceship. If you're going to give Bentenmaru information about us, don't you think it would be a good balance if Marika tells us what she already knows?"

　Marika raised her voice when Lynn pressed her with a smile.

"Eeeeeeeee!?"

Gruier, on the other side of the table, is picking at her sandwich with an innocent expression on her face.

"No, but, um, you're not interested in hearing about some old pirate ghost ship from long ago in a place like this, right?"

"Unless something like that comes up."

　Lynn looked at the chair where the patchwork suit had been sitting.

“However, for some reason I don't understand, he came after the Odette II, and although I feel bad for Marika, unfortunately, the Hakuoh College Yacht Club has already been made a party to it. Since everyone in the club has heard the distress signal, as the president of the club, I need to gather as much information as possible.”

　Lynn smiled.

"Come on, let’s talk."

　Marika looked at Gruier with a feeling of apprehension. Gruier put down her teacup and nodded at Marika.

"I think we should share the information now, in case there are any critical situations in the near future."

Marika bent her head deeply and sighed.

"Garnet A, a pirate shipwreck from 120 years ago, huh?

　Lynn crossed her arms as she listened to Marika's story.

"The ultimate weapon of the Revolutionary War?

Gruier folded her hands together on the table.

"Is that all the information you know?"

"I don't have a complete picture of the situation either."

Marika shook her head blankly as Lynn and Gruier's skillful interrogation made her reveal all the information she had forgotten she had heard.

"I heard that Chiaki-chan was on the Barbaroosa that jumped to investigate Garnet A, so there may be more information from her, but that's all I've heard so far in my regular communications."

"It would not be surprising if the battle records from when the Odette II was the White Swan were kept on the data server, but that the files were locked or hidden in various ways."

　Tapping the keyboard of the information terminal spread out on the table, Lynn searched for the battle records of pirates during the War of Independence. She found only a few results, including official records of the Tau system's self-defense fleet and private research websites.

"I don't know where the traps and trickery begin and end, but there was someone doing something bad at Garnet A, and then there was someone who entered Hakuoh Academy and told us not to touch our ship. If that's the case, what we should probably do is to keep the Odette II out of the wrong hands."

"What?"

　Marika felt a sense of disquiet and reassessed the president's face.. Lynn continued to operate her mobile terminal.

"At this moment, there are no intruders on our pier at the relay station. I should probably re-lock the doors just to be safe."

"Even if you lock down the docks, won't they opened by the station if the tax bureau authority attacks?"

Gruier asked, to which Lynn replied, while moving her hands.

"Then, it’s time. For my part, I just made sure that the ship was locked down to prevent outsiders from inadvertently entering. Marika, what should we do if we want the Odette II to leave port as soon as possible?"

"Do you want to set sail!?"

"Answer the question. What is the fastest way to prepare food and other necessities, and get the Odette II out of the relay station by our own hands as soon as possible?"

The tone of her voice was extremely calm, and Marika had no choice but to answer.

"If we only need to launch the ship, we can manage with two people for helm, two people for engine, and one each for communication and navigation. Oh, and if possible, we need one more person to control the dock side."

　Lynn looked around the clubroom again.

"Not enough."

“What?”

"Marika, call Ai and Yayoi. I'm going to go report everyone's early dismissal."

　Lynn looked up at Gruier. Before she could open her mouth, Gruier pulled out a crystal credit card.

"If time is of the essence, you'll need to book the earliest shuttle from the airport to the station."

“Eeeeeee.......”

"So why are so many more people coming when there's supposed to be a minimum number of people!"

"Thanks to you, I got a group discount."

　Gruier, who occupies the window seat next to Marika, smiles.

"We were able to get seats without any waiting time, and it looks like our next voyage is going to be a good one!"

"Did you let the Serenity royal family pay for the shuttle for our yacht club members, and for the full fare, too?"

　Marika looked around at the dozen or so yacht club members who filled the cabin of the regular shuttle between Shin-Okuhama Airport and the relay station. Not so much if you book in advance, but tickets bought at the airport on the day of departure are sold at a fixed price, making them eye-poppingly expensive.

“What are you going to do, president?”

"Oh, don't worry. I had a credit card that I could use, and I also used Jenny's shareholder coupons and a group discount, so it's not that much money."

　Lynn, who had taken an aisle seat, was busily moving her fingers on her favorite computer, HAL-bou, which she kept open on the bus ride from the school to the airport.

"If I can prove that the trip to the station was justified, the school will pay for the expenses later. I'll figure out what I owe you later, so don't talk to me for a while."

“Huh."

　Sandwiched between Gruier and Lynn on either side in the front row of economy class, Marika had no choice but to tighten her seatbelt. An announcement says that the plane will soon begin its takeoff run.

"But, as expected, Marika is popular."

　Gruier looked around over the headrests at the high school girls who had filled nearly half the seats in the normally empty economy class cabin.

"Just one word to them and we can gather so many people."

"I think it was the president's word, not mine."

Marika leaned deeper into the seat, feeling more and more confused as she thought about what was to come.

"If we told them that we would send them an early dismissal form, there would be many club members who would be willing to drop their classes and come to the club activities. With this many members, not only can we launch a ship, but we can also sail between planets for short periods of time."

　Marika found herself unconsciously counting Odette II stockpile of preserved food. After having stocked up on reserves during the first training voyage, the life-support environmental system should be fine, and enough water should be available, so as long as you can turn a blind eye to perishable foodstuffs, there will be no need to resupply for a while after going into space.

“Well, I guess we can get by if we get the things we really need delivered later.”

"What exactly is president Lynn doing?"

Gruier's voice trailed off as she watched Lynn run her fingers rapidly across the computer keyboard.

"She's probably trying to get Odette II out of the station."

Marika looked at HAL-bou but could not see what she was doing from the side because she was blocked by the polarized display.

"If the fake tax official was right, whether or not the tax really is in arrears, there is no way they can get the Odette II out of the port even if they approach at the relay station in the proper way. I think they are preparing to pull our ship out of the station somehow, whether by fooling the control station or making up an emergency situation."

Pier C68, which was lit only by pale green emergency lights in key places, was almost completely dark. The flashlights, which emitted more than enough light in the narrow inspection corridor, illuminated only a small portion of the spaceship in the large space, even when turned up to maximum brightness.

"I didn't know there was such an inspection corridor."

　Gruier, who had followed Marika out onto the dark dock, drifted out through a narrow hatch that was only barely big enough for a spacesuit to get through.

"Even though I'm on my own pier, I can't use the main entrance openly!"

Yayoi followed her out onto the dock, spreading the light of the flashlight she was carrying to its fullest extent. Even though she swung it around, the white hull of the Odette II, which was fixed to the pier, returned only a dim light.

"Even though it's ours, we're going to be stealing a spaceship."

　Lynn, wearing sunglasses with night-vision she had taken from somewhere, emerged from the open hatch of the inspection corridor with a large package in her arms.

"We want to make it look like nobody's here at this point. So, we can't pull power from the station, and of course we can't open the locks on the dock. With this inspection corridor, station security won't react unless there's a sudden decompression or a runaway high-energy body, and a simple trick can be used so that there is no alert from a hatch opening or closing."

"Have you breached the station's security yet?" Marika asked as she helped the club members who came out later.

"It's fine, I didn't leave any traces."

"That's not the point."

"I’ve already explained the procedure."

　Hooking her toes on a bear trap on the floor of the closed dock, weightless and under pressure, Lynn looked up at the sailing spacecraft's hulking body above her head.

"If the energy supply of a moored spacecraft with its doors locked were to suddenly spike, it would look suspicious, so I want only one entrance open, the main systems to wait until the power system is switched on, and keep the lights on board to a minimum."

“I understand, but..."

　Marika narrowed the beam of her flashlight to illuminate the hull of the Odette II, which was covered by a stowed mast. It was pitch black except where the light was shining, so it was difficult to grasp the distance by eye, but she lightly jumped toward the usual port side hatch. Once afloat, whether or not the target point is illuminated, there is no choice but to stay afloat until hitting the hull.

　Floating, Marika pointed her light around the hatch where the entire yacht club had not yet come out.

"And then what?　If we increase the power of the main engine, no matter what we do, ATC will know we're doing something here."

"I won't increase the power of the main engine."

　Following Marika, Lynn jumped through the inspection hatch.

"If we keep the ship running at idle, we can supply enough power for the navigation electronics and propulsion systems. We won't use power for anything else until we leave the port."

"And the life support systems?　Aren’t you going to purify the air inside the ship?"

"With that much volume and this many people, if we are careful not to leak air until we leave port and increase the power of the main engine, we should not have to worry about air pollution."

'That's unconventional......"

　When operating a spacecraft, the basic rule is to follow the manual exactly and perform every step of the procedure. The methods for operating a spacecraft have been developed over many years, and the laws that must be followed place safety first.

All of these rules are designed to ensure the safest possible operation of the most complex mechanical structure used by humans, spacecraft, in the extreme dangers of space.

"Do you disagree?"

　The expression on the president’s face as she asked the question was unreadable in the darkness. Marika turned her body toward the approaching hull of the Odette II.

“The only time you can violate the rules is in time of war. So, if this is war, then it’s okay."

"War, huh?"　I heard the president mutter.

"If that's the case, we have to do well and win. Like our ancestors who ran this ship."

　In the control room at the dock, a flashlight flashed twice. A pause, then two more.

　After confirming the signal that Lynn had successfully taken over the security of pier C68, Marika went to the control room and began opening the Odette II's passenger hatch.

　The door, which would normally open automatically once the key lock was released, was set to manual mode, with several people turning the airtight handle to release the hatch’s crimp, and pulling the long lever to open the hatch.

　Inside the ship, there are only modest emergency lights at the passageway intersections. Marika entered with the lights still off, using a flashlight, sensing by the smell and temperature that the air conditioning was working properly.

"With the lights still out, it looks like an unfamiliar ship."

　Gruier's voice was heard as she entered the ship.

"I remember when Marika and I boarded the ghost ship."

"It's a lot better than that time, though, just knowing where everything is."

　Marika was moving ahead quickly, relying on her flashlight.

"But will it really be okay to steal a spaceship in public?"

"We've taken over control of the pier."

　In the dimly lit bridge, with only a minimum of control panel lights on, Lynn looked around at the faces of the assembled club members.

"We can't do whatever we want yet, but the port authority, the control station, and the port police security office are all getting dummy data for the time being, so they'll think everything's okay. We have to get the Odette II ready to leave the port without anyone noticing, open the dock without anyone noticing, and leave the relay station without anyone noticing."

"Um."

Ai timidly raised her hand and asked the question that every member of the club aboard has been asking.

"Can you really do that?"

"It's not impossible."

　Lynn took the trouble to shine a light on her own face and gave an awesome smile.

"The first step is to prepare the ship for departure. This can be done with just an emergency battery, without using external power or increasing the output of the main engine. In that case, there are a number of steps that must be skipped or fudged because we don't want to use power, but if we do them well, as I explained before coming here, we should be able to do them without attracting anyone's attention."

　Lynn flexed her right hand to show off her bicep.

"Well, you'll just have to wait and see if this Lynn-sama trick works."

　Laughter rippled through the tense bridge.

"So, along with preparing the ship for departure, we're setting up a dummy on the dock. As you know, the Odette II is a living starship, so even while moored, the port authority monitors the operation of the main engine and the circulation of the life support system. If the data from the moored ship stops flowing as soon as the ship leaves the dock, everything will fall apart, so we have to leave a dummy in place to ensure that the monitoring data flows the same way when the Odette II is gone."

　Lynn looked around the bridge and pointed to a corner.

"We'll remove that subsystem, take it outside, hook it up to the data relay system at the pier, and have it stream dummy data."

"That's a big job."

　Lynn laughed at Gruier's comment.

"This is just the beginning. Once the dummy data is successfully flowing to the port authority and the control station, we’ll have to hijack the dock control from the port authority and secretly open an airtight pier!"

"Can you do that?"

　Ai raised her voice. Lynn nodded vigorously.

"Fortunately, both the port and control stations are located deep inside the station, not in full view from the glass-walled control room. The airspace covered by the relay station is too large to be seen by the naked eye. Of course, there are cameras on the inside and outside of the station, so it is necessary to broadcast a false image to them, but once that is done, there is no way to know if the pier is open or not unless you are actually there and see it with your own eyes."

"Really?"

"If we accidentally open it, all the pressurized air in the airtight pier will be released and the station will be shaken, so we have to do something about that, too. The biggest task this time is to open the pier and set sail."

　Lynn looked around at the faces of the club members once more.

"Departing the relay station without ATC control......"

"I've been thinking about it for a long time, but I just don't know how to do it."

　Marika raised her hand.

"Is it possible to sail silently and remain undetected by a control station that has a fine mesh observation network?"

"It's not impossible if you time it right."

　Lynn tapped the keyboard of the expanded HAL-bou and turned the display around to face everyone.

“As long as we choose an open space situation where we can quietly sail away pretending that we are under the control of ATC, and we choose a time when we do not pass by other ships so that questions about our spacecraft will not be sent to ATC, we can leave port without disturbing the entry or departure of other ships.”

"I don't think that the station's radar and sensors can be fooled by any amount of unpowered sailing."

"That's what electronic warfare equipment is for."

　Lynn pointed to the electronic warfare operator's seat on the bridge where Marika and Gruier were sitting.

　Comparing the electronic warfare panel with the lights still off in front of her and the face of the president holding the flashlight, Marika raised her voice.

"What?　You're going to jam the ATC electronically and leave!?"

“No, no, just the opposite."　Lynn waved her hand exaggeratedly.

“Fortunately, the Sea of the Morningstar relay station is a peaceful civilian relay station, and the control station is not constantly emitting powerful radars like those used in combat. Besides, indiscriminate electronic jamming would cause trouble not only to the control station but also to other vessels. We wouldn't use such a flashy technique. We'll use a more elegant, humble, and time-consuming method."

　Lynn looked around at everyone's faces.

"We analyze the radar waves from the relay station, calculate the amount that will be reflected by our spacecraft, and send the radar back to the site at the same power and frequency before any reaction occurs. It's called active stealth."

　In the silence on the bridge, Marika looked around at the faces of the club members who hardly understood the president's explanation, and then raised her hand.

"Um, if possible, could you please explain it more clearly?"

"Well, in other words, it's a high-end type of electronic warfare. Normally, electronic warfare would not be conducted at such close range, so it is more of a hacking and deception technique, and it's a waste not to use what we have, so I'll use Odette II's electronic weapons at full capacity. We're going to hack the ATC and Port Authority from the time we leave the dock until we leave their airspace and make ourselves invisible."

"What?" "Isn’t that the president’s usual technique?"

　Lynn looked around at the relieved faces of the club members in frustration.

"Why do they look so worried when I say electronic warfare and so relieved when I say hacking?"

"That's how much they trust the president's skills."

　Marika's voice trailed off as she interceded.

"So, you can really do that?"

"It's impossible with a normal spaceship. But if you have electronic equipment, sensors, and communication systems like this ship, and a high-gain antenna for precise data sniping at specific targets, you can do it without being a warship."

"Ordinary spaceships don’t have that kind of equipment."

　Marika's voice was even quieter.

"I've never heard of that kind of electronic warfare being used on departure, have there ever been any successful cases in actual combat?"

"Well, it's a nice idea, but no matter how much research I do, I can't find a case like this where the ship has sneaked out of the port. So there are two possibilities in this case. First, no one has ever tried that before."

"What is the other one?"

"In all cases, the sneak departure has been successful, so there is no record of it!"

　Marika sighed.

"Sometimes, I envy the president's unwarranted confidence."

"I've done most of the preliminary work before coming here, so all that's left is to prepare and set up."

　Lynn placed her HAL-bou on the control panel of the bridge.

"According to the relay station schedule I checked earlier, there is a 30-minute period in which there were no departures or arrivals between the scheduled afternoon flights and the start of the evening rush. Unless there is an extra express flight from outer space, if we took advantage of this time period to leave the station, we could leave the station unobserved at least until the next ship arrived. Aim for this time to open the dock!"

"Let's see..."

Looking at her wristwatch, Marika raised her voice when she saw the arrival and departure schedule for the Sea of the Morningstar relay station displayed on HAL-bou's display.

"We don't have much time!"

“That's why we have to hurry.”

　Lynn floated up to the bridge with the night vision in her sunglasses turned on. She opened the access panel on the wall and reached into the case of the onboard tool kit.

"If we can just change the power system connections, the emergency batteries will restore the ship's internal power. Yayoi will take care of that, and Gruier will take the lead on getting the onboard systems up and running."

　Lynn pulled a tool case the size of a large trunk out of the access panel.

"Over here, we'll take the subsystems out to the dock and set up a system to make it look like Odette II is there. First, we need to remove this block computer from the base and haul it out!"

　Although it’s not much of a concern for normal navigation, when I opened the access panel on the bridge of the aging Odette II and tried to temporarily changes the system, it turned out to be a terrible mess.

　Although the bridge may have had a standardized unit structure at the time of construction, the control system has been remodeled and modified over the years, making it strangely complex. It is not so bad if the connectors connecting each unit are of a dubious emergency type or crimped together forcibly, but if the bolts and screws within the same block are of different standards, tools must be constantly changed.

　The tools on board are all completely out of power, there are no batteries to replace them, and the ship's power supply is not available to recharge them.

　After sending personnel to the engine section to switch the connection and use the emergency battery as the main power source, the main bridge finally had normal lighting and the control system could be used. However, the power supplied is limited compared to when the main engine is running, and even though it has passed the ship inspection, the capacity of the old emergency battery is unreliable, so the work continues with the lights in the ship’s passageways is limited to the bridge, and work continues with the air conditioning off.

Marika and several others managed to carry the four subcomputers that had been detached from the bridge off the ship, and under Lynn's direction, they temporarily fixed the machines to the dock and continued the connection work to transmit dummy data.

　Just when they had managed to reconnect the Odette II's data communication system to the subcomputer by the scheduled departure time, a new problem was reported by Gruier, who jumped out from inside the ship.

"Emergency departure of a convoy?

"Yes!"

　Gruier, who flew into the unlit pier with a flashlight in hand, quickly laid out the facts as she understood them.

"The status of the three star system military destroyers currently in port at the relay station has just changed to Preparing for Departure. The color is urgent, and the estimated time of departure is just before the night rush begins, the time we were aiming to depart on the Odette II!!"

　It is difficult to work using night vision when light is shining on you. Lynn raised her sunglasses to her forehead.

'If it was an emergency sortie, you could have sent a ship from the anchorage airspace, but they didn't have the right one ...... Do you know the reason for the emergency sortie?

"No."　Gruier shook her head.

"I might be able to find out by contacting the star system military command center, but that would reveal our true identity, so I haven't done that."

"No. I don't think I can stop the star system army from going out, even if I knew why."

　Lynn dropped her sunglasses over her eyes and went back to work.

"If it's a warship, its radar and sensors are always on right from the moment it leaves port."

　Marika was working on several data cables extending from an array of computer systems.

"If the ship leaves port without permission from ATC, and of course with its transponders turned off, it will be discovered at once."

"Well, it's a good thing we're in controlled airspace so we don't have to worry about being fired upon without warning. If we leave port first, they will catch up with us and find us, and if we leave after the fast destroyers have departed, we will be caught up in the night rush."

"What do we do?"

After a brief pause, Lynn quickly answered Gruier.

"Keep preparing. When we're done here, I'll go back to the bridge and review the arrival and departure schedules for the station. But if we wait until the night rush is over, it will be after midnight at best, or in the morning at worst. Do I need to get an overnight stay permit as well as an early dismissal?"

　Marika looked at Lynn, who was wearing sunglasses.

"……As for permission to stay out, president, did you mean to go home after pulling Odette II out?"

"Of course. If you have a training camp, it's one thing, but our club members aren't pirate captains like Marika, so we have to make sure we go home after club activities."

"That's..."

Marika noticed Gruier's amused gaze.

"Um, do you realize that you are involved in the criminal act of stealing an entire spaceship right now?"

"Yes, of course."　Gruier nodded with a smile.

"So if I can't manage to escape, I'll be in trouble"

"……Don’t say that with a smile."

"How are the preparations for departure going?"

　Lynn asked while testing the subcomputer with her connected HAL-bou.

"Whatever happens later, we just need to pull Odette II off the pier and out of the controlled airspace."

'We're a little behind schedule, but I think we can probably manage to stay on the president's original schedule. But as it is, we'll be leaving with three destroyers."

"Keep working. I'll go back to the bridge when this is over."

　When I returned to the ship through the corridor, where the lights were still off, I found that preparations for departure were continuing on the bridge as usual.

"Installation of the subcomputer on the pier is complete!"

　Lynn, HAL-bou in hand, declares as she leaps to the electronic warfare seat.

"I still need to make some minor adjustments, but soon we will be able to replace the ship's data for port and control stations with dummies, and then we will be able to use more power."

　Gruier, who was in charge of preparing for the ship's departure, came over to Lynn.

"It looks like we will be able to complete preparations for departure as scheduled. However, it looks like the star system military convoys will try to time their departure before the rush begins."

"Hmm?"

　Lynn ran her eyes over the relay station's departure and arrival schedule displayed on the sub-monitor.

"Does that mean the star system military also wants to get out of the way before the civilian ships crowd the controlled airspace? But if we try to get out in the first half of the open time, we can easily be spotted by a convoy that comes out later, and if we wait for the convoy to leave, we'll run into the rush."

“That's right."　Gruier nodded.

"So, I think we should forgo the departure at this time and try to find another time."

"But…"

　Lynn put her finger on the sub-monitor and scrolled through the schedule.

"The next time there will be no departures will be after midnight. If we wait too long, the Taxation Bureau, fake or real, will be here and make things even more troublesome."

"So, I've been thinking."

Marika, who had been watching the departure and arrival schedule from beside Lynn, reflexively felt a shiver run down her spine. Pretending not to notice, Gruier continued.

"On the other hand, if we were to set sail during the rush hour, wouldn't the other vessels be less concerned?"

"I'm sure it would be a lot of trouble if we sailed without control when it's crowded."

　Lynn looked at Gruier's face.

"Go on."

"I looked up the afternoon rush hour departure and arrival schedule. The Princess Apricot, a luxury cruise ship, is in Upside Bay right now and will be leaving in an hour and a half. The pier is A60, right in our neighborhood."

　Gruier turned to Marika.

"You know them, don't you?　The Princess Apricot"

With a further sense of foreboding, Marika nodded reluctantly.

"They've done business with the Bentenmaru many times."

"It’s a liner luxury liner with more than three times the length of the Odette II and two orders of magnitude more volume. With her dimensions, the Odette II could easily fit in her shadow."

"Shame on you, Gruier!"

"If the Odette II sails in the shadow of the Princess Apricot , wouldn't that, combined with her active stealth, allow her to successfully navigate through controlled airspace during rush hour?

"It's true that we wouldn't have to ask for ship's passage control, but we would be leaving the same route as the Princess Apricot, and wouldn't have to worry about crossings or unusual approaches, but what excuse would we give the other ship for following them so closely?"

"That's it, of course."　Gruier smiled at Marika.

"You'll have to go to the Princess Apricot beforehand as Captain Marika of the Bentenmaru, explain the situation to them, and get their approval."

"It's not just a matter of getting approval!　How many navigational laws do you think you're going to ignore when you're so close to the relay station that you can't even be seen on radar and you're sailing in sync with it, violating the safe distance with abnormal proximity?"

"You could be charged with nine violations of safe navigation obligations under the Navigation Act and the Port Act. There may be two more, but if anything should happen to the Princess Apricot, it will be our fault and she will be the victim."

"Does that mean all we have to do is have the Princess Apricot pretend not to notice?"

"That's right."

　Nodding to the president, Gruier turned to Marika.

"Don't worry. I will join you in greeting the Princess Apricot."

"Eeeeeeeee!?"

"I can't believe it. ......"

　On the escalator up to pier A, where many luxury cruise ships and regular flights dock, Marika shook her head, repeating a line she had said many times before.

"I'm definitely being deceived."

　Just 30 minutes ago, Marika was almost kidnapped and taken to the high-end fashion district of the relay station she had been to before. Now, dressed in a dark blue business suit with a hint of makeup, Marika and Gruier, her blonde hair pulled back in a tight bun, are on their way to the upside bay area.

"It's a shame because I could have had a new suit made for you if I had the time.”

　Gruier, standing on the next step, raised her expressionless business glass a little to reveal her eyes. Marika's eyes darted from the toes of her high heels to her tied-up hair as she looked at Gruier, who was wearing a light blue business suit this time, whereas the last time it had been black.

"Anyway, why did you keep my suit from the last time?"

"I was told that the size needed to be fine-tuned and finished, so I left it there for cleaning as well. I had no idea that I would be on a mission to have Marika wear it again so soon!"

"I can't listen to Gruier's words with an open mind these days."

"You don't listen to royalty with open arms, you know. How do you feel about the fit compared to last time?"

"Well, it's perfect, like it was custom made."

　Touching the sleeve of her suit, Marika came to her senses.

　"You're using the boutique as a locker!?　 Also, you're not just changing clothes, you're also putting on your makeup, and yet you're able to schedule an appointment with the captain of the Princess Apricot!"

"Getting ready quickly is part of the job." Gruier, who had put her business glass back in her hand, replied coyly.

"And if you're willing to help me get dressed and do my makeup, it's easy enough to talk while I’m at it."

"How can a mere schoolgirl make an appointment with the captain of a luxury liner on the verge of setting sail with just a few words?"

　Marika stared at her with a suspicious look, and Gruier simply smiled.

"It's fine, I didn't mention the Serenity royal family's name."

"Did you intend to?"

"I used a dedicated line, but it is up to the recipient to decide how to interpret it."

"It's not like I actually used it."

　Marika looked down and put her hand on her forehead.

"It's fine within the royal family, but is Gruier okay with diplomacy?"

"Serenity has always been famous for its diplomatic skills."

　The escalator steps rose to the pier floor. Gruier looks straight ahead and starts walking.

"The trick is not to push only one side's interests, but to suggest ways to gain a little on both sides. It would be better if we could get the other side to make us the offer we want."

"Such an advanced tactic."

　Marika followed Gruier down the escalator and looked around the big dock on the upside of the relay station.

　The Grand Dock, with its starry sky, is a state-of-the-art open-air dock that just finished its last renovation a few years ago. The dock and its interior are pressurized with a normal gravity of 1G and 1 atmosphere, and a high-density air shield allows spacecraft to enter and exit freely while completely shutting out harmful rays and radiation.

　The starry sky above the large wharf is real space seen through the air shield. Unlike the old type, in which the ceiling and floor are supported by structural materials and the walls are air-shielded to maintain atmospheric pressure while allowing spacecraft to pass through, this type of spaceport, in which the entire port area is covered by a dome-shaped air shield, has only just been developed and is still rarely used even in the core star systems.

Large, colorful spacecraft are docked under the starry sky, protected by an air shield that shuts out debris, meteorites, and dust as well as harmful radiation.

　Moored to their respective dedicated docks, the spacecraft are anchored by individual artificial gravity fields, with no spacecraft held in place by old-fashioned gantries or robotic arms.

　Marika easily spotted the Princess Apricot, whose hull's lower half was hidden beneath the bay area because the boarding deck and pier were at the same height. The large white liner, decorated with graceful curves, was lying on its massive hull between two movable piers radiating from the central compartment.

"I never thought I would be on a luxury cruise ship like that, even though it was docked, without being a pirate."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

In a completely innocent voice, Gruier pointed to the glass-walled Harbor Light Café at the base of the two movable piers that supported the Princess Apricot from both sides.

"I decided it wouldn't be a good idea to go on record getting on and off the Princess Apricot without a ticket so close to departure, so I asked the captain to come out."

　Gruier looked at Marika, who dropped her business glass on the tip of her nose and glared at her resentfully.

"Did you want a ride?"

"It’s fine, I don't have time anyway, so even if I could get on I'd have to get off right away, and you're right that it's better not to be on record. Never mind."

"Then, I don't mind."

　Ignoring Marika's gaze, Gruier headed toward the garden terrace of the Harbor Light Café.

　The Princess Apricot docks at the Sea of the Morningstar relay station for only about half a day. The overwhelming majority of passengers enjoy the upscale shopping area and restaurants at the relay station and the half-day sightseeing at Sea of the Morningstar rather than embarking and disembarking.

　Even though it is almost time for departure, there is no sense of urgency around the Princess Apricot, which is sandwiched between two movable piers. Passengers returned to the ship by private commuter and cargo containers were in motion, but the white luxury liner was leisurely illuminated by the harbor lights.

The Harbor Light Cafe juts out from the Bay Area central section, right in front of the Princess Apricot, which is entering the port with its narrowed bow. Marika met the captain not in the restaurant, but on the open terrace where a number of tables were lit with large, lighted shades.

　Immediately after taking over as captain of the Bentenmaru, Marika had made the rounds to greet all of her customers. Although she did not have time to greet the captain while she was working as a pirate, the Princess Apricot was a ship that Marika had worked on many times since she became captain, so she was familiar with the main staff members.

　Ronald Harley, captain of the Princess Apricot, was looking at his ship with a tea set on a table under an umbrella shade.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

　Gruier, casually coming into Captain Harley's view, greeted him in a low-key manner that did not attract the attention of the guests around him.

A couple of cartoon girls

Description automatically generated

“I can't thank you enough for taking the time out of your busy schedule to come all the way here."

　While still at the table, Captain Harley gave an abbreviated salute with his finger lightly resting on the bridge of his cap. He pointed to two empty chairs across from him.

"Go ahead. It's probably best if we both kept a low profile."

　Marika shoved the business glass she was wearing into her clutch bag, which had also been supplied by Gruier and she was not quite sure what was inside.

"My name is Katou Marika. It's an honor to meet you."

“No, no."

　Captain Harley's eyes narrowed into a glare.

"I have to admit, I had my doubts about whether the Bentenmaru's Captain would actually show up, but this is the real deal. Currently, she doesn't look very much like a pirate."

"Thank you for showing me these ridiculous outfits."

　Marika sat down in front of the veteran captain, who looked much older than Bentenmaru's bridge personnel. She catches her breath and looks him squarely in his eyes.

"I came here today to ask you for a favor. I think this topic falls into the category of trouble, but would you mind listening to it?"

　Gruier looked a little surprised. Captain Harley crossed his hands on the table.

"Even if the other party is a lady like you, I don't expect it to end with only pleasant talk when you are summoned by a pirate. Now, what kind of story are you going to tell me?"

"Thank you."

　Marika recalled her impression of Captain Harley from their first meeting. Even if the other party is on a ship without combat capability, she didn't want to make this man her enemy.

"I don't have much time, so I'm going to give you a very brief explanation. If something is unclear, I will try my best to provide a convincing explanation after everything is finished."

"Oh?　It seems to me that you are in a great deal of trouble if you are so willing to present your concessions to us first."

　His lips are loose, but Harley's eyes are not smiling.

Marika briefly explained the distress signal from the pirate ship that sank 120 years ago received by the Odette II, the gravity anomaly observed at the red giant star Garnet A and the wreck that should have sunk, and the seizure of the training sailboat by the self-proclaimed tax bureau agent who appeared at Hakuoh Academy.

　After listening to the minimal explanation, Harley opened his mouth.

"So, you are saying that this is not your business as captain of the pirate ship Bentenmaru?"

"Yes."　Marika nodded.

“This is, uh...”

　There was a pause in Marika's dialogue as she chose her words.

"We are acting on our own initiative, having sensed the danger. We still don't know what is going on, and we still don't know the connection between the distress signal received from a friendly pirate ship that was supposed to have sunk 120 years ago, and the fact that today a fake tax bureaucrat appeared at Hakuoh Academy and declared the seizure of our school's training ship that was a pirate 120 years ago. However, as long as they are inside the tax bureau and issuing official documents, we think that reporting them to the authorities will only take more time and will not be beneficial, so we are going to do what we can do ourselves first."

"It seems that the Hakuoh Academy yacht club is full of brave people."

　Captain Harley looked at Gruier next to Marika.

"Now, as you know, my job is to keep the spaceship moving safely and get the passengers and crew safely to their next destination. If you attempt to ignore the Navigation Act and all other laws and regulations and decide to operate the ship in a dangerous manner, I will do everything in my power to protect the Princess Apricot. How can you guarantee the safety of the Princess Apricot?"

"I have no intention of risking our ships." Marika replied.

"The Princess Apricot's departure trajectory is always set in a way that minimizes the need for changes in trajectory to ensure a comfortable ride. The Princess Apricot flies with minimal risk by simply following the instructions from ATC."

"There are actually not that many navigation law violations that Odette II will commit before leaving the control airspace of the Sea of the Morningstar Relay Station."

　Gruier joined the conversation. Marika looked at Gruier's confident profile, wondering what he was going to say.

"Of course, it is a violation of the Navigation Law to depart without following the instructions of the ATC, but the speed and operational procedure are the same as usual. The only thing that will be greatly reduced is the safety distance."

　Marika is flabbergasted while listening to Gruier's explanation.

　For spacecraft navigation, the safety distance is determined by airspace and speed to prevent collisions. This does not apply to warships navigating in formation or when docking, but if a spacecraft approaches closer than the safe distance, an alarm will sound during normal navigation, and if there is no orbit change, the spacecraft will be forced into an automatic evasive maneuver.

"But the Princess Apricot could be forced to ignore the safety distance on a regular voyage through no fault of her own."

"Oh?"　Captain Harley asked curiously. Gruier continued.

''The operational staff of the Odette II is the same as the staff of the Bentenmaru when we worked on the Princess Apricot before."

"Ah!"　Marika let out a small scream.

"In all our previous acts of piracy, have we ever caused even a single scratch on the hull of the Princess Apricot? This time, the Odette II will be guided by a helmsman of exceptional skill. Although the Odette II is an older model, it is equipped with an electronic warfare arsenal that can compete with even the most advanced ships of the Empire. She has active stealth and has sufficient concealment measures against the control station and other vessels, so the Princess Apricot probably won't find her as long as she is in normal navigational position."

"I see."

Hurley took over the conversation, preempting Gruier's attempt to continue her explanation.

"I understand that you have taken all the necessary precautions, including safety measures. However, if you are a pirate, why didn't you just shut up and hide behind the Princess Apricot like a pirate?"

　Gruier gave a small look to Marika as if to tell her it was her turn. Blinking, Marika opened her mouth.

"We hope to continue our good relationship with the Princess Apricot. As I mentioned earlier, this is not an action as the pirate ship Bentenmaru. Well, things are complicated and it is true that the current crew of the Odette II overlaps with the personnel that we had previously operated with on the Princess Apricot, but it is not our intention to act as a pirate against the Princess Apricot. And one more thing."

　Marika looked straight into the eyes of the captain, who must have spent several times her age in space.

"We are doing this because we think it is the right thing to do. If we were dealing with Captain Ronald Harley of the Princess Apricot, we thought we should greet him first, rather than hiding quietly and stealthily in the shadows of his ship."

　Captain Harley reached for his previously untouched teacup and sipped from it.

"You're good at getting old people on board, aren't you?"

“That’s…”

"When I entered this profession my mentor said to me, 'Don't get in the way of a pirate.'"

"……What?" Marika asked back, unable to understand the meaning of his words. Harley placed his teacup on the saucer.

"It seems to mean that the profession of pirate is to pursue the quickest path to the goal, legally or illegally, so don't get in their way."

　Harley nodded to Marika.

"Okay. We will sail as normal. There may be some noise on radar and sensors that suggest we are approaching abnormally close, but let's pretend we can't see it."

"Oh, and if possible, could you please keep the dome on the bottom of the ship closed?"

　The Princess Apricot, a state-of-the-art luxury liner, generates artificial gravity inside the ship while underway to reproduce an environment similar to that on a planet's surface. The ship's flat, hierarchical structure is gravity-defined, and its interior is modeled after the ships of the past that conquered the oceans.

"I understand."

　The captain looked around at Marika and Gruier with amusement.

"Of course, the ship's passengers are not interested in the universe beneath their feet. By the way, I'm going against my mentor's advice, but may I make one condition in exchange for doing as you say?"

"What is it?" Marika asked, relieved.

"Anything we can do to help."

"The crew aboard the Odette II is the same crew that pirated the Princess Apricot before, right?"

　Marika nodded with a sense of foreboding.

"The truth is that the girl pirates that time were extremely popular with not only the passengers but also the crew. If it is possible, would you be willing to play pirates again with the members from that time?"

"What did you do!"

　There was no time to change, so Marika ran into the Central Shaft monorail in her business suit and shouted "I can't believe you agreed to Captain Harley's request to play pirates again, even though the members at that time were supposed to be in the yacht club!"

"Oh, Marika, you didn't refuse either, did you?"

　Gruier, propping herself up on the monorail's grips, turned her slightly upturned gaze toward Marika.

"If there was any inconvenience, you could have stopped it right then and there, or loosened the conditions, or said something."

“You didn't give me the luxury of interrupting."

　Marika turned away from Gruier.

“Besides, I was thinking that it would be bad to disappoint the captain, who took us up on our offer so easily, I just ended up agreeing!"

"Good for you. Now you have a reason to let everyone play pirates."

"Who do you think is going to tell everyone about that?"

　With her head in her hands, Marika looked up at Gruier with a start.

"The trick of diplomacy, getting the other side to make a proposal that will benefit both sides a little bit... No way, Gruier, you ......"

"Come on, we're almost at Block C."

From Pier A in Upside Bay, it takes only a short time for the Central Shaft monorail to reach Pier C, the group of piers that houses Odette II. Gruier turned her back to Marika when she saw the light above the door begin to flash.

"The negotiations have been a success. We have obtained the consent of the captain of the Princess Apricot. I think that's enough for now, though, don't you?"

"No!

"I'm back!"

　 Before returning to the Odette II at pier C68, Marika rushed into the control room and reported to Lynn, who was working in the light of the control panel only.

"Yes, thank you for your hard work. So, what's the outcome?"

　Lynn turned to Marika and Gruier, who jumped in and remained still.

'...... er, that's a flashy look."

"Who's in the entertainment business?"

"Oh, do I look that grown up?"

　Gruier shimmered, and Lynn gushed.

"No, I still can't do it. I can’t do this conversation. If you can afford to joke about it, you've succeeded, haven't you?"

"The captain of the Princess Apricot has given his consent. As long as we don't make any mistakes, Captain Harley will turn a blind eye to the Odette II."

"Well done!"

　Returning to the control panel, Lynn entered the last phrase onto the keyboard. Gruier looked at the chronometer in the control room, which showed Galactic Standard Time and the local time of the Sea of the Morningstar.

"The Princess Apricot will depart in 30 minutes, on schedule!"

"I know. I've just set the timer so that the pier will open in thirty minutes to release the Odette II."

　The control panel rang a soft bell to indicate that the entry was complete. The display switched to show a timer for thirty minutes and began counting down.

"Now, get back to the ship!　After closing the hatch and securing the airtight seal, we will start venting the air at the pier. Then we'll prepare for active stealth and go live without any testing!"

"Air pressure in the pier has dropped to 5 percent."

"Data from pier control room, pressure at pier maintained at 100 percent."

　Falsified data sent to the port authority and external data from Odette II's sensors are reported separately. The pressurized atmosphere inside pier C68, which is continuing the departure preparation sequence by Lynn's hacking, was about to fall below the value for opening in the limited time available.

　Lynn in the electronic warfare seat, arms crossed, is busily running her eyes over the monitors and main screens throughout the bridge. There were no changes to the latest Sea of the Morningstar arrival/ departure schedule by the control station, nor to the Princess Apricot's departure schedule.

"All preparations to increase main engine power are complete."　Yayoi announced from the engineer's seat.

"Power can be increased at any time."

　If the Odette II, which is light in comparison to its size, were to leave the dock and simply navigate at legal speed within the controlled airspace, there would be no need to increase the power output of the main engine. However, the power supplied by the idling main engine would quickly become insufficient to supply the electronic armament with enough energy to perform complex operations such as active stealth.

"Not yet. If we inadvertently increase the engine output in a closed dock, even though it is rigged, the energy reaction alone will set off the fire alarm. How much power is left in the emergency batteries?"

"Another fifteen percent." Yayoi replies.

"Wait a minute!　I just heard that there’s thirty percent left!"

"I had some leeway until it was half full, but after that it’s decreasing at an accelerated pace. At this rate, we may reach zero before we leave port......."

"Even without life support running, it’s still the same."

　Lynn clicked her tongue.

"The ship is pretty worn out after all. Even if we pass the inspection, it won’t help you in the real world."

"It’s okay, the supply voltage is stable. The remaining battery charge is usually a low number, so I think it will last."

"If the power goes out as soon as we leave port, we're in trouble."

"The Princess Apricot has removed the boarding bridge and closed all hatches."

　Gruier's quiet voice came from the observer's seat.

"It will be moving shortly."

　At Pier A, which is surrounded by an air shield, there is a slight time lag between the start of the spacecraft's movement and its departure from the station.

“The air pressure inside the pier is at 4.9 percent.”

"The efficiency will only get worse anyway. I'm going to open up the pier."

　Lynn gave the command to the control room at the pier. In an emergency situation, the pier could be opened suddenly under one atmosphere, but the control room started preliminary release of the pressurized atmosphere of the C68 pier according to the set procedure.

Large valves were opened in each part of the slender, cylindrical pier, with angles calculated so that if they were released at the same time, no unnecessary propulsion pressure would be applied to the station. The small amount of air remaining inside the pier is exhausted outside the station, and the interior of the pier turns white due to adiabatic expansion.

"Preliminary release confirmed."　Marii announced from the navigator's seat.

"Zero pressure outside the ship."

“The rest of the procedure is all automatic. We're not going to stop now.”

“Automatic pier opening initiated.”

　The pier opening was initiated in accordance with the procedure set up in the control room. The outer wall of pier C68, centered on the base of the station side, began to open like six petals.

"Battery power at 10 percent."

　Yayoi announced in as calm a voice as possible, knowing that the decrease was accelerating. Gruier's voice followed.

"The Princess Apricot has left the pier. She will soon leave the air shield and begin sailing under her own power."

"No more reports on remaining battery level."　Marika announced from the captain's seat.

"Switching over after a power failure would take time because it would have to be restarted, and even if we start up the main engine just in time it will be caught on the sensors and they will find us. As soon as Odette II's gantry arm was released, the ship began to move forward at a slight speed. When the ship leaves the pier, the main engines’ power will be increased, active stealth will begin, and the ship will use slow maneuvers to attach itself to the underside of the Princess Apricot. There are no changes to the procedure, we just have to follow the rehearsals, and since we don't have to follow the instructions of the control station, it should be easier than usual."

　Marika ran her eyes over the monitor showing the situation on the pier. The gantry arm securing the Odette II to the pier will be released soon.

"Pier opening complete. Gantry arm released."

　Gruier's announcement was not necessary, the dull thud of the gantry arm detaching from the hull was felt on the bridge.

"Release confirmed."

　Gruier announced that the gantry arms, which were secured at six points on the front, middle, rear, left and right sides of the hull, had all been pulled back toward the dockside. Marika announced to the quiet bridge.

"Odette II, launch."

"Odette II, launching."

　As soon as she recited it, Ai, at the helm, moved the Odette II, which was floating in the open C68 pier, forward at a slow speed. The thrusters fired in a light kick and stopped immediately so as not to cause any unnecessary reactions in the dock side sensors, even though the ship had been hijacked.

　With a sighing jet of light flickering for a moment, the slender training ship with its sails still folded slowly moved out from the center of the closed pier, which was open on six sides.

"Main engine, prepare to increase power."

"Open all antennas that can be opened."

　The Odette II is still sustained solely by emergency battery power and is still only navigating inertially with the slight thrust of its maneuvering thrusters. On the bridge of the almost drifting spacecraft, Yayoi, in charge of engines, and Lynn, in charge of electronic warfare, are now ready and waiting for their cue.

"Main engine, start."

"It's too early."　Lynn's voice is overlaid by Yayoi's screams.

"But the emergency battery is running out of power!"

　All the monitors on the bridge blinked for a moment. Marika instructed.

"Switch energy systems, main engine startup!　President, initiate active stealth!"

"Roger, hit it!"

　Once more, all electrical equipment on the bridge went out for a moment. The darkness, which seemed to last forever, was soon restored as if nothing had happened, showing normal operation.

"The energy system switchover is complete!　Main engine power at 10 percent. Do you still need more?"

"No, it's enough. All radar and sensor systems are normal. The radar has succeeded in controlling reactions in accordance with the relay station's control system pattern. Active stealth successful!　At least the surrounding ships and station can't see us."

"Princess Apricot's current position is confirmed."　Gruier announced in a calm voice. Marika remembered what she had told her to do.

"Ai, can you see the Apricot?"

"I see it."

　Ai looked around at the control panel in the helm and regained her grip on the old steering wheel.

"We're starting our approach."

"Ah, finally."

　Lynn jumped from the electronic seat to the radar/sensor seat and ran her fingers over the control panel.

“I’ve also confirmed it here. The position of the Odette II is currently 20 degrees diagonally below and ahead of the Princess Apricot.”

　In order to hide from the relay station in the shadow of another ship, the Princess Apricot's current position would have to be used as a reference point.

　Lynn sends a diagram from the Odette II's current position to the helm showing the shortest path to the Princess Apricot coming out of the air shield and the position to occupy.

"Put the ship in this position. As we move away from the station, we will have to raise the forward angle and close the distance, but for now, this is where we are!"

"Closing distance, 100 meters........"

　The bridge seemed to hear even the sound of Ai swallowing as she recited the data as if to confirm it. If she wanted to take full advantage of the shade created by the Princess Apricot's massive body, the Odette II would have to approach to a distance of about half its length.

"Here I go!"

　As if determined, Ai kicked Odette II's maneuvering thrusters. While being exposed to electromagnetic waves from all directions and emitting signals to disguise herself, Odette II began to nestle into the much larger luxury liner.

"Thank goodness the departure orbit for the ship takes it closer to Sea of the Morningstar than the horizontal plane of Pier A."

　On the bridge of the Odette II, which is entering the shadows created by the Princess Apricot to avoid the direct light from the Sea of the Morningstar, Lynn continues to make minor adjustments to the electronic armament, which continues its omni-directional active stealth.

"If we were to sail into a high orbit, we would be in full view of the air shield, and everyone on the pier would see us before we even entered the shadow of the Apricot."

　The Sea of the Morningstar relay station is generally oriented with the upside bay toward high orbit and the downside bay toward low orbit.

　Spacecraft entering Pier A, located at the top of the upside bay, enter the air shield from a higher orbit, while ships departing from the station leave the station in a lower orbit than the relay station.

　The reason why departing ships avoid Pier A is to prevent the ultra-high-speed jets from hitting the air shield covering the pier.

"Maybe you can see it through the window."

　Marika said as she watched Ai navigate towards the Princess Apricot, which was proceeding at a slight speed through the sky, striking the right balance between minimum jetting time and minimum distance.

"There are plenty of places where you can see outside the relay station, and there are plenty of monitor cameras."

"If we can just see them, we won't have a problem."

　As the Odette II moves away from the station, active stealth, specifically the precision sniper angle of the false data, must be fine-tuned. There would be no time to manually control all of Odette II's antennas and all of the signals sent out from them, so Lynn had automated all of the operations, but you never know when or where a glitch might occur.

"It's rush hour at night, when there are a lot of ships leaving port. It's one of many ships, and with the mast folded down, it's not that noticeable, so unless you directly contact ATC, they won't know that this ship is leaving port without being controlled."

"What if they call ATC?"

"It's okay. Control can't see this ship."

　Lynn had a tremendous smile as she watched all the electronic armaments she had set up working as planned.

“Besides, we'll be in the shadow of the Princess Apricot soon. Then the Odette II will be out of sight everywhere, unless she's covered by precision radar for fire control. Then we can sneak along on the belly of the passenger ship until we are out of controlled airspace."

"Present distance to the Princess Apricot, 200 meters."

　I could hear the strain in Ai’s voice as she held her breath.

"Entering final deceleration"

　Unlike the Bentenmaru, which is a mobile cruiser that has been repeatedly remodeled to add thrusters, the thrusters of the Odette II, though enhanced, are only at the level of a civilian spaceship. Concentrating on the thrusters of each part of the fuselage, which had only a meager thrust force, far from enough for combat maneuvers, Ai aligned the Odette II's vector perfectly with that of the Princess Apricot, flying above.

"Final deceleration is complete. The Princess Apricot will now approach from the other side at a slight acceleration."

　The speed limit in controlled airspace is set lower the closer you are to the station and higher the further away you are. After leaving port, the spacecraft will increase its speed in accordance with the prescribed departure trajectory.

"Position confirmation. good work"

　Marika spoke to Ai at the helm, who had finally relaxed her shoulders.

"Compared to the Bentenmaru, which is capable of combat maneuvers, it must be difficult to perform precision maneuvers with this ship."

"Yes, but the low thrust means that even if we make a mistake, we have plenty of time to cover it, and we don't have to get as close to the opponent's ship as we would if we were pirates."

"That's good. Plenty of room."

"Not yet."　Lynn's voice echoed on the bridge.

"It will take another 30 minutes for the Princess Apricot to pass through the controlled airspace. We need to keep the main engine power at the current level and start up the life-support and navigation systems, or she won't be able to move by herself!"

"I forgot!"

　Marika remembered that she had skipped most of the steps that would normally be taken, giving top priority to pulling Odette II out of the dock.

"Well, Ai, stay at the helm and stick to the Princess Apricot. President, you should take a look at the electronic weapons, right?"

"Yeah, we're doing some nasty maneuvers that I wouldn't normally do, so I don't want to move from here until active stealth is complete, if possible."

"Now then, the rest of you, um, Yayoi, please adjust the engine output. The same minimum power output is fine as it is now, but if you don't raise the output in conjunction with the startup of other systems, be aware that if you inadvertently disrupt the supply balance and stop the ship, the control station will find out and treat it as an unidentified vessel."

"Can I start charging the emergency battery?　I can use it as a buffer for the extra output."

"I’ll leave it to you. Put the rest of the ship into normal sailing mode, and begin preparations to start up all systems!"

"Jackie Celsius, Assistant Director, Spacecraft Division II, Space Transportation Department, Taxation Bureau, Tau Star System Administration."

　The young port officer, who had apparently been transferred to field duty in the middle of his career, compared the three-dimensional display of his ID, which he rarely saw on the relay station, and the tax bureau's asset seizure order handed to him by the red-haired man in the very colorful patchwork business suit with a wry grin on his face.

"Seizure of a spaceship?"

"Oh, it's not like I'm going to take it for unpaid taxes."　Jackie waved a friendly hand.

"If I wanted to take the spaceship that was already docked, I would have to go to the tax office to arrange for a crew and prepare the ship for departure. We can't spend more on expenses than we receive in taxes."

"Then why did you come all the way up to the relay station?"

　The port official in charge of Pier C, who had been forced to deal with the sudden visitor, stood up from his desk in his office with an annoyed look on his face as he handed Jackie back the order printed on the special paper for public offices.

"It's just some additional business."

　Jackie, red hair sticking out of his patchwork bowler hat, refolded the order form he had received and put it back into the synthetic cloth envelope.

"I have some cargo coming into port today that needs to be attended to and escorted. It's a famous ship, after all, and as a low-level employee of the tax bureau who will be the nominal caretaker of the ship until the delinquent taxes are paid, I thought I'd take the opportunity to take a look at the ship with my own eyes."

　After looking suspiciously at the bright red-haired tax officer's bowler hat and pointy shoes, the port official looked around the small, bare office.

　Pier C, once the main entrance to the Upside, has been downgraded with each new bay area built above it. Now that Pier A, with its state-of-the-art air dome, is up and running, Pier C, which is less convenient but more expensive to use, has many vacancies, and the Port Authority office in charge of Pier C is quiet.

　The staff knows this, and many of them are not afraid to leave their offices empty. There were no staff members in the small office who might be forced to do extra work.

　With a reluctant look on his face, the port official searched his jacket pockets.

"Well, let me show you around. The training ship for the girls' academy is at Pier C68."

"Oh, as long as you lend me your administrative master key, I'll be fine on my own."

　Because entry to a private pier owned by an individual or organization in absentia requires the use of a master key, port officials are required by regulation to be present.

"Is that okay?”

　With a relieved look on his face, the port official checked the current status of pier C68 on the information terminal at the counter just to be sure. The private pier owned by Hakuoh College was still closed after being used by high school girls for club activities a few days ago, and no abnormality was detected in either the moored vessel or the pier.

"Pier C68 is weightless because it contains an old spacecraft. You can't walk around in artificial gravity like you can here, you know?"

"Don't worry about it."

　The man in a business suit and shoes, who seemed to have no idea how to move around in zero gravity, spread his hands in an exaggerated manner.

"I'm still in charge of spacecraft in the Space Transportation Department. Even though I look like this, I'm used to weightlessness. I'm just going to go into the dock, turn on the lights, and see the famous training ship with my own eyes. It's a closed pier, so it's pressurized, right?"

"Yes, of course."

The official confirmed on the information terminal monitor that the atmosphere at Pier C68 was maintaining normal pressurization inside the relay station.

“There is no vacuum beyond the airlock, so there is no need to change into a space suit or wait for air to fill the pier.”

“I don't need to bother you, then. I just want to take a quick peek inside the pier and look at the ship. I don't have time to go inside or inspect the exterior, so I'll be back soon.”

“Please don't tell anyone."

　The port official pulled out a spare emergency master key from under the counter, not his personal master key. He hands Jackie an official card with a picture of the relay station floating in the sky with the Sea of the Morningstar in the background.

“The card key has a chip in it that shows your current location and will not work if you take it out of the station.”

“I know, I work for the same government agency.”

　Jackie received the card with white gloves, raised his hand to the official as if in worship and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

“Now, if you'll excuse me. I'll let you know if I'm going to be late.”

　With all the lights on, pier C68 was deserted. Jackie burst out laughing when he discovered that the high-capacity data cables that should have been connected to the spacecraft were connected to a hastily fabricated computer system installed on the dock.

“This is a big deal. Well, this is no time to laugh.”

"Thank you very much, I'm done."

　The staff looked suspiciously at Jackie, who returned in a flash.

"Have you seen it yet?"

"Yes, I'm done. I may come back for something else, but I'll be glad to see you then. Oh, the key card was a big help. Thank you very much."

　Jackie put the master key on the counter.

"Well, I have a lot of work to do next, so I'll be leaving. Thank you for your time."

"Who said we need at least four people to sail?"

　Lynn continues to fine-tune from the electronic warfare seat.

"I didn't hear at the time that you were going to sneak out and steal a ship while using advanced electronic warfare such as active stealth!　If I had known we were going to do that, I doubt we would have had enough people in the yacht club."

　Marika moved to the navigator's seat and helped with the navigation, as she was unable to do anything else by simply taking command from the captain's seat. While navigating within the controlled airspace could be done by following the Princess Apricot, from that point onward, the captain had to check the ship's current position and set a course by herself.

"Honestly, we should have done all this setting inside the relay station, but we had to do the initial calibration and setting while moving!"

"The relay station is also moving in orbit, and Sea of the Morningstar and Tau stars are moving at high speeds in the galaxy, so the conditions are not that different!"

"If you're on the relay station’s pier, you can check your current position by network without having to observe it. They can even send you corrected values depending on where you are in the station, but if you're outside, you have to observe everything yourself!"

"You've been doing this a lot during yacht club practice!"

"The Odette II's system is much older than our simulator!　We didn't make any adjustments while flying on the last voyage."

　The latest model spaceships are automated and labor-saving, but the Odette II is an older model and used as a training ship, so most of its onboard equipment must be operated and manipulated by hand. Preparations for departure, which would have required the entire yacht club to be on hand if the training voyage had gone according to schedule, were omitted as much as possible this time because of the emergency situation.

　In any case, once a spacecraft has been put into space, it must be operated as a spacecraft. The bridge crew, whose roster was not even half full, was busy redoing the omitted procedures in parallel.

　In order to use the navigation equipment, the current position must be initialized and reset. To operate the life support system, all systems must be checked to ensure that the required amount of water is available in the tanks, that there are no problems with the components, that the various cartridges are normal. Even with the help of automated systems it's a lengthy process.

　Since almost all of the work that should have been done in parallel with the preparation and submission of the flight plan flight plan prior to departure from port was ignored, if Odette II is to be operated as a spacecraft, all of its systems must made operational.

　Therefore, it was necessary to start up the Odette II in a way that no one in the crew had ever done before, by following the omitted procedures from the beginning for some things, and for others, by following only the necessary processes along the way, to bring the Odette II into operation with as little trouble as possible.

　Gruier, who had memorized the structure and systems of not only the Bentenmaru but also the Odette II during the previous training voyage, was put in command in lieu of a cheat sheet of navigational preparations that were not in the manual. Gruier, Lynn, and Marika were in charge of setting priorities and instructing the necessary procedures for the Odette II, which had only the main propulsion system, attitude control system, minimal piloting system, and electronic armament in operation, to sail as a proper starship.

　The output of the main propulsion system was adjusted as delicately as possible so as not to release excess energy. In order to maintain the Odette II's current position in the shadow of the Princess Apricot, which was on a breakaway trajectory, Ai had to concentrate on steering the ship.

　Active stealth must continue while starting the Odette II's systems. The further away from the relay station, the lower the density of observations from the station even in controlled airspace, and as long as the ship is snugly attached to the Princess Apricot and on the same course, the chances of being detected by other ships are low, but they cannot be assured.

　Marika anticipated that if something bad were to happen, it would be an emergency military launch, which was not on the schedule prior to the ship's departure. A military combat ship, which deploys radar and sensors at a density unmatched by civilian vessels immediately after departure, would easily defeat the Odette II's active stealth.

　External information gathered during active stealth navigation is limited to passive observation, which does not emit radar waves. The arrival and departure status of a station is announced as public information, so if monitored, the current position of spacecraft and schedule changes can be known.

　While starting up the systems necessary for navigation one after another, Marika was watching the status of the relay stations and the status of the spacecraft in the surrounding space as much as she could.

　Fortunately, there were no warships dispatched or spaceships making unscheduled emergency port calls, and the Odette II was safely passing through the control airspace in the shadow of the Princess Apricot.

"Out of controlled airspace."　Gruier announced in her usual voice.

"We have reached the third space velocity. Switch coordinates from the Sea of the Morningstar system to the Tau system."

　The Princess Apricot, heading for its next port of call, begins its high-powered acceleration toward outer space, where a FTL jump is possible. The Odette II, which will be left behind, protects itself by moving away from the Princess Apricot's thrust axis.

"The relay station's radar response is rapidly decreasing. Even though we are in the Tau system, we don't have to worry about being spotted by the control station unless we do something foolish."

"Shift to normal navigation."

　Marika looked around at the machinery on the bridge, which was finally working like a normal starship, and asked Lynn, who was back in the electronic warfare seat.

"Um, is electronic warfare continuing?"

"It's certainly better if they don't find us, so we'll try to dazzle them with what appears to be noise."

　As Lynn typed in a new command into the electronic warfare panel, Marika asked timidly "So we shouldn't even turn the transponder on yet, right?"

"Obviously. If the mechanism is working properly, Odette II is still moored inside the station. We can't broadcast the transponder of a spacecraft that is not supposed to be flying."

"I feel like we're violating all sorts of navigation laws every time we do this......"

　With a gloomy look on her face, Marika sank into the captain's seat.

"If I were accidentally discovered, I would never be able to get a license other than that of a pirate ship captain."

"Sorry to disturb you, but this is a response to an unidentified ship."

　It took the crew some time to understand what Gruier meant because there was no change in her tone.

"What!?"

　At Gruier's report, Lynn flew to the radar/sensor seat. Gruier, in the observer's seat, continued her report.

"Even though we're out of controlled airspace, we're still in the inner planets of the Tau system!　If the ship is flying properly, there's no way it's an unidentified ship!"

"Please check. It's from the direction of the outer planetary system and still far away, but there is some kind of bad reaction on the radar."

　Lynn frowned as she turned up the resolution of the passive sensor to the maximum.

"Only the transponder response has been confirmed. The metallic reaction, velocity, mass, and all the data we're getting insist it's not a natural object. Optical sensors can only give us a position, but this is ...... a black spaceship?"

　Marika recalled the Bentenmaru's report of the black wreck observed by Barbaroosa at Garnet A. She pulled out her student bag that was shoved next to the captain's seat, opened it, rummaged around, and took out the data card.

"President!　I have the data of the shipwreck observed by Barbaroosa!"

"Just read out the numbers and pass them over here!"

　Marika used the reader in the captain's seat to read the data card. She identified the latest communication log from the mountain of data and forced open the observation data sent through regular communication with Bentenmaru.

"It's over 300 meters long and has a mass of 30,000 tons!"

"It's a match!"

　The data captured by the sensor matched Barbaroosa's observations within the margin of error.

　Lynn looked around the radar panel. With the Odette II's radar, it would be possible to identify the other ship's equipment, not just its type, but it would also announce the Odette II's current position throughout the Tau system. Civilian vessels would not care about the radar waves of other ships, but they would sound the alarm system of a warship.

　A sharp alarm cut through the bridge. The communication monitors flashed red, indicating an emergency.

　This time, everyone on the bridge understood what had happened.

"Another SOS!"

"It's from the Black Swan!"

　No one was at the communications officer's desk on the bridge. There was no need or room to keep a radio operator on the bridge because there was no plan to communicate with anyone.

　Gruier, who had received the distress signal from the observer's seat, cut the alarm ringing on the bridge.

"Same pattern as last time, except this time it is a laser instead of an ultrashort wave!"

　Laser communications, which are even more directional than ultrashortwave, require extremely precise targeting, but there is little danger of being intercepted. Over long distances, lasers are more diffuse, requiring accuracy comparable to that of a ship's artillery fire.

"They're aiming at our spaceship!"

　Lynn jumped from the electronic warfare seat into the vacant radio operator's seat.

"The distress signals’ current location matches the radar response, and the date and time of the transmission is, oh, today's date!"

"The transponder is here too, that's ......."

　Gruier looked up at Lynn, who was in the communications officer's seat, as if reluctant to say anything.

'I'm sure you have more detailed data over there, but, uh, as you can see, the transponder claims the spacecraft's name is the Black Swan."

"Friend or foe identification, unconfirmed!"

　Lynn picked what she considered to be the most important information from the monitor, which displayed only cursory information.

"The identification signal is assigned randomly for each period or mission and is deactivated when it is no longer needed."

　Marika recalled the ABCs of friend or foe identification that she had learned on the pirate ship.

"If the same identification signal is used for a long time, it can be analyzed and used to identify a ship as an ally even though it is supposed to be an enemy, so it is normal for it to be changed for each mission during a war."

　Marika checked her own identification signal currently registered to the Odette II on the control panel in the captain's seat. Sure enough, it was unregistered.

"But the Odette II is a civilian ship, not a warship or a pirate ship, so there is no way that her friend or foe identification signal should be activated!"

"At least it has updated identification signals from the military and security forces of neighboring star systems, plus the pirates who have been granted immunity by the former Confederation of Independent Star Systems."

　Marika peeled her eyes away from Lynn as she tapped on the control panel.

"How?　Identification signals are not that easy to get!"

"It's not that difficult for the military. The imperial fleet's identification signal, which exchanges more detailed codes for each mission, can be found on the official website."

Lynn tapped on the keyboard. The result, which came back instantly, made her smile.

"The Black Swan's current identification signal doesn't match any of the previous ones. I checked it against all the patterns of identification signals from the Revolutionary War, and it's different from all of them."

"Where did you get that from?"

"It's in the history books, and this was an active pirate ship at the time of the Revolutionary War. We have our own records of all the signals used to identify pirates and the Revolutionary Army."

"...... you mean?"　Gruier urged the conclusion that the president seemed to be heading towards.

"The transponders are well disguised, but this is not the Black Swan. No matter how much it looks like it did back then, no matter how much it screams the same SOS, it's just a fake imitating the shape and voice of the Black Swan!"

"This ship, which claims to be the Black Swan, may be a fake, but it is equipped enough to know the current location of the Odette II, which is supposed to be in active stealth, and also to accurately hit the Odette II's antenna with a distress signal, albeit a nondestructive beam."

　Gruier added the exact current situation.

"Who are they?"

"The enemy."

　Marika looked around the bridge after repeatedly confirming the current position of the distress call and the current position of the Black Swan as understood by Odette II.

"It's subtle, but the current position of the distress call does not match the position of the Black Swan on our sensors. Since it is a fake Black Swan with no matching identification signal and no matching transponder, and since it has been shooting at us when we were supposed to have snuck out, we consider it to be the enemy!"

"I agree."

　Lynn returned from the communications officer's seat to the electronic warfare seat.

"Captain Marika, can you fight using the current Odette II?"

　Marika looked at Lynn with a despairing look on her face and looked around the bridge, which was less than half full. Also, there were two people in the engine room working directly on the main engines.

"I told them it was war when we launched the ship, so I should have at least anticipated that there would be a war when we got out. If you were planning on this, president, why didn't you do it when we had more members on board?"

"I didn't expect the other side to move so quickly."

　Lynn scratched her short-cut hair.

"I thought I had, well, two days to spare from when pompous idiot, the self-proclaimed tax bureau official, came to notify me until he could get his hands on Odette II directly. So, I thought that if we pulled the ship out today, we could get everyone in the department on board tomorrow and make all kinds of preparations, but well..."

"No, not 'well'.　I'm sure the president knows this, but based on my limited experience as a pirate ship captain, it is impossible for such a small group of people to engage in an anti-ship battle against an unknown opponent!　Besides, the Odette II is not equipped with any usable weapons!"

"Well, it's a civilian ship, after all."

"So even if all the members of the yacht club were on board, anti-ship combat is impossible!　You're not a president who doesn't understand that, are you?"

"I don't intend to fight a real battle on a training ship with no weapons and no crew, so don't worry about it."

"What do you want us to do, then?"　Gruier asked, as if to echo the sentiments of the bridge crew.

"In an emergency, if we deactivate stealth and send out an SOS, I'm sure the military or whatever will come to our rescue."

"I'd prefer to avoid that if possible."

　Lynn looked at the main screen with a difficult expression on her face as she saw the relationship between the two ships.

"It's true that they are guilty of disguising themselves as an old pirate ship and a shipwreck, but we are also in a weak position because we have secretly taken out a spaceship without paying attention to the seizure by the tax bureau. Even if we were to go to the military for help, we still don't have all the ingredients to make a deal."

"What do you mean by 'ingredients to make a deal'?”

As Marika screamed, Lynn pointed to the symbol of the Black Swan, which claimed its current location on the main screen.

　　"It's a pirate ship that even a high school girl could tell was a fake if she had the right circumstantial evidence."

"... and you're just a high school girl?"

"The reason they disguise themselves as tax officials or as ancient pirate ships is because they have something to hide and something bad in mind. So, as long as you have enough material to explain what happened, whether it is the military or the taxation bureau, you will be able to explain the situation with impunity."

　Gruier spoke over the noisy bridge.

"Enough material to convince the authorities - is that a victory condition?"

"Yes."

　Lynn looked around at the control panel in the electronic warfare seat.

"It would be great if we could seize the actual wreck, but if we can get enough battle records to prove it's the enemy, and maybe even a piece of it, then we can turn on the transponder and send out a powerful SOS that will send all the warships in the inner planetary system flying."

"The goal is not to sink it, but to capture it......."

　Marika in the captain's seat gave an exaggerated sigh. Lynn laughed merrily.

"We don't have the weapons to sink them anyway. Do you think that's a reasonable combat goal?"

"The opponent's tactical objectives are currently unknown."

　Marika thought for a moment before opening her mouth.

"I'm sure they want to do something with the Odette II, but I don’t know what it is yet."

"If we keep dealing with them, they’ll tell us what they want to do."

"So what we have to do is buy time until we can get them in front of us?"　Gruier summed up the situation succinctly.

"They are the enemy - I'm calling it that because the captain has determined that the Black Swan is the enemy - but since we don't know exactly who they are or what they want, we have to buy time to find out, don't we?"

"Well, we don't have the luxury of taking our time to deal with them."

　Lynn checked the chronometer embedded in a corner of the control panel for the current Sea of the Morningstar Standard Time.

"It's almost dinner time, and hopefully we'll be back before classes start tomorrow."

"Do you really think that a time-limited battle would be so convenient?"

　With a look of dismay, Marika emerged from the captain's seat. Stepping on the wall, she attached herself to the communications officer's seat.

"Well, how accurately can you get the Black Swan's current position?"

"I think they are intentionally jamming the radar so that the civilian radar can't get an accurate position."

　Lynn moved from the electronic warfare seat to the radar/sensor seat.

"What do you want to do?"

"To reply back to the person who sent out the SOS that we're on our way to rescue them. Since we don't want other ships to hear our transmission, I think it would be better to reply with a laser transmission like the Black Swan, but as you know, a laser transmission requires us to locate their current position with the same accuracy as a ship's gunfire."

"I see. So you’re letting them know that we know where they are."

　Lynn began to move her fingers on the control panel at the radar/sensor seat.

"Why don't you reduce the convergence of the beams used for communication and increase the signal area?"

"If we widen the beam too much, they will know that we are just trying to communicate without knowing their exact location. A communication laser at such a long distance will spread out anyway, but if we're going to bluff, I'd like to be accurate enough to win the game."

"I'll leave it to you to draft the text."

　Lynn quickly calculated the current position of the Black Swan, relying on optical observation data. Not much time has passed since Odette II captured the unidentified spacecraft that looked like the Black Swan, but we know it is moving at a considerable speed.

"We will use a standard message."

　Marika picked out a reply pattern for receiving a distress signal, which had been prepared in advance in the communication system.

"It is an abbreviation meaning that we acknowledge receipt of a distress signal and are heading for immediate rescue. I'm thinking of replying as the White Swan instead of the Odette II."

"A reply to a ship wrecked 120 years ago under the name of that time? That's very clever of you, Marika."

"What do you mean!"

"We got her!"

　While adhering to the condition of not transmitting radar from here, Lynn was able to derive enough data to satisfy the present position of the Black Swan and the prediction of its future position.

"Hit this position with a laser transmission. At this distance, even our high-power laser will spread out if we don't narrow it down, so we can catch them in the beam."

"I understand. Yayoi, increase the engine output!"

　Marika put her hand on the firing button of the laser communication that was set to send the standard message.

“Replying to this rescue signal is our declaration of war, isn't it?"

　Gruier's voice was heard. Marika waited for the power required for the long-range laser transmission to be sent, and then checked the sighting coordinates sent by Lynn.

"Don't say anything embarrassing like it’s a declaration of war!"

　Marika vigorously pressed the signal button. From the high-powered laser mounted on the bow of the ship, a beam carrying a distress acceptance signal was shot out toward the wreck in the distance.

"I'm just telling the unidentified wreck where I am."

"...... should it be arriving soon?"　Gruier asked Marika in a whisper as she returned to the captain's seat.

"It's still far away, if not between planetary orbits, so it's almost there." Marika answered.

"President, what is the course for the Odette II?"

"Decide as you see fit."　Lynn answered without looking up from the electronic warfare seat panel.

"The original plan was to advance to the military anchorage area around the Lagrange point."

　The Lagrange point is in high orbit, but within the Sea of the Morningstar zone.

"But the Black Swan has already appeared, so our schedule is a mess. If we go too far from Sea of the Morningstar, it will be difficult to return home, so it doesn't matter where we set our course as long as we don't go too far."

"Even if you say anywhere......"

　Marika looked at the correlative display on the captain's seat. In clear space, you have to consider the future to chart your course.

“Unless we are so far from the Sea of the Morningstar that the relay station and warships don’t care about us, the Black Swan probably won’t come close to us.”

"You should at least set an orbit for outer space to make it easier for the other side to approach us. It’s troublesome to have to stare at them in the distance. "

"That's appropriate."

　Marika looked up again and looked around the bridge.

"…… There aren’t many sailing staff here."

　The solar sails of the Odette II show their true value outside the planetary sphere. This time, there are not enough bridge personnel, and the solar sails cannot be used when departing from the relay station, so sailing operations are not considered.

"I think it would be better to deploy the masts."　Gruier stood up from the observer's seat.

"The enemy doesn't know what's going on aboard the Odette II. They can't know that we've embarked without enough crew. If that is the case, then I think we should show them our normal sailing position by unfurling the solar sails as usual."

"If we don't adjust the angle of the sails properly, the relay station will be able to see us."

　Marika got up from the captain's seat, trying to figure out the angle of the sails so that radar waves from the Sea of the Morningstar would be well reflected in the direction of deep space, and yet still capture the sunlight well.

"The spaceship stands out, so I don't think we should spread the sails all the way out, but we should at least pretend to be flying normally. Well, president, do you still need to adjust the electronic armament?"

"If the other party is stupid, I can deal with them just by making initial adjustments, but I don't think they're that kind of person."

　Lynn moves around the three seats of the electronic warfare seat, making adjustments as she goes.

"I think the reason why the Black Swan's current position appears to be blurred is due to various false information being sent to our passive sensors. If we can analyze their methods, we can take any number of countermeasures. It'll just take a little longer."

Knowing that 'a little longer' by the president in such cases takes forever, Marika gave up quickly.

"Okay, Ai, please continue to steer the ship. Yayoi, can you take your hands off the engine?"

"The engine room should have settled down and the main engine is now in steady operation, so we should be fine. If there is any abnormality, the alarm will sound."

"Well, then, come on, everyone who is free! Open the masts and raise the sails to cruising position."

　Odette II's mast, which is tall relative to her hull, can hardly be opened inside Pier C68. The nine masts, which open in three directions, can only be fully opened in space.

　All masts and yards, and the sails that stretch across them, can be controlled from the bridge. However, the masts, which are precisely assembled and stowed like a puzzle, are difficult to deploy if they get caught somewhere.

　During the first training voyage on the Odette II, it was necessary to wear a space suit and work outside the ship to untangle a mast that had become entangled during deployment. However, thanks to subsequent maintenance and proficiency in operating methods, Odette II's masts were deployed in a time not much different from that of regular operations.

"All horizontal yards deployed!"

"The foremast, mizzenmast, mainmast, and all three rows have been deployed."

　Marika took a deep breath after confirming the deployment of nine masts in three rows with the schematic diagram on the display and the monitor cameras in each part of the hull.

"Now we can raise the sails and start sailing."

"If we raise the sails, it will increase our reflexivity, so for now, we'll just leave it as it is."

　Lynn, who had fixed her beloved HAL-bou to the electronic warfare seat and was doing various things, said without even looking up.

"This will increase the accuracy of our reception by two orders of magnitude. Any communication from the Black Swan since then?"

"No."

　Gruier, who had taken a quick peek at the communications officer's seat while returning to the observer's seat, answered. Without returning to the captain's seat, Marika takes the radar/sensor seat and confirms the current position of the Black Swan.

"It seems to be approaching the ship from the other side, but it hasn't moved much."

"Maybe I’ll try using radar."

　Lynn muttered after resting her hand on the control panel. Yayoi, who returned to the engineer's seat, answered.

"The main engine has plenty of power, so there should be no problem even if the radar uses full power."

"Is that okay? Even though we are away from the controlled airspace, we are still close to Sea of the Morningstar. If we accidentally use full power for Odette II's radar, won't that reveal our current location to the military or ATC?"

"We are not going to broadcast in all directions. The Black Swan's current location cannot be determined by passive observation alone, so if you focus the radar on that area, you can get more reliable data......."

　Lynn floated up from the electronic warfare seat.

"The ship, with its mast fully open, can scan specific airspace without bothering anyone except those in the direction of the radar beam. However, if we do that, even though it’s a civilian training ship, it has powerful radar equipment, and the Odette II’s skills will be exposed to the other party. The enemy will probably assume that this ship is being operated properly so it won't be an easy opponent, and we want to keep our cards as close to the vest as possible."

"It's the basics for negotiation."

　Gruier took the observer's seat.

"There is no need to unilaterally give the other party bargaining chips when you haven't even met them yet."

"Huh, diplomacy can be applied to combat."

"To be precise, it can only be applied before the start of a battle."　Gruier laughs shyly.

“And since the Black Swan has not been active so far, so I can’t make any strong moves either.”

　Lynn updated the correlation between Odette II and the Black Swan on the main screen.

"Do you think this is real?"

"Huh?" "Eh?"　Several crew members besides Marika sounded disappointed.

"After all, president, didn't you just say that the Black Swan was a fake just imitating its appearance?"

"Oh, no, I don't mean that. I’m just wondering if there really is a fake spaceship pretending to be the Black Swan at the location we're seeing right now."

"After all, even Chiaki-chan's Barbaroosa has a record of encountering a spaceship that seems to be the shipwrecked Black Swan, right?"

　Marika also explained that report to Lynn. Lynn shook her head.

"A professional pirate ship with a crew that is supposed to be much older and more skilled than our training ship turned away without being able to confirm the actual ship. I don't know as much about the Barbaroosa as I do about the Bentenmaru, but I'm sure she's at least a lot more experienced in combat and observation than we are at the moment."

"Well, I'm sure there's no mistaking that."

"Even if we, a mere training ship, were to chase after the Black Swan, which Barbaroosa had seriously chased after and failed to confirm, we are sure that the Black Swan could outrun us. So, if we wanted to pull the Black Swan out to a distance where we could see the other side, we would have to somehow create a situation that would make the other side make the first move. I wondered what the quickest way would be to get it to make a move, and after thinking about it, I realized something. If I wanted to lure out the White Swan using the Black Swan as a decoy, it didn't have to be the real thing."

"...... eh!"

　Finally understanding what Lynn was trying to say, Marika looked at the president's face.

"It is difficult to guess how big the enemy is, and how bad their plot is, but if I were in a position to move a spaceship disguised as a wreck, I would only move my handiwork into the immediate vicinity of their home port if I was sure of a win. In any case, if the actual Black Swan is seized by the military or pirates, it will be much more difficult to do any further work."

“So they put the fake Black Swan at a distance to lure us out?”

　Lynn nodded to Gruier, who took over the rest of the conversation.

"It's much easier to make it look like there's a spaceship there than it is to actually put one there. And if the enemy's goal is to get this ship, the further Odette II is from the Sea of the Morningstar, the more convenient it is."

　Lynn looked at the main screen.

"Come to think of it, doesn't the Black Swan's course look like it's headed for empty interplanetary space, outside of shipping lanes and military training airspace?”

　Thinking ahead, Gruier raised her hand.

"But if we move into the Black Swan's vicinity as the enemy intends, how will they catch us?"

"To catch a spaceship, you don't have to approach it every time and hold it by its docking arm like you do when you pirate. Even Marika would take over their control before pirating, right?"

"Yes, well, if I don't have control of the other ship, if they make any unnecessary moves before forced docking, I can damage them without being attached to their ship, and I'm not directly taking over control of their ship either."

　Marika looked from the radar/sensor seat to the vacant communications seat.

"...... So you're saying that the ship is currently under attack from the outside?"

"I'm not sure, though."

Lynn, too, looked at the unoccupied communications seat.

"After leaving the controlled airspace and moving away from the Princess Apricot, they are trying to crack into our systems by pretending to be noise in the signals we're receiving. There are many bots that can sneak in from the enemy and steal data while flying normally, but this ship, unlike today's standards, is old enough that there is no need to actively intercept them, but it is clear now that the mast has been widened and reception accuracy has improved. Someone is actively trying to sneak into this ship."

"From where?"

　As she asked, Marika pointed to the current location of the Black Swan on the main screen. Shaking her head, Lynn pointed to an unexpected location.

"Not that way. Whoever wants control of the Odette II is sending signals from the Sea of the Morningstar relay station."

　After a moment of silence, the bridge was filled with surprise and groans.

"What?" "So the enemy is not outside, but on the station?" "After we just left?" "If the enemy is on the station, isn't it right to leave?"

"Yes, yes, be quiet!"

　Lynn clapped her hands.

"We still don't know where the enemy is. It has not been confirmed that the Black Swan in front of us is a fake with only electronic signals, nor has it been confirmed that someone controlling the Black Swan is at the relay station. The only thing we know is that we only need a tiny probe floating in the neighborhood to spoof the distant Black Swan, and that the signal aimed at us is being sent from the direction of the station."

"If the Black Swan is real, it's dangerous for us to approach it unless they're really stupid, right?"

　Gruier says slowly and thoughtfully.

"There is no need to go into the effective range of a ship that is disguised as a wreck and whose identity we do not know, nor how far it extends, is there?"

“You have to get close to them to get clear evidence, but not getting close to them avoids danger."

　Lynn looked down at the radar control panel and agreed with Gruier.

"If there are no enemies there, then there is no need for us to approach the Black Swan, is there?"

"Oh, that's right."

"Even if the enemy were at the relay station, we can't just go back with the Odette II now, can we?"

"That's right."

　Thinking for a moment, Lynn shrugged.

“Unless someone reports an absence at Pier C68, Odette II is supposed to be there, so I don't think we should go back to the station unless we're sneaking back.”

"Sneaking back, how?"

　Gruier asked honestly, and Lynn shrugged.

"I don't know.　I haven't thought about it yet."

"Well, then, we're not going back yet, but do you know who's trying to control the ship from the station?"

"No, partly because we haven't counter-cracked yet, but at this point we don't even know who they are or how they plan to take over the ship. There is no doubt that the signal is coming from the direction of the station, but we don't know if he's there or if he's just borrowing the most reliable communications equipment around."

"Anyway, the fact that someone knows it was taken out without permission and not even report it to the station to get their hands on it means that at least we made the right decision in taking the Odette II away with us, right?"

　Feeling as if it was time to determine the next course of action, Marika tried to summarize the current situation in her own way.

"Yes, at least for now, the Odette II is in our hands."

　Lynn looked at the map of the spacecraft, planetary system, and stations centered on Odette II that was being projected on the main screen.

"So we have to use this to successfully expose the enemy, when we don't even know where they are or what they're up to."

"Um, I've been thinking."

Gruier raised her hand discreetly. Marika felt a shiver run down her spine when she saw the confidence in Gruier's expression, as if she had finished considering everything.

"What?"

　The president asked, seemingly unconcerned.

“It's going to be a long battle, and the other side probably doesn't know about our situation, but, if possible, I'd like to clean things up in a short battle and go home.”

"But if we don't have enough evidence, I think it will be a long battle going back to the station and explaining the situation to the authorities.”

"There are plenty of ways to do that."

　Lynn glanced at Marika.

"I'll take care of it, don't worry about it."

"I was thinking, if the other party is trying to take over the Odette II right now, can't we pretend to be taken over while retaining control of it?"

"What?"

　Lynn studied Gruier's face. Still in the observer's seat, Gruier continued her explanation.

"I am not familiar with electronic warfare, so I don't know how to do that. But what about keeping control of the ship on our side, or leaving the Odette II temporarily in the hands of the other side with the ability to easily regain control at any time?"

　The people on the bridge begin to murmur. Lynn stares at Gruier.

"I don't want to leave our starship to the enemy in any way. So what happens next?"

"With the other party in control, we get off the Odette II and empty the ship."

　The club members were shocked by the unexpected proposal. Lynn nodded with an amused look on her face.

"Jenny's electronic reconnaissance plane was left on deck, so it's easy enough for all of us to get off, if a little cramped. But if we let the enemy take control of the ship and leave it empty, that's exactly what they'll want us to do. All the trouble we went through to get the Odette II out of there will be for naught."

"Yes, we went to a lot of trouble to bring the ship that was supposed to be at the station with us. If we let the other party take control of the Odette II, empty the ship, and then return to the relay station and inform the control station and the military that the pier is empty, we would not have to sneak the ship back, we could blame the enemy for the theft, we could make it public, and we will be able to return home quickly because we are the victims."

　Gruier looked around at the faces of the people on the bridge.

"I am not sure if the other side will go along with our idea or not, and I will have to ask the president, who has been working hard for a long time, to do the hard work again. However, if we consider the ratio of effort to effect, I think this is the way to get the maximum effect with the minimum effort. What do you think?"

"How about it……"

Marika shook her head with an exasperated face.

"How can you come up with such a convenient solution given this situation?"

"They say that royalty's name will go down in history depending on how bad they can get, and I see why your place is already assured."

　Lynn looked at the electronic warfare seat, the open HAL-bou, and the faces of the bridge crew, all of whom had fallen silent, and then turned her attention back to Gruier.

"'What if they really do take over and we lose control of Odette II?"

"Oh my, I trust that with the president's skill, that won't happen."

　Gruier stuck out her tongue.

"And even if the enemy were to be such a wizard, fortunately the Odette II is a Category II starship, which means it does not have a FTL engine. If they don't attach a spacecraft that can do FTL as a chaser, I don't think we have to worry about it suddenly being taken away"

"Marika."

　Still looking at Gruier's face, Lynn changed her opponent.

"How do you get a spaceship the size of Odette II to go FTL?"

　Marika tilted her head a bit in response this sudden question.

"If you attach a FTL booster, you can make it jump even if it is not a spaceship but just a container or a lump of rock. But if you want to install it on a ship like the Odette II, you have to adjust the thrust axis, center of gravity, fixation, and so on, so that even if you are on the other side of Tau while you are working on it, a convoy should be able to reach it in time.”

"Is there any other way?"

"Not that there aren't, but ......"

　Marika stammered.

"If the FTL ship is large enough to accommodate the entire Odette II, it would be possible to take it on board and jump directly without the troublesome work of attaching a booster. But that would require a FTL ship much larger than the Odette II, so I think it would be difficult to hide."

“Okay."

　Lynn nodded.

I like the concept that even in the worst case scenario, only the Odette II would be lost and the entire crew would be safe. Let's try Gruier's plan.

A black rectangular object with white text

Description automatically generated

"Aaaaah!"

In the operator's seat of the electronic reconnaissance plane, the Silent Whisper, Lynn let out a pitiful cry as she saw a close-up of the Odette II's port side on the display.

"I'll be back to pick you up soon, so do your best to do your duty, HAL-bou!"

"President!"

　Marika, in the pilot's seat, emitted a low voice without even looking up.

"Please calm down. Are you that worried about leaving your computer on the Odette II?"

"I'm worried. I've never been more than 30 meters away from her since I got her, and if I tell her I'm going back to the station like this, I wonder how many tens of thousands of kilometers I'll be away from her."

"Are you more worried about HAL-bou than the Odette II?"

"Because I spent much more time with HAL-bou than I did on the Odette II."

"Then you should have set the controls on the Odette II."

　Marika said, taking care not to change the distance between the ship's hull and the Odette II, which remained with its mast spread out.

"Even last time, our training ship made a long voyage on the exact route we had set for her."

　The last time the Odette II departed from the relay station under the guise of a training voyage, the entire crew switched to the Bentenmaru en route, leaving the ship unmanned and automated for the majority of the voyage. Even though it was the entire yacht club that set up the planned route around the outer planet’s orbit and back, it was, of course, Lynn who was at the center of it all.

"At the time, I didn't anticipate any sudden emergencies before I came back."

　Grumbling, Lynn began tapping on the electronic warfare panel in front of her.

"In this case, I had to make it look like the enemy had control of the ship, avoid further hacking, and prevent them from really taking over control of the ship while keeping the Odette II safely underway. If I had a complete grasp of the Odette II's systems, I would be able to make such delicate settings, but unfortunately, even I don't have a complete understanding of the Odette II's electronic systems, which are not only outdated but are also incredibly complicated."

“The level of understanding the president is talking about is whether you know the layout and quirks of the electronic components.”

"I don't have time to do all that research. I can understand that I would have to leave everything to HAL-bou, who knows what to do and how to do it, and whom I can trust."

　Lynn stopped and looked at the Odette II on the display again.

“Oh, I wonder if she can handle the job by herself. I've set up every situation and response I can think of, but I wonder if I'm missing something.”

"Excuse me."

　Opening the cockpit's small inward-opening door, Gruier appears in the cockpit, which has only two seats and is designed to operate in a weightless environment, with inertial control but no artificial gravity.

"Luciel has locked the door and returned. We're using even the airlock we came through because the ship is full, but we've managed to get everyone on board."

　The Silent Whisper is a highly electronic reconnaissance ship designed to be operated by a small number of people. The capacity for personnel varies depending on the specifications, but the Silent Whisper brought in by Jenny Dolittle, the former president, was the most expensive electronic warfare version, which maximized performance with the fewest number of people.

In the compact cockpit, there are only two seats, one for controlling the ship and the other for operating the electronic weapons, installed in parallel facing the nose of the ship. The rear of the cockpit, where an additional operator's seat may be installed depending on the specifications, and the ceiling are filled with sophisticated electronic equipment to allow a single person to perform complex operations. Behind the cockpit, there is a living facility that is little more than a life capsule for long cruises, but most of the cabin volume is filled with additional electronics and special equipment, so there is little space for a single person for the size of the ship.

　Marika had no idea whether all of the ten or so members of the club who had embarked on Odette II would be able to board the Silent Whisper. If an emergency arises, there was a last resort of taking the space-suited yacht club members outside the ship, but since they are planning on returning to the relay station, such an unlawful operation was to be avoided.

　Thus, with the not very spacious cockpit operating at capacity, a hurried experiment was conducted on the hangar deck of the Odette II, which was being prepared for unmanned operation, to see how many people could fit in the remaining space. The result was that it was safe for the time needed to return to the relay station in a weightless state. However, if the last person in a spacesuit closed the storage deck and returned, the airlock, which had just enough space for one person, would be opened to the inside of the ship to be used as living space.

"Are you in control of the Odette II?"

"I've got it."

　Lynn said, showing the schematic Odette II control system on one of the displays.

"It's running on autopilot. We've put all kinds of protections in place, but it can only respond automatically, so it's only a matter of time before it’s taken over if it’s attacked in the right way."

"External hatch confirmed closed."

　Marika confirmed on the monitor that the open external hatch was successfully closed and airtight.

"Then we will launch the Silent Whisper."

　In accordance with the standard design of electronic reconnaissance ships, the Silent Whisper has no windows. The outside view is provided by the monitor cameras and radar/sensor indications installed throughout the ship.

　The Silent Whisper, which was running alongside the Odette II with its masts extended but sails furled while maintaining its course toward the outer planets, slowly began to break away. In order not to shake Odette II's attitude due to the propelling plasma of the thrusters, she takes a trajectory that rises vertically from the axis and a wide reverse arc.

"The course will be as indicated earlier."

　Most reconnaissance ships, not just the Silent Whisper, are built for maximum radar/sensor performance in the nose direction. Lynn gave instructions from the operator's seat of the Silent Whisper, which had its nose pointed toward the relay station to which it was to return.

"Keep her on the straight line between the station and the Odette II."

"Understood."

　Marika confirmed on the display the Sea of the Morningstar far ahead and its orbiting relay station. On the sub-display, she confirms the current position of Odette II in the immediate rear.

"The guy who is trying to get his hands on the Odette II is at the relay station. If that's the case, we'll be able to get a better look at him if we stay between Odette II and the station."

"Entering cruise mode."

　Marika said as she placed Silent Whisper exactly on the line connecting Odette II and the station.

"Begin acceleration."

"Okay, open the antenna."

　Lynn, in the operator's seat, glanced at Gruier, who had slipped through the hatch into the cockpit.

"Are you sure there's no one outside?"

"Everyone is on board."

　Gruier supports herself in the weightless cockpit with her hands on the opposite side of the seat.

“Okay. Well then, let's unleash the full potential of our electronic reconnaissance ship.”

　Lynn happily ran her fingers along the control panel. The stowed antennas began to deploy like a halo from each part of the Silent Whisper's fuselage as it entered its cruise configuration.

“The radar is so powerful that if someone were to accidentally pass near the antenna when active, the radar wave alone would burn them to a crisp.”

"Please don't accidentally hit the relay station directly with that kind of radar."

　Marika said as she thought about what excuse she would use to apply for a stopover at the station.

"We're about to go back there."

　On the display, the bright spot of the target split into two.

"What the...?"

In the crowded cockpit, which resembled a street vendor's junk shop, Jackie immediately touched the display to get a close-up of the two separate bright spots. One was the Hakuoh Academy's training ship, Odette II, which was locked and tracking, but the other reacts like noise and reverted back to a single bright spot.

A comic page of two people

Description automatically generated

“I can't get very accurate results from the station's observatory."

　Jackie's Lunar Lion, which is secured to the downside docking port by a boarding bridge and gantry arm, has an antenna disproportionately large for its compact hull and a powerful main engine that supplies sufficient power to it. However, when the ship is in port and docked at a relay station port, it is impossible to deploy the antenna and engage in serious electronic warfare.

When Jackie noticed that the training ship he wanted had disappeared from Pier C68, he returned the master key to the port office and headed for his ship, which was moored at the docking port downtown. He started up the Lunar Lion, which had been locked at idle, while still docked, and performed an all-sky scan.

　While docked at the port, the Lunar Lion could not use its full observation capabilities. On the first scan, Jackie was unable to find the Odette II, which was supposed to be somewhere in the area.

　Having no choice but to sneak into the relay station’s network, Jackie began to monitor in real time the observation information of the station and the surrounding airspace under the station's control.

When the Lunar Lion's electronic brain, which intensively processed responses that would have been ignored as noise or filtered out as low response under a normal control system, detected a response that looked like it, the training ship had left the relay station's control airspace.

　He thought about pursuing it immediately, but following the standard practice of gathering information first, Jackie tried to check the current status of Odette II by mobilizing all of the Lunar Lion's capabilities while it remained moored.

　If the conditions were right, he could even steal and check the images from the onboard cameras, but it was not so easy when he was dealing with a solar-powered sailing ship that was still utilizing an old-fashioned system. It took time to break through the elaborate security system for a civilian ship, but even if he tried to probe the internal situation with his skill, he could not obtain images from the monitor cameras that would normally be installed in a modern spaceship, nor was there a system installed to identify the crew's location based on their bio-signs.

Judging from the situation where the ship's transponders were off and is also cruising discreetly in active stealth, Jackie judged that the crew was all present, so he lightly shook the ship with his usual tactics. From the outer planet orbit side, he sent an SOS message to the Odette II from the pirate ship.

Surprisingly, the Odette II accepted the rescue signal within a short period of time. The accuracy of the laser transmission, which accurately aimed at the Black Swan placed in orbit of an outer planet, was also quite good, but the Odette II, which had expanded its mast and assumed navigational posture, made no further sudden movements.

　If they don't come out, I have no choice but to move as it is convenient for me. With a touch of uneasiness at not being able to see the crew, Jackie began to take over the Odette II's control system using his beloved Lunar Lion.

　Even though the ship was obsolete in comparison to the spacecraft he usually dealt with, he took control of it by manipulating its controls here and there so that the crew would not notice. Jackie, who had been studying the published performance details of the Odette II in the meantime, grunted at its low performance, even for a ship in service at the time of the Revolutionary War.

"She is a sailing ship that can't go FTL. If the solar sails were expanded, the ship could accelerate at a steady rate near the star, but it wouldn't be able to make much speed with just a little solar thrust."

　With one hand, Jackie cleared the space in front of the three-dimensional display of the various weightless objects floating by, such as lunch boxes, junk parts, laundry, and unprocessed data media.

"With this positioning, and with the current orientation, it would take half a day to enter an outer planet orbit even if we flew at full speed, knowing that we would be discovered as a hijacker. We're sending out an SOS that we're about to sink, and they're just going to take it easy and wait for the ship to arrive."

　Jackie pulled a small mechanical digital calculator from the inside pocket of his patchwork jacket and flicked the balls of the abacus, whose shaft had a high coefficient of friction so that it could be used in a weightless state. No matter how many convenient calculations he made, it would take too long.

"...If that's the case, I guess I'll have to take some bold steps."

　Jackie looked ahead at the direction of Odette II's course.

"I'm in trouble. My sponsor told me to avoid flashy moves as much as possible, but in this case, well, I guess I have no choice."

　Jackie ran his fingers over the control panel, brushing past the junk and trash that kept floating by as he tried to dodge them.

The order was for the White Swan only and nothing else, but I guess it's inevitable that the members of the yacht club of the prestigious Hakuoh Academy who are playing along will come with me. If that's the case, I'll just have to do my best and work diligently.

"Oh, no!"

　Lynn, who had sunk into the operator's seat without a seatbelt, put her hand on the side console and floated up. She caught Gruier's body, which was stuck to the ceiling.

"Gruier, switch places."

"What?"

　Gruier, with a startled voice, obediently switched places with Lynn.

"I don't remember much about the handling of this ship."

"Why don't you just sit down? It's the latest model, so it responds quickly, but it's military grade and hard to use. I'm going to go behind you for a moment and tweak the settings."

"President!"

　Marika shouted in the cockpit.

"Are you trying to tamper with the controls of an electronic reconnaissance ship in flight?"

"Tools, whether for military or civilian use, must be adjusted for ease of use. This machine was brought to us by Jenny with the standard settings, and we didn't adjust it to make it easier for us to use, so it is very difficult to use. Even Marika seems to be having a hard time controlling it."

"I'm just not used to it yet."

　Marika took a look around the latest model cockpit, which she rarely has the chance to see otherwise.

"Besides, I can adjust the cockpit area while moving, and I've done it before."

"I'd like to be able to better pinpoint the location of anyone trying to mess with Odette II from the station."

Lynn put her hand on the open cockpit door.

"Also, if we change the settings around the antenna, we can intercept the signal they're trying to send to Odette II and modify it for our convenience. Be careful not to move the ship away from a straight line to the station. The stealth and electronic jamming capabilities of the ship should still make it invisible to the other side, but the smaller the projected area toward the enemy, the better."

"Roger that."

"Come on, everyone, lend me a hand."

Lynn stepped out into the corridor filled with club members and ducked into the electronic equipment room behind the cockpit, which had been opened to create more space.

Marika switched some of the displays to monitoring systems so that she would know as soon as the president started messing not only with the electronic armament, but also the ship.

"...... Um, are you okay?"

"What?"

　Marika set the alarms so that the power system would not be altered without her knowledge, and looked at Gruier, who had entered the operator's seat.

"The enemy's objective is the Odette II, right?"

"Maybe, yeah."

　Marika nodded and checked the course of the Silent Whisper. It was about to enter the relay station's control airspace.

"They went all the way to the school and declared a seizure because if they did that, at least we wouldn't be able to move the Odette II. Thanks to the president's pre-emptive action, though, we got away with it early."

"So now they're doing it from the station."

　Gruier looked around at the numerous displays in the operator's seat, which she did not even know how to read.

"I thought the enemy might be after a pirate ship that was in service during the Revolutionary War, so he sent out an SOS so that only the pirate ships of that time could hear it. But now, at least, the enemy seems to be concentrating on capturing the Odette II. Why is that?"

"I don't know?"

　Marika called up a standard port entry application to be sent to the relay station's control station. After confirming that the civilian registration of Silent Whisper had been restored to the name of Hakuoh Academy, she prepared to send it.

"At the very least, if we don't enable the transponder at the same time as the application for port entry, we'll be treated as a suspicious ship, and they'll be angry."

After muttering, Marika turned around to look into the open hatch. The work in the electronics room, led by the president, is not likely to be finished for some time yet.

"They want the Odette II."

　Marika gave Gruier the obvious answer.

"At least, I wonder if Odette II has something the enemy wants to get."

"What would that be?"

　Gruier asked more questions.

"Why would you want to get your hands on an old ship that has been moored at a closed pier at a relay station for decades, has not had a training cruise in the last 20 years, and does not even have a FTL engine, going so far as to stop the people involved?"

"If you think about it normally, is it data?"

Marika shook her head.

"It seems that the previous president had a hard time, and even with the current president's skill, there are still a lot of things in Odette II's electronic brain where we don't know what she is thinking or what she has stored. I don't think Odette II itself has much value as an asset, so the only thing I can think of in that spaceship that I would want to acquire if I had to do that is old data."

"That was my first thought, too."

　 Gruier said, keeping her hands folded in her lap to avoid touching the control panel.

"But if they can interfere with the Odette II in flight, we should assume that they are quite skilled in that area. If what the enemy wants is the data sealed in some circuit in the Odette II, what the enemy should do is not to get the whole Odette II, but to sneak in, find the data they need, and steal it."

"Cracking the Odette II. That's exactly what we're getting ourselves into."

"That's right. But I think that this situation is happening because we have taken out the Odette II, and it is not the enemy's original purpose."

"...... Well, if the enemy's target is not the Odette II, but the data inside an old sailing ship that's sleeping on a closed dock at a relay station anyway, it would be faster to just sneak in or infiltrate on your own and snatch the data you want. "

　Marika turned her head to the other side.

"So, what the enemy wants is not the Odette II's data, but the Odette II herself?"

"Or is it cargo hidden somewhere on the Odette II, or the onboard equipment? Since the ship is so old, is there anything of value in the furnishings or equipment on board?"

"No, no"

　Marika waved her hands.

"It's true that it's old, so it's full of vintage electronic equipment and old-fashioned mechanisms, but I think it's rare that most of them are still working, but if that's the case, the Bentenmaru is the same. If you turn the ship upside down, you'll probably find plenty of antiques, but for onboard equipment and electronic parts, it's faster to go to junk shops than to pull them out of the Odette II. You don't see that many junk shops around here, but everywhere you go, they're great. In core star systems, there are old shops with inventories that go back a thousand years, and big ones that do business on prehistoric relic planets."

　Gruier frowned and shook her head.

"Odette II as an antique is not such an attractive commodity. So why does the enemy want the Odette II so badly?"

"I don't know......?"

　Marika turned to the hatch.

"If I knew that, it would be much easier to deal with it, but I guess I'll have to ask the enemy directly when we get in contact with them."

"Hold on."

　Lynn returned to the cockpit, using a sports towel to wipe away the sweat that accumulated and wouldn’t drip off in the zero-gravity environment.

"Did it work?"

　Gruier, who had been in the operator's seat, emerged from her seat to switch places.

"I think we'll be okay somehow."

　Lynn deftly swapped positions with Gruier in the narrow space of the cockpit and entered the operator's seat.

“I hope it works a little more the way I want it to.”

　With a sports towel floating around, she reaches over to the control panel and begins to change settings here and there.

"Oh, it's working. Now if we could just change the interface to be a little more practical, it would lighten the load, but I don't know why it's so inflexible."

"We need to contact ATC soon."　Marika told Lynn.

We're entering controlled airspace, so we need to enable the transponder.

"Aah......"

　Lynn stopped her hands and exhaled.

"I know, it's not easy to fly without a transponder in interplanetary space where no one is flying, but in controlled airspace clearly within the Sea of the Morningstar range, it is impossible to fly without a transponder."

"What do you want to do?　If you really don't want to enable the transponder, you could try to stay in this area for a while."

　The president thought about it for only a moment.

"No, if we waste time here, we'll be late getting back to the station. I've rigged the Odette II's transponder to transmit at about the same time we get to the station, go straight to pier C68, make a fuss about the ship being stolen, and have the port police come. It's fine if it's early, but it's bad if it's late."

"Then, shall we enable our transponder and apply to enter the port?"

"How much longer can you delay the transponder?"

"We're still just barely outside controlled airspace."

　Marika checked the current position of the Silent Whisper on the three-dimensional display. Even though it had to slow down in controlled airspace, it was coming back much faster than Odette II.

"Just a little bit more."

"If I can get a more solid grasp of their pattern, I can send out a transponder. If I could get their exact location, I could blindfold them, but if I send out a transponder when they can't see me yet, they'll know where I am and my affiliation."

"This ship is very difficult to see, so I think it should be able to hide even if it goes very deep into the control airspace."

"If a transponder is suddenly activated in the middle of a controlled airspace that was not there before, they would wonder where and what they were doing before that."

"Also, do you want to hide behind the ships entering the port?　If we do that, I think we can get right in front of the relay station without being detected, but if we suddenly come right in front of it and then apply to enter the port, they will be furious."

　Vessels navigating in space are required to constantly transmit their current position, direction of travel, speed, and the name of the vessel by transponder for safety. It is a criminal offense to fly without a transponder in controlled airspace, where order is maintained by the relay station's control station. It would be better if they were captured by the military and only fined for violating the navigation law, but if it is deemed to be malicious, they could be imprisoned.

"If I could get a better pattern, I could narrow down their current location, but they are very cautious, changing their patterns from time to time, so it's hard to catch them. This guy is a veteran with a lot of experience."

"We're at a disadvantage because we have to abide by navigation laws."

　Floating above Lynn's head, Gruier peers into a multilayered 3D monitor.

"Not really," Lynn replied, busily moving her fingers.

"We'll have to enable transponders eventually, and we'll have to follow the instructions of ATC, but we're in a position where we can just float in the air and fly as we please. The other side is probably in the Bay Area, and they're setting it up while docked. Whatever equipment they have, they can't do much with it still connected to the station. Okay, I have a similar pattern!"

　Lynn tapped her keyboard loudly.

"I've got him!"

"Okay to enable Transponder?"

"Do the transponder and the application for port of entry. He's such a cautious guy, he's going to find out we got him anyway. The game starts from here."

　At the sound of Lynn's happy voice, Marika, in the cockpit, and Gruier, floating above her, looked at each other. Marika turned her face back to the front.

"Starting transponder transmission. Transmitting request for port entry to the relay station control."

The Silent Whisper was registered as a liaison vessel belonging to Hakuoh Academy. Although it is an electronic reconnaissance ship and is not supposed to be armed in its registration, the members of the club do not know what kind of trouble they had to go through to register a powerful military ship, which is not even deployed by the star system military, as a liaison vessel of the women's school.

Now, the Silent Whisper has joined the ranks of the training sailing ship Odette II and other spacecraft owned by Hakuoh Academy.

　The Silent Whisper, which left the relay station while stowed aboard the Odette II, naturally has no record of its departure. Marika wondered if she would be asked where she came from, but the automated response from the control station easily authenticated the Silent Whisper and allowed her to enter the downtown docking port.

"Permission to enter port has been granted."

　Marika's monitor displayed the standard port clearance message from the control station.

"As per the application, the ship is entering the downtown docking port as requested. It's a small ship, so it should be easy."

"What is the approach course?"

"Approaching from the low orbital side of the relay station."

　Marika showed the model course of the approach trajectory indicated by the control station on the cockpit display.

"This is the normal approach trajectory for the downtown docking port. But if we follow ATC's instructions, we'll have to change course soon."

　The airspace around the relay station is strictly divided by approach and departure trajectories. The space is divided into several sections around the relay station, some of which only spacecraft approaching the relay station are allowed to fly, while others are open only to those leaving the space station. To avoid collisions, spacecraft traveling in different directions are never guided into the same space.

　The Odette II left the control area on the launch trajectory of the relay station. Although it has since moved, its position has not changed much, so the Silent Whisper returning to the relay station from the Odette II would enter from the control space designated for its departure orbit. Control had instructed Silent Whisper to approach the station from the space designated for the usual approach orbit.

"If we follow the instructions of the control station, we will be off the straight line connecting the relay station and Odette II. They won't let us fly at our convenience......."

　Stopping her hands, Lynn looked around at the display, which was stacked with three-dimensional displays that overwhelmed the operator's seat.

"Also, how long can we maintain our current trajectory?"

"We'll be slowing down, so if we don't move into our approach trajectory in 10 minutes, ATC will be furious."

"Ten minutes......."

　Lynn looked around the operator's seat display again.

"Can you do it ......?"

"Do what?

"Counter cracking."

　Gruier's question was answered by Lynn as she began to move her hands.

"If the enemy is doing it, we have a chance to do it ourselves. The safest way to keep a network secure is to completely cut off all contact and isolate it, but in order for them to attack, they have to open the network and contact the target in any way they can."

"Can you do it......?

"It's hard."　Lynn admitted honestly.

"I've never done any kind of forced electronic reconnaissance with the military's newest model, let alone with my regular HAL-bou or the computer in the club room. If I had known this was going to happen, I should have at least read the manual more seriously."

"You're touching it without looking at the manual!?" Marika screamed from the pilot’s seat.

“It’s okay, these machines are all basically the same, except for the authentication and switch locations. It's certain that the other party is at the station, so if I could get the transponder, I could expose the current position and the ship's name to the light of day."

"How many spaceships are in the station right now?"

　Lynn glanced at Gruier’s face peeking out from above.

"Well, you can look it up there."

　Both hands in use, she points with her chin at the console on the side.

"Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes, somehow. I'll look it up."

　Gruier, who had repositioned the console above Lynn so that it was easier to handle, extended her slender fingers to the console.

"What are you going to do?"

　Lynn seems busy, so Marika, in the pilot’s seat, asked instead.

"I was thinking that if we could find out the type, affiliation, and name of the ships that are currently docking at or near the station, I might be able to pinpoint what they are doing..."

"It's a downtown docking port."

　Lynn said, in the middle of an operation.

"Or else a spaceship fixed at coordinates in that area. Ignore the uptown side of the relay station and any spacecraft whose coordinates don't overlap with downtown."

"Eighteen ships are currently in port."

　Gruier called up data from the control station on ships in port at the downtown docking port. The names of the ships, their affiliations, and their captains were superimposed in a list on a three-dimensional display.

......Oh?"

　Gruier turned the dial to rotate the list on the three-dimensional display, feeling that she recognized some of the letters in the sequence. After some of the data had been replaced at the top, Gruier spoke up.

"Ah!"

"What?"

"West Kyria ship registry, Lunar Lion, Captain Jackie Celsius."

"Arghhhh.....!?"

"Really?"

　Lynn, who had stopped her hands with a startled cry, and Marika, who had unexpectedly emerged from the pilot's seat, looked at the three-dimensional display in Gruier's hand. The captain of the small ship in port at the relay station had the same name as the ID they had seen in the club room.

"Of all things, entering the port with the same name, are you setting me up here?"

　Lynn, who had switched some of the displays by manipulating the stack with both hands, stared at the control panel.

"I didn't think he was that much of a lickspittle."

"What should I do?"　Gruier asked, now moving above the cockpit.

"Do you want me to call him directly?"

"Give it a try."

"You're going to call that tax official from here?"

　Marika screamed. Lynn nodded.

"If it's the wrong person, that's fine. If it's him, I have a lot of questions. Above all, if it is the person who is setting it up, just being talked to is enough to disrupt business. The docking port location matches the outgoing data. And the Lunar Lion data?"

　Lynn ran her eyes over the ship's data, which was still placed at the top of the three-dimensional display. West Kyria is an area where vessels can be registered without ship inspections or the shipowner’s presence, as long as they pay a small tax and necessary expenses. Half of the registered ships are tax havens that are said to be dummy data and ghost ships.

"It's not that big a ship, is it? It came into port two days ago? He's a very busy man, isn't he?"

　Using the location of the Lunar Lion's current docking port as a clue, Lynn once again reviewed the location of the Odette II's cracking code transmission point.

"Ah, they're using the public antenna at the relay station to avoid being identified as the source. Okay, I've got a general idea of what they're doing. Marika, it's safe to change our course to an approach trajectory to the station. Gruier, try to call the Lunar Lion directly in port at the station."

"Roger."

'Understood."

　After answering at the same time, Marika involuntarily held Gruier's hand, which was extended to the communication panel in the cockpit.

"What are you doing!?"

"I'm trying to communicate directly with Captain Jackie Celsius of the Lunar Lion."

"Who's going to be in communications?"

"Shouldn’t it be me?"

"Of course not!'

　Patting Gruier's hand, Marika readjusted her grip on the control stick.

"Do you really think a princess of the Serenity royal family can call someone whose identity you don't even know and talk directly to them in a place like this!?"

"Is that wrong?"

"Don't do it!"

"But Marika is flying the ship."

"I can communicate with them while on the approach trajectory to the station!"

"But, Marika, you're also the captain of the Bentenmaru."

"Oh ......."

　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 　 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She was not in a situation to be entrusted with communications. Marika made up her mind.

"It’s better than Gruier, I'll take care of the communication. Gruier, give me some advice, uh, you need to make the call."

"Yes, ma’am."

　Smiling, Gruier ran her fingers over the communications panel. Using data obtained from the control station, she called the Lunar Lion, docked at the downtown port, by name.

　Keeping her eyes down on the communications monitor, Gruier announced.

"You are connected."

　Marika pulled a wireless headset out of the side of the cockpit headrest and put it over her ear.

　The processing noise of the digital communication cut out, and the communication connected. Marika inhaled nervously.

"*The spacecraft you have dialed is either out of range or has no main engine. Please check your message and try again, or wait a moment and try again.*"

　A synthesized voice of an automated response played over the silent whisper.

"You're doing a lame imitation."

　Lynn began to move her fingers furiously.

"As long as you know the location, you can even make a direct communication connection from here. Watch!"

　A harsh, crackling noise flooded Marika's earphones. Marika screamed and pulled the headset from her ear.

"Sorry, this will connect."

"*What's with the strange persistent calls? Did I turn off the auto-answer?*"

　A familiar voice came over the speakers. Lynn, in the operator's seat, gave Marika and Gruier a thumbs-up.

"It's a bit forced, but we're connected. You can talk now."

　After blinking her eyes, Marika opened her mouth.

"Jackie Celsius, I've been able to connect to you. This is ......."

　Marika looked at Lynn and Gruier before continuing.

"The Odette II, Odette II from Hakuoh Academy."

　The communication monitor showed the redhead's startled face with wide-open eyes.

“*...... Thanks a lot.*”

　Jackie chuckled and gave the monitor a perfunctory salute, his fingertips not even in alignment.

"*This is Jackie Celsius, Lunar Lion, in port at the relay station. It's quite a feat to force a direct connection to my line.*"

　Marika tried to see if she could control the transmitting camera from here. The entire screen looks sooty, probably because the cockpit is not well organized and the lens surface is dusty. The camera controls are not working.

"*Hi, nice to meet you. Can I see your face?*"

　Marika looked at the small communication camera built into the control panel in the cockpit. She looked at Lynn and Gruier, made sure no one was objecting, and switched on the camera. Now the communication from us will be video communication instead of audio only.

"Hello, Jackie Celsius."

　Marika made a business expression and greeted the other side of the communication camera with a smile.

"It's not the first time."

"*That's a lie......*”

　Marika had a hard time not bursting out into laughter when Jackie opened his mouth.

"I'm in command of the Odette II. My name is Katou Marika."

"*Eh.....*"

　Jackie's complexion changed as he stared at Marika. He raised his voice in despair and looked away.

"*You mean to tell me that the Odette II is now run by the yacht club members?*"

"Thank you for your prompt reply, Jackie Celsius."

　Marika nodded, keeping her business smile.

"It must be tough being a tax bureau official these days, having to do all that work?"

"*Hey, hey, hey, hey, ......*"

　After looking around the cockpit, which seemed to be extremely cluttered as far as the camera could see, Jackie turned his attention back to the communications monitor.

"*Even high school girls these days are quite good, aren't they? Not only did they sneak out with a training ship, but also messing around with mine is quite a feat. I was wondering why the yacht club of Hakuoh Academy, which is neither an Inter-High School powerhouse nor a winner of the Galaxy Cup, is said to be so prestigious, but it turns out that they have a good group of people. Being able to meet the young lady in charge is something to brag about.*"

　A message from Lynn was superimposed on the sub-monitor. The information superimposed on the display could be read without looking away from the other party.

　Without being noticed, Lynn had switched the communication line with the Lunar Lion at the relay station to the relay line with Odette II. The line to Lunar Lion was first connected to the Odette II, and from there it flew to the Silent Whisper. Without probing beyond the communication line, it would appear from the Lunar Lion that the communication line was connected to the Odette II.

"Yes, our club is truly blessed with talented people."

　Marika nodded to Jackie and Lynn on the other end of the communication monitor.

"I'd like to share them with you."

“*That's nice. I do a lot of dirty work, so I have a bit of a remorse when it comes to introducing myself to young ladies.*”

　The information on the communication monitor was updated. The information about Jackie Celsius, the owner and captain of the Lunar Lion, is displayed with a lot of blanks. It is said that even non-existent names of people or stars can be registered in the West Kyria ship registry, so there is no information that seems to be very useful. Marika does not know how much of the information on the screen is true and how much is false.

"If you ever have trouble finding a job, please let me know."

　Marika carefully looked at Jackie's face on the other side of the monitor.

"Yes, you do a lot of dirty work."

　Jackie looked away from the monitor camera with a look of shame on his face.

"There are many questions I would like to ask you, but I will start with the most important one."

　Marika, not missing a beat, cut right to the chase.

"Who are you?"

"*Before you ask me what I'm doing or what I'm here for, who are you?*"

　Jackie turned his face back to the monitor, looking genuinely amused.

"*You're a great captain. A tax official, of course, is going through all sorts of trouble to find the whereabouts of a training ship that disappeared when he was about to seize it, before his bosses find out about it.*"

"A mere tax official?"　Marika deliberately asked again.

"*Deputy Director of Spacecraft II Section, Department of Space and Personal Property, Taxation Bureau of the Tau System.*"

　Jackie answered smoothly and held up his hands with a pitiful look on his face.

"*Even if I say that, you wouldn't believe me now, would you? I've learned all this stuff, but it's all useless now.*"

"The cracking of Odette II is continuing."　Gruier reported to Marika in a whisper about Lynn's war situation.

"The pace hasn't slowed down. I wonder if there are other staff members?"

"If he's being honest in his application to enter the port, there's no crew on board the Lunar Lion other than Jackie."　Lynn added more information.

"Is he doing this alone?　If so, that's quite a feat."

"I gave my name honestly."　Marika continued talking, staring at Jackie.

"You can tell us your real name, too.

"*Uh, Jackie is not an alias, that's true,*"

　Jackie pulled a three-dimensional ID out of the inside pocket of his patchwork jacket and opened it to the communications camera.

"*The name is real, and by the way, this ID is real, too, regardless of what it says. Well, it's useless now.*"

　Jackie leaned in closer to the camera and lowered his voice.

"*Hey, at what point did you notice?　I thought I could fool you for at least another half day or so, but you reacted so quickly and moved so fast, it's safe to say that by midday you had figured out that I wasn't a real tax official. It was a gamble. I thought the president and the middle-schooler looked like young ladies.*"

　Marika looked at Jackie's face in surprise.

　"You thought they might have found out you were a fake tax official, and you still went about your business with a nonchalant look on your face?　You have some nerve."

"*Yeah, I get that a lot. In general, this business is not about name and status; you can only make money based on your achievements. As a humble bottom feeder, I have no choice but to work diligently and quietly, no matter how bad things get or how inconvenient they are.*"

"A dirty job bottom feeding, huh?"

　Marika suddenly felt as if the red-haired man was doing pirate-like work.

"So, can you please explain to us why you came to our school with a fake ID and tried to seize our training ship?"

“*Right.*”

　Jackie looked back at Marika over the communications monitor with a serious face.

"*If possible, I had planned to finish the work secretly and erase my footprints without bothering the members of the yacht club of the prestigious Hakuoh Academy and without any complicated explanations, but it seems that I was dealing with the wrong person. I guess it's common courtesy in the bottom feeding world to give a clear and convincing explanation after causing so much concern. I have no choice but to reveal myself.*"

　After returning the tax official's three-dimensional ID to the inside pocket of his jacket, Jackie took out a new ID and showed it to the camera.

"*My name is Jackie Fahrenheit. I'm an insurance investigator by trade. Being a fake tax agent is just one of the many ways I do my job.*"

"Lies."

　Marika nodded when she heard Gruier's mumbling.

"You're an insurance investigator?　Which one?"

"It's the Interstellar Investigation Department of Marx & Marx General Insurance Guarantee. You've at least heard of Marx & Marx, right?"

　It is a major insurance company, along with the Harold Lloyd Insurance Association that handles the Bentenmaru. Unlike the Harold Lloyd Insurance Association, which handles everything from interstellar warfare to personal travel insurance, its clients include star systems governments and major corporations.

'Well, an infamous Marx & Marx insurance investigator?'

　Marika repeated Jackie's words.

"Of course, you can give me a satisfactory explanation as to why someone claiming to be an investigator for such a major insurance company would disguise himself as a tax bureau official and try to get his hands on a vintage training ship?"

"*Yes, of course. I assumed the identity of a tax official was because it seemed most appropriate for this job, which means that I am also working with the cooperation of the Tau System Administration.*"

"That's a lie." Again, Gruier muttered in a small voice. Marika continued, wondering in the back of her mind how she could tell the truth from a lie.

"For what reason would you need to deceive even the members of the yacht club?"

"*Of course, it's because the job of an insurance investigator is not only troublesome but also extremely dangerous.*"

　Jackie winked flamboyantly from behind the communications monitor with his blue eyes.

"*Under normal circumstances, insurance investigators like us, who specialize in troublesome matters, would not be called upon. In this case, it is a diplomatic matter involving the Galactic Empire and its external interests at a level above the Tau system, so first and foremost, for the safety of you, the outsiders, and future generations, we have created a situation where we can keep you away from your training ship.*"

"Really ......?"　For the first time, there was hesitation in Gruier's voice.

"It's supposed to be a lie, but there's some truth in it......"

"*I apologize for trying to deceive you with a blatant lie, even though it was for my own convenience. However, the matter is too dangerous for a private high school girl to get involved. It's not too late, but I hope you will let me save face and back out of this matter.*"

"Oh?"　Marika looked genuinely puzzled.

"Is it just me? Why is an insurance investigator involved in the diplomatic affairs of the Galactic Empire?"

"*Uh, well, that's, uh, that's a highly politicized, consequential issue.*"

"Why does the Galactic Empire's foreign relations need our training ship?　Is it also a matter of imperial diplomacy and high political sensitivity?"

"Ask him why he revealed it to us."

　Hearing Gruier's voice, Marika probed deeper. "Why are you revealing the secret now, which you tried to protect from us with the cooperation of the Tau System Administration?　Is that something you can determine by your own authority in the field?"

"*You're curious, aren't you?*"　Jackie seemed to chuckle.

"*You might not live long, you know?*"

"Oh, scary."

"*I don't know the whole story either, and it is of course beyond my personal authority to reveal any part of this to you. So I expect you to keep this matter a secret as well.*"

　Marika checked the communication channel. The line that we forcefully connected is a normal line, albeit FTL, and neither an encrypted line nor a secret code was used.

"Are you sure you want to talk about such an important matter over an unencrypted line?"

　Marika continued, carefully observing Jackie's expression.

"I know a person at the insurance company who is so careful that he even uses an encrypted line to call me to send seasonal greetings, but is he the only one who is special? Or is the Marx & Marx culture that open?"

“*Yeah, I'm often told that I talk too much.*"

　The redhead laughed like a child who had been caught playing a prank.

"*There are many things in this world that are better left unknown, and many more that you don't need to know. Are you, as captain, prepared to put your fellow yacht club members at risk of knowing things they don't need to know?*"

"Who in this universe has the right to decide what you should know and what you don't need to know?"

　Marika added, saying it with as honest a face as possible.

"What is there in the world that is good to be known and what is bad to be known?"

"Gotcha!"　I heard Lynn mutter.

"Downtown, docking port number 21. This is the Lunar Lion he's riding."

　A sub-monitor displayed an image that appeared to be from the relay station's surveillance camera. An awkward-looking spaceship, connected to one of the radial docking ports by a single narrow boarding bridge, is docked at one of the ports.

　Marika struggled to keep her expression from changing as she caught sight of the tropical fish-like, extremely colored spaceship at the edge of her vision, holding antennas that were too large even folded up on both wings of its thick hull. Lynn moved her fingers further.

"I'm going to take the controls now and cut the ship's power. Keep talking some more."

"*What is good to be known and what is bad to be known, huh? You have good taste. I'll make a note of it.*"

"Can you explain to me how our Odette II is related to the foreign affairs of the Galactic Empire?"

　Marika made an effort to calmly ask Jackie, who seemed to be enjoying himself on the communication monitor.

"Or, in your mind, does that also fall under the category of things we don't need to know?"

"*I'd rather you didn't know if you could.*" Jackie nodded yes.

Marika immediately asked, "Why?"

"*Because you guys wouldn't believe me no matter what, right?*"

　Marika, caught off-guard by the unspoken truth, burst out laughing.

"Isn’t that obvious? How can you expect me to trust you just by saying things like that when you've done so many shady things?"

"*If that's the case, whatever I say, whether it's the truth or not, it's all for naught. Don't you agree?*"

"I guess it depends on how persuasive your words are."

　Marika stared into the red-haired man's face.

"I guess it depends on your own powers of persuasion."

"*Ah, my own problem.*"

　Jackie's tone broke.

“*It's a problem, because I live a life that doesn't have much to do with things like persuasion and trust. What can I say that will make you trust me?*"

"If you tell the truth."

　Marika said, wondering if she could trust the man in front of her even if he told the truth.

"If you do that, I think your words will be a little more convincing."

"*So, unfortunately, it is a common pattern that people don't believe me even when I tell them the truth. Because even if I told you that all I want is a part of the Odette II, you would not believe it and cooperate with me, would you?*"

"This is true."　Gruier said.

"But I still don't know what you're hiding ......."

"Okay, I've disconnected Lunar Lion's commands from the control system!"

　Lynn shouted and gave a fist pump.

"Locking the ship from the port side. Now, no matter what he does, this guy can't move from the relay station!"

　Continuing, Lynn ran her fingers over the control panel.

"I've alerted the port police to the suspicious ship. Now he's a rat in a bag!"

"Got it."

　Marika nodded to Lynn and Jackie over the communications monitor.

"We'll discuss the rest with you when we see you in person. Please remain at docking port 21."

"*I'm afraid that's not going to happen, Captain Marika.*"

　Marika, shocked, looked at Jackie's face on the other side of the monitor.

"*From now on, there are many steps I have to take in order to get your ship. It's time to go.*"

　On the communications monitor, Jackie sat back in the pilot's seat and began the launch procedure. Lynn, in the operator's seat, raised her voice.

"What!?　The controls are disconnected, there's no way it can move!"

"*Give my regards to the net-using witch who's with you. Even though this one is older, it's a brilliant trick against my dummy head. If it weren't for this, I would have thought you guys were really communicating from the Odette II.*"

"What? ......?"

　Marika ran her eyes over the camera feed from the relay station. A small, rag-like spacecraft connected to the docking port opens the antennas on both wings to form the shape of an unbalanced tropical fish. The gantry arms securing the hull slowly opened, and the status of the ship in port on the overlaid display switched to departing.

"*For your own safety, I do not recommend that you go any deeper into this matter. Hey, even if I say I'll take it, I'll just borrow it for a while. After I am done with my business, I will return the Odette II to you. I think I'll probably be able to return it safely.*"

"I said I can't trust you."

　Marika said as calmly as possible, even though she felt that the situation was changing rapidly.

"We will do everything we can to protect our ship."

“*I'm glad to hear that. It was a pleasure talking to you, Captain Marika. My best wishes to your crew and classmates. And now, farewell.*"

　Jackie sent a cursory salute from the communications monitor with his fingertips extended.

"*Well then, I wish you the best of luck on your voyage.*"

　In the camera feed from the relay station, an ungainly spaceship with its antennae extended left the boarding bridge, its navigation lights flashing. The communication line was cut off from the other end.

"It's a lie!　We've got control over here. They can't use their commands unless they disconnect the entire physical line......"

　On the control panel, control of the Lunar Lion should have been completely taken over. Nevertheless, after undocking and leaving the port, the Lunar Lion followed ATC and moved toward its departure trajectory and out of the fixed angle of the camera.

　Lynn realized another possibility and began furiously tapping on the control panel.

“The dummy head he was talking about, did he mean that he had prepared a dummy computer in advance for anti-cracking purposes and entrusted it with external operations?”

　Marika looked up from the deactivated communication monitor and looked at the president.

"Do you mean that he set up a decoy from the beginning?"

"Yes. It's old-fashioned and time-consuming, but if you put a low-security system at the front entrance and have it handle the business operations, anyone who tries to enter from the outside will have to deal with it first. With the front system running as a dummy and the back system monitored by a secure setup, you know what's going on in the front, and if it gets hijacked, you can just switch the system over and regain control right away."

　Lynn's hands stopped on the control panel.

"And this guy didn't even keep that dummy on his ship..."

　Lynn's low voice, which sounded like she was gritting her teeth, made Marika shudder.

"What I thought I hijacked wasn't Lunar Lion's mainframe, but a junk computer they're leasing for customers at...... an Internet cafe downtown. They set up a dummy Lunar Lion system on it, and that's where they communicate with the port office and file their applications with ATC. This is the station's side of the record, and if you look for it, it's been erased again."

　A clear metallic sound, like the ringing of a bell, echoed through the cockpit. Remembering that it was the call of the Silent Whisper radio communication, Marika put her finger on the communication panel and gasped.

"A transmission from ...... Lunar Lion to Silent Whisper."

"What!?"

　Gruier peered over Marika's head at the communication monitor. A short message appeared on the communications monitor that had just shown the redhead's smirking face.

"I'll read it."　Marika ran her eyes over the correspondence.

"’Lunar Lion, Jackie Fahrenheit to Captain Marika and crew of the Silent Whisper. The White Swan will be taken for a while. Don't worry, with any luck we will see each other beyond the stars.’ .......That's all."

　Lynn clicked her tongue as she quickly searched for the Lunar Lion's current location. The Lunar Lion advanced into a launch trajectory that would pass the Silent Whisper as it approached the station, and it rolled its hull lightly from side to side as if it knew that the Silent Whisper had caught it.

"I was beaten...that bastard!　You look like an idiot, but you know what you're doing, you criminal!"

　After a rapid-fire barrage of invective that Marika could barely hear and couldn't make more than half of it make sense, Lynn began pounding on the control panel again.

"Does that mean that he read all the tricks and traps we set on the

Odette II!?"

"Should we go back?"

Marika asked while thinking of a course change from the approach orbit to the departure orbit in the shortest possible time and an excuse for the flight plan to the control station. Although the courses of the Silent Whisper on the approach trajectory and the Lunar Lion on the departure trajectory do not intersect, they will soon reach their closest point of approach.

"……It's useless."　Lynn said as she clenched her teeth.

"We'll go straight to the station and drop the club members off. Have them go to pier C68 as arranged and make a fuss about the disappearance of Odette II, which is supposed to be there, or else the scenario will get screwed up."

"But ......

“We’ll go after that pompous idiot after we drop everyone off at the relay station. Please make an additional application so that we can 'touch and go' in the shortest possible time, and if there is a place where it is faster to enter the port than downtown, please change to there."

"Roger!"

"The Lunar Lion is not a very big ship," Gruier said.

"It's not that much bigger than the Silent Whisper. I don't think a ship that size could do anything if it got to the Odette II before we did."

"I think the person who knows best what his ship can and cannot do is probably Jackie himself."

　Marika followed the projected trajectory of the Lunar Lion as it moved away from the relay station without a hint of panic, at the trajectory and speed instructed by the control station.

"He already knows that Odette II can't go FTL, so I wonder what he's thinking..."

"The Black Swan?!"　Lynn shouted.

"Anyway, hurry to the relay station!　The Lunar Lion, with that style, is not as fast as this military scout plane, no matter how you look at it. Even if we drop everyone off at the station and then return, we'll still have enough power to get there in time!"

"Well, I'm sure we can catch up with them if we violate the speed limit in the controlled airspace."

"I don't want the Odette II or HAL-bou to be touched by that pompous idiot. I don't know what will happen if they do whatever they want."

"Apply to ATC for a change in flight plan as a top priority."

　Marika's fingers stopped tapping on the communication panel.

"......The Uptown Air Dome has openings that can get you in earlier than the downtown docking port, but the price is, uh, ......"

　Marika's mouth dropped when she saw the list of fees, which were different from the downtown docking port by an order of magnitude, in addition to the priority fee, the port usage fee, and other anticipated expenses.

"I'll pay for it."

"Ah!"

　Gruier reached out her finger to the communication panel and sent a port entry application that prioritized the time when money was not an issue. Gruier, who supported herself with her hand on the communication panel, looked into Marika's face in the cockpit.

"I'm sure you've figured it out by listening, but Jackie probably noticed that Marika is not only a member of the yacht club at Hakuoh Academy, but also the captain of Bentenmaru, right?

"What?"

　With an uneasy look on her face, Marika looked at Gruier's face.

"'Why?"

"Jackie addressed Marika as Captain Marika, even though she only identified herself as being in command of the Odette II. I wondered if he assumed she was the captain because she was in command, or if he knew the pirate captain of the Bentenmaru, Captain Marika. Since he didn't seem that eager to gather information, I was hoping it was the former, but at the end he said hello to your crew and classmates as well."

"Oh......"　Marika recalled Jackie's last line.

"I think the fact that he separates crew from classmates means that he is saying hello to her classmates as members of the Hakuoh Academy yacht club, and to the rest of the captain's crew. At this point, we do not know how Jackie is separating the Odette II from the crew of the Bentenmaru, but we can assume that Jackie is conversing with Marika knowing that she is the captain of the pirate ship Bentenmaru."

"So the redhead thinks he's not only dealing with us yacht club members, but pirates as well?"

　Lynn, in the operator's seat, joined the conversation.

"If they're going out of their way to pretend to be an ancient pirate ship and send out a distress signal, they're probably planning on turning pirates into enemies. ...Perhaps he's Marika's competitor?"

"There is no reason for pirates with privateer's licenses to be enemies with each other!"

　Marika has only been a pirate captain for a short time, so she only knows about pirates who have the same privateer's license.

"So, aren't there real pirates who don't care about privateer's licenses?"

"Those are just criminals."　Gruier snapped.

"That person tried to disguise himself not only as a tax official, but also as an insurance inspector. And if he’s trying to steal the Odette II, he’s just a thief and a scammer!"

"I wouldn't want to give the Odette II or HAL-bou to someone like that."　Lynn growled.

"Hey, you bastard, it's the return match!　We know where you are, we know the name of your ship, we know what it looks like, we know where it's going, and we're not going to let you get away with this!"

　Having paid the priority fare, a special express fare, an Air Shield entry fee, plus the landing fee in the Bay Area the Silent Whisper entered, if only for a short time, Pier A of the Sea of the Morningstar Relay Station.

　After making a vertical landing on the tarmac for small boats and spitting out the yacht's crew, Silent Whisper took off again without any resupply.

　The Silent Whisper, which launched after breaking the record for the shortest time in port since the Sea of the Morningstar Relay Station Pier A opened, jumped out of the air shield and left the relay station.

"So why is Gruier still on board!"　Marika screamed in the pilot’s seat.

"I told you to go to pier C68 and make a fuss about the Odette II being stolen!"

''If that's the case, the members of the club will be enough without me."

　Gruier replied nonchalantly, propping herself up in the empty space of the accelerating Silent Whisper's cockpit.

“No matter how I look at it, it seems like I would be more useful here, even though I thought it would be presumptuous of me.”

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

“Besides, no matter how you look at it, this seems more interesting.”

"No, well, I thought you might be staying again, but this time we might be a battle!"

"We're in a fight!"　Lynn, in the operator's seat, raised her voice.

"What kind of a move are you using, you bastard? ...... At least for the moment, they're only poking at it from the outside to break down the barrier, they haven't gotten inside yet, but if you look at the way he just did it, it's not the kind of rudimentary move you'd use."

“The Lunar Lion and the Odette II are still far apart.”

　Marika confirmed the current position of the Lunar Lion and the Odette II, which are still within the controlled airspace.

"At this distance, Odette II is still using active stealth, so I think it's still safe."

"Is this the Lunar Lion's current position?"

　Lynn glanced at the status of the airspace around Silent Whisper on the large monitor above the cockpit and immediately returned to her work.

"I don't know how much of that I can trust."

"Ehhh...?"

　After a moment's delay, Marika understood the meaning of Lynn's words and raised her voice.

"Even we were able to deceive the radar of the control station and the relay station and leave the port so that our current position would not be taken. The observation of a ship's current position in the airspace is done by a combination of transponders and radar, but even that can be faked in any number of ways."

"How on earth did they do that?"

"If you leave a dummy probe that responds in the same way, you can fool the transponders and radar. If you set the drone to follow the ATC's instructions for safe navigation and hide your own reactions, you can then fly around as you please. Ahhh, it's so frustrating not knowing what you're doing when you're dealing with something like that. I haven't seen anything like this since I dove into the military net!"

　Gruier whispered secretly to Marika in the cockpit.

"Sounds like fun, boss."

"I don't know if I can call it fun. I'm pretty sure that was after she went into the military network and was taken into custody."

"I see."

　Gruier turned her attention to Lynn.

"If the enemy can overstep the speed limit in controlled airspace by feeding false information to ATC, why can't we do the same?"

"What?" "Gruier, what are you talking about?"

"As it is now, if we follow the Lunar Lion at maximum acceleration after it leaves the controlled airspace according to the speed limit, the Silent Whisper should be able to catch up before it contacts the Odette II. But that's only if we take Lunar Lion's power output at face value on the port of entry form, and if it's a common fee-evading underreporting, we won't be able to catch up."

"That's true."

"If the enemy can falsify their current position, could the Silent Whisper do the same?"

　Lynn's hands stopped. Marika secretly murmured to Gruier, who was above Lynn.

"Gruier is a real smooth talker, isn't she?"

"I've been trained since childhood."

"It's harder to make it look like you're there than it is to hide."

　Lynn looked around the control panel in the operator's seat as if to check the pieces at hand.

"If you want to make it look like you are not there, you can turn off the transponders and dodge the periodic radar scans. To make it look like you are there, you have to send out a copy of the transponder and the same response from the radar. If we had such a plan in place ahead of time, we could prepare a drone set up specifically for this purpose and release it by radio control, but unfortunately, there is no such convenient option available anywhere."

"Then, can't we create a situation where ATC can overlook a violation of the navigation laws by calling it an emergency evacuation?"

"One after another with this girl......."

　Marika felt mildly dizzy and held her forehead. Gruier continued smoothly.

"If we insist to ATC that the Odette II is currently in danger at someone's hands, wouldn't it be possible for them to overlook a small speeding violation?"

"There's the timing issue..."

　Lynn looked around the cockpit for a clock. In the corner of the display, she found Galactic Standard Time and Sea of the Morningstar Time.

"I think it's probably about this time that our crew finally arrives at the dock and are starting to make a fuss about the missing ship. The device we left at the dock was made up from off-the-shelf parts taken from the ship, so we don't have to worry about it being traced back to us, but it will still be a while before the port police will notify the ATC and the military......"

　Lynn saw the Odette II's icon on the three-dimensional display as it continued its inertial navigation outside of the controlled airspace.

"Above all, if we suddenly fly to our spacecraft, which hasn't even sent out a transponder yet, it's obvious that people will ask how you knew the Odette II was there."

"How about just skipping ahead without thinking about it?"

　Marika took back the control stick, which fit snugly in her hand. Lynn and Gruier looked at each other with a "What?” look on their faces.

"As far as the control airspace is concerned, there are no vessels that would cause trouble in front of or behind us even if we suddenly go into interplanetary space-like acceleration from here. If the control station turns a blind eye, that's fine. If we are pursued, we will ride to the Odette II along with the pursuit ship. If I lead the port police or the Star Forces pursuit ship and rush to the Odette II, or the Lunar Lion gives up, we will successfully retrieve the Odette II, and if not, we can use the pursuit ship as reinforcements and hope for more reinforcements."

"What's the worst penalty for speeding?"

"A fine, a warning, and maybe a license suspension......"

　Marika counted off a few mumbled guesses.

"Even if I use my pirate license, I'll still be fined. Right now, the controlled airspace is empty, so unless you take a trajectory that reverses the approach trajectory from here, it shouldn't be judged dangerous or malicious."

"In the worst case scenario, even if we get the Odette II back safely after being fined, there is a possibility that they will search for our escape......"

　Lynn thought about it for only a moment.

"Unfortunately, we're dealing with the port police, who have a bad reputation, and the hard-headed military, so I will accept that level of risk. Marika, how fast can you fly?

"Let's see, if we fly as fast as we can....."

　Marika recalculated the remaining energy, ship weight, and course to the Odette II.

"……We will leave the controlled airspace in five minutes. At this speed, even if a pursuit ship is sent it wouldn't be able to catch up."

"Are there any military ships that might be able to intercept us somewhere?"

"I don't think there are any in the neighborhood of the Odette II."

"Then let's fly!"

　Lynn waved her hand vigorously in the direction of the Silent Whisper.

"He's about to leave controlled airspace, but we're going to ignore him and fly with the primary purpose of returning to the Odette II!"

"Roger that."

　The Silent Whisper is the latest model, and as a demonstration model it is equipped with a high-powered main engine that can easily crush the crew if it is inadvertently opened to full throttle without inertial control. If the high-speed, high-power propulsion exhaust were to be dispersed into the controlled airspace, it might be treated as indiscriminate terrorism, so Marika did not increase the Silent Whisper's output to combat levels, but instead moved to maximum acceleration in the normal power range.

　To her surprise, the control station only sent her a standard warning message automatically after she started accelerating.

"I was scared of what kind of warning I was going to get, but all I got was an automated message?"

"I'm sure ATC would be nervous about this if it were at a port of entry."

　Marika, who had never received a warning from ATC before, even though it was an automated message, replied to the message, wondering whether she should reply explaining the situation or ignore the message.

"I've heard that they don't care about people who leave. Even if you chase after them for a dangerous flight or speeding violation when they leave, they'll get away with it, and if you put an APB out on them, the runaway vessel will never come back, and the port of entry data is often faked."

"We only know about the Sea of the Morningstar relay station."

　Lynn watched the ship's course as it quickly closed the distance to the Lunar Lion ahead.

"If other ATC stations are like that, there is no way that that ragged ship, which must have more experience than ours, is seriously flying in compliance with the navigation rules. So the flight data we are seeing from Lunar Lion is deceptive data for us to monitor, rather than for ATC."

"Yeah, I'm skeptical."　Gruier called out to Lynn as she mumbled something.

"You don't have to worry about the Odette II, which the president has worked so hard to lock down, being hijacked so easily."

"I'm worried because I did it!　Oh, I can see HAL-bou is having a hard time thanks to its poor setup. Marika, hurry up!"

"I'm hurrying!　We are almost at the closest point of contact with the Lunar Lion, would you like me to check from here if the readings are genuine?"

"I'll do it over here."

　Lynn, remembering her job, put her hands on the control panel in the operator's seat.

"In this orientation, a slightly stronger radar hit won't cause any other problems, so be prepared!"

　Mobilizing all the antennas deployed on the Silent Whisper, which was undergoing steady acceleration, Lynn fired a radar beam of such power that it could be taken as a warning to shoot down the slow-flying Lunar Lion. The response was immediate.

"Aaaaah!"

　Lynn shouted pitifully.

"They're giving us the exact same response right at this moment!"

"Is it real?"　Gruier asked, and Lynn shook her head.

"No, it's a fake. If you compare it with the data we took immediately after the launch of the Lunar Lion, the reaction is too simple. But without the comparison data, we wouldn't know, and this is enough to fool the control station."

"So where is the real thing?"

"I'll explore the planned trajectory."

　Lynn ran her fingers over the radar panel.

"I'm glad we're facing outward, no one will complain if we fire the radar at maximum power on this side."

"Please don't be too reckless."

　A clear metallic sound, like the ringing of a bell, echoed through the cockpit. Marika connected the line, expecting to receive a second warning from the control station.

"*Silent Whisper from Bentenmaru, this is Hyakume.*"

"What?"　Marika raised her voice.

"*The time for regular contact has long passed, so I thought I'd call you even though I know you're busy. You seem to be having a good time.*"

　Marika hurriedly checked the communication settings. The minimum encryption is the same as when communicating with Bentenmaru.

"How long have you been watching me having fun?"

"*Well, I've had a general idea of your movements since Odette II left the relay station......*"

"Gaa......"

　Marika held her head as she tried to imagine what kind of faces the crew of the Bentenmaru had while monitoring their actions. She quickly looked up.

"Where are you now!? How long will it take to make contact with the Odette II at full speed?"

"*I'm on my way to the Odette II now to see what's coming. I think we'll get there before you do.*"

"A strange spaceship called Lunar Lion, which has just launched from the relay station, is approaching in an attempt to take over the Odette II. Can you stop it?"

"*Lunar Lion, Lunar Lion... I've got him. Is that the guy behind the captain right now?*"

"That's a dummy!"

　Marika exclaimed to Hyakume, who seemed to have caught the Lunar Lion's transponder.

"The real one is probably closer to the Odette II than we are right now. Whatever you do, just don't let him get close to the Odette II!"

"*If it is the captain's order, I will obey it, but it will be difficult to use force if Captain Marika is not on board.*"

"Eh?"

　Marika did not know what Hyakume was talking about.

"*As you know, a privateer's license is valid only when the ship and the captain are in one set. Since the Bentenmaru does currently not have a captain on board, if it's not a matter of self-defense, it will be a problem if you get questioned later.*"

"The Odette II is being targeted!　Didn't you intercept our communication with the Lunar Lion!?"

"*How can we listen to such a highly directional FTL transmission if you don't broadcast it to us? What's the matter, some evil mastermind on board?*"

"I don't think it's a mastermind, but he is the fake tax official who came to the yacht club!"

　Marika had already reported on that matter.

"That Jackie guy now says he's an insurance investigator for Marx & Marx, and he's taking the Odette II with him!"

"*Insurance investigator?　That's a very old-fashioned approach nowadays.*"

"And the Black Swan!　I'm catching a Black Swan-like signal on the Odette II, can't you see it from there!?"

　Compared to the Odette II, which was launched with a hodgepodge, incomplete crew, the Bentenmaru should be operated in a much more proper manner. Hyakume's reply, however, disappointed Marika.

"*Oh, that one's gone now.*”

"Gone? It's a spaceship bigger than the Bentenmaru, and it's gone!?"

"*It was visible here for a while too, but as of now it's gone. Coorie has been working hard to scan it again, but it's so invisible that I can't help but think the first response was a dummy. If the real Black Swan shows up, he's a very skilled guy.*"

"With the Silent Whisper and the Bentenmaru's electronic warfare capabilities, shouldn't we be able to detect most spaceships?"　Gruier suggested.

"The combination of the Silent Whisper's state-of-the-art facilities and the Bentenmaru's know-how will be a force to be reckoned with."

"No."　Lynn in the operator's seat shook her head.

"The use of multiple electronic warfare machines will only increase the power if they are well coordinated. This one has only undergone minimal adjustments since Jenny brought it to us, and the data connection with the Odette II has not even been tested yet. Even if we send our data to the Bentenmaru, they can't analyze it because the format is different."

"I don't think we have enough time to get over there to the Bentenmaru."

　While thinking about the development, which might turn out to be inconvenient, Marika told Hyakume.

"If the other party is not only Jackie's Lunar Lion, but also the Black Swan, we may not be able to communicate properly in the future. Our first priority is to preserve the Odette II. We have more than enough mobility, so if we are in danger, we will evacuate at our own discretion.

"*We must secure the Odette II and retrieve it. I understand. So, the Black Swan is working for the enemy?*"

"Even with the Barbaroosa's observation, the identity of the Black Swan has not been determined. In addition, there is a possibility that we will not be able to respond in time after the Black Swan comes out and takes action against the Odette II. Be careful, the enemy is so skilled that our president was outwitted."

"Don't say I've been outsmarted!"

"*I’m looking forward to this.*"　Hyakume's voice contained a smile.

"*Well then, if the Black Swan appears, we can shoot it without question, right?*"

After exhaling, Marika answered.

"Yes. As the captain, I should take responsibility, but if you wait for the Black Swan to complete its friend or foe identification, it will only give them more time. I'll leave it to you to decide whether to fire a warning shot or hit them, but I hope you can destroy them in a way that will stop them in their tracks so you can examine them more carefully later."

"*I have been talking with other pirate ships and the military, not only with the Barbaroosa, about considering the Black Swan as an enemy. It won't be easy to suddenly fire a shot, but they have a history of disguising transponders and distress signals, so they should be able to handle it. Understood, the Bentenmaru will now deactivate all armament safety devices and move into battle stance.*"

"You’ll do fine."

　Marika wondered if there had ever been a time when the Bentenmaru without her on board was in a combat situation. Whether she was on board or not, she could not imagine a situation in which combat command decisions would change dramatically, so there would be no use in worrying about it.

"*I'll do my best. By the way, the Odette II changed its trajectory for the outer planets and started accelerating with its main engine. Is this your instruction?*"

"The Odette II has started to move, you say?"

　Involuntarily repeating it, Marika looked at Lynn, who was supposed to be in control of the Odette II from the operator's seat. Lynn, whose eyes met hers, shook her head as vigorously as she could.

"It can't be!　The Odette II is inertial cruising, and according to our display, the main engine power has not increased and the sails have not been extended!"

"*The reason they don't have the sails up is because they don't really know how to handle solar sails. The main engine alone, with inertial control, can provide a decent amount of acceleration. That means the control of the Odette II is not in our hands right now.*"

　Lynn immediately raised both hands and conceded defeat.

"Unfortunately, the Bentenmaru is right. I can't see Odette II's movements on my monitor. If the Odette II is moving as the Bentenmaru says, then the Odette II has been taken over!"

"I thought I was protecting her, but I don't have control over the Odette II right now. The enemy is in control."

"*Who is on board the Odette II right now?*"

"Only HAL-bou!"

　Marika interrupted Lynn's immediate answer. "It's unmanned now!”

"*So, even in the worst case, there is no need to hold back.*"

　The Silent Whisper's cockpit fell silent. Exhaling once more, Marika opened her mouth.

"No, there isn't. In the worst case, even if we sink the Odette II, there will be zero human casualties."

"*Don't sound so scary. She was at one time the command ship of a pirate fleet, and she's a very important training ship, so let’s try to get it back with as little damage as possible. Is it okay if I cut off all the radio lines that are connected to the Odette II from the outside?*"

　Marika glanced at Lynn, who was busily moving her hands.

"You can cut it off!"　Lynn exclaimed.

"If it's a hidden line that gets cut off, that's the extent of it, and if it gets cut off, I'll reconnect it through a different route!"

"That's right. If you can regain control of the Odette II via the Bentenmaru, please do so."

"*Roger that.*"

"We are leaving controlled airspace."　Gruier, who was watching the correlation monitor in the cockpit, reported.

"No pursuit ships from the station or surrounding airspace."

"We can't count on reinforcements in case of emergency?"　Marika murmured.

"Show me the Odette II's current position and estimated orbit!　I'll return to the Odette II at full throttle!"

　At the next moment, a furious static signal came over the communication line. Marika reflexively pulled the headset from her ear and ran her eyes over the communication monitor.

"That’s...... interfering with the FTL line and jamming our communications?"

"No......."

　Gruier reached out from her side and ran her hands over the control panel.

"A gravitational anomaly so strong that the background galaxy appears distorted in the direction of motion is moving at high speed on the outer planet side. This is probably a similar phenomenon to what the Barbaroosa observed at Garnet A......"

"How!?"　Marika raised her voice.

"How can you create a gravity anomaly that can cut off FTL communication without a gravity source?"

"If you bring in a powerful anti-gravity engine and interfere with it properly, you can create a gravity anomaly anywhere you want."

　Lynn switches the Silent Whisper's sensor systems in interplanetary space, where not only gravitational anomalies but also strong electronic interference block normal electromagnetic waves.

"I wondered what in the world would be the use of a gravity sensor that could even be used for academic research, but I see where it could be of great use in a situation like this. Do you think you can get away with causing such a commotion in the immediate vicinity of Sea of the Morningstar, even though it is outside of the controlled airspace, you bastard?"

　The Silent Whisper's multi-channel gravity sensor detected three intertwining gravity anomalies without any initial calibration.

"Perhaps these gravity anomalies are installed in the path of the moving Odette II."　Gruier murmured as she looked at the results of the gravity sensor's observations, which were schematically displayed in a three-dimensional image above the operator's seat.

"Should we change the destination to this gravity anomaly instead of the Odette II?"

"Gravitational anomalies are just phenomena, observations."

　Lynn continues to fiddle with the simplified observations.

"The question is, who is causing it and for what purpose? To cause such a complex gravitational anomaly, a ship with a powerful anti-gravity engine would have to be behind it. If its presumed location is here, and if it can maintain a communication line in such a twisted space, then ......"

　Lynn estimated the location of the antigravity engine behind the ship based on the observation results of the ever-changing gravity anomaly, added the distortion of space to the calculation, and then estimated the space where a clear communication environment could be secured. In the space on this side of the gravity anomaly, the space for successful communication behind it is confined to a narrow, loosely unwound spiral.

“Here!"　Lynn raised her voice.

"If Lunar Lion is still on this side and communicating with whatever is causing the gravity anomaly on the other side, he is somewhere in this spiral tunnel. If his goal is the Odette II, that's somewhere in here, too!"

"This girl can even make such an observation?"

　Marika looked at the three-dimensional display of the triple helix, which was slowly unraveling and expanding.

"Among the myriad battle patterns the manufacturer envisioned are battles in the neighborhood of a high-gravity source."

“That means that the only airspace where communication lines can be connected, taking into account gravitational anomalies, is within the slow-moving spiral space.”

　Marika entered detailed numbers into the Silent Whisper's trajectory selection.

"If the Lunar Lion is targeting the Odette II while communicating with the ships beyond the gravity anomaly, that means the Lunar Lion is in this spiral space, or at least within immediate access to it."

"That's right."

　With the gravity sensor still operational, Lynn initiated electronic anti-jamming countermeasures.

"Yeah, he's jamming us at such a high density. I won't dance in his hands forever!"

'Let's go!"

　The standard for jamming is to concentrate the jamming on the target. It is not practical to fill the entire combat airspace with jamming signals, and it would also interfere with the movements of friendly ships. Marika took a sharp evasive maneuver, hoping to get out of the range of the enemy's electronic jamming of the Silent Whisper.

"I knew he was good at this kind of trick because he had his huge antennae spread out."

　Lynn's hands do not rest as she measures the finely varying radio wave density.

"I didn't think he could do this much. If I had known this was going to happen, I would have read the manual more seriously."

"Read it, now!"

　Even with the radar output turned up, we can only see the situation immediately in front of us. The estimated position of the Odette II was also displayed, but it was not reliable. Shaking her head, Marika reset the status of spaceship placement in the surrounding airspace that she had previously envisioned. From this point forward, she could only trust the information she had confirmed.

"Thank goodness for open space."　Marika murmured.

"If it was an asteroid field with unregistered rocks floating in it, we wouldn't be able to fly around at this speed."

"Be careful."　Lynn said.

"We haven't found the Lunar Lion that's supposed to be in front of us, but the Lunar Lion dummy behind us is jamming us as if it's trying to shoot at us. I wonder if we overserved them the first time, now that they're trying to pull this trick on us."

"Even the dummy behind us is a pawn of the other side!?"　Marika screamed.

"If I had known it was such a nuisance, I would have shot it down as I passed it."　Gruier expresses her opinion as if it were obvious.

"If we had done that, not only would we have reduced the enemy's arsenal by one, but we might have been able to draw out the military as a combat act within controlled airspace."

"Then the real Lunar Lion could have gone out into outer space without doing anything, and slowly taken the Odette II with it after we were held by the military." Lynn said while moving her hands.

"Combat is about results. Now that the other side has taken the initiative to use force in the Sea of the Morningstar area, we can recognize it as a definite enemy and start a serious battle."

"That's true."

"However, the fact that the enemy has pulled off such a spectacular trick means that they have a good chance of winning. The fact that they made such a fuss and showed themselves so clearly means that they have achieved their goal in this one shot and will never come back here again. And the enemy's target is the Odette II - I see her!"

　Lynn, who had been using her narrowly focused radar to forcefully break through the enemy's electronic interference and continue her single-point spatial scanning, raised her voice.

"The main body of the Lunar Lion has been found!"

"Confirmed!"

　Marika cheered as the Lunar Lion's current position was clearly shown on the display.

"Give me power, I'm going to hit this guy with some serious electronic interference, take that!"

　High-power jamming radio waves, which would short-circuit and burn all electronic equipment if a civilian ship without anti-electronic protection were hit directly, were focused like a beam and fired at the Lunar Lion ahead.

"Check the main body!"

After confirming the response, Lynn let out a yell. "It's a return match. Prepare yourself, pompous idiot!"

　Lynn's electronic jamming attacked the Lunar Lion, mobilizing everything that could be used in the attack, including electronic weapons that she did not fully understand how to use.

"I won't use a delicate hand to take control. I'm going to destroy any electronic devices that are turned on and I'm going to strip them naked!"

"How vulgar."　Gruier, pouting, looked into Marika's cockpit.

"Do you have any weapons that can attack him directly?"

"No, I don't."　Marika shook her head with a pathetic voice.

"That's why I think that even though it's a military ship, it was easily registered as a civilian. It was a demonstration model, so it was already unarmed when the previous president brought it here. As options, beam cannons for self-defense and missiles can be used if they are loaded, but with such a state-of-the-art model, it would be obvious what you are doing if you order the options now, and even if you order missiles through distributor channels, they may not be able to sell them to a girls' school."

"It's a shame. If we could at least land one blow on the enemy, this violent electronic interference will subside somewhat."

Gruier's voice trailed off as she looked into Marika's face.

"But the enemy is probably armed, right?"

"Probably."　Marika nodded.

"That's why I wanted the Silent Whisper to be as uninvolved as possible."

"It’s a shame there's no seat for me."　Gruier looked around the Silent Whisper's cockpit, which only had seats for two.

　The clear metallic sound that announced a communication call echoed in the cockpit. Marika couldn't believe her eyes when she saw the communication panel.

"It’s Jackie Fahrenheit of the Lunar Lion!?"

"Marika, take the controls."

　Gruier was quicker than Marika to reach for the headset that had been returned to the headrest of the seat.

"I'll be your partner this time."

"Please."

　Marika reassessed the status of the ship from the pilot's position. Lynn's intensive electronic attack on the Lunar Lion has used a lot of the main engine's power, but it still has enough output to perform sudden evasive maneuvers.

"Communications connected. As expected, it’s only a voice line this time."

"I don't think they can afford to maintain an image communication line in this situation."

"*Hey, hey, hey, hey.*"

　After the deafening noise characteristic of strong electronic interference, the voice line connected to the system unexpectedly transmitted Jackie's clear voice to the cockpit.

"*Really, young ladies? This is Lunar Lion, Jackie Fahrenheit, but really, ladies, have you followed me this far?*"

"Silent Whisper, this is Gruier, our communications officer."

"You really don't mind giving out your real name."　Marika secretly murmured to Gruier, who had easily given her name, even if it was only her first name.

"*Oh, the communications officer has changed. Did Captain Marika get off at the station?*"

"The captain is busy at the moment, so I'll be the communications officer in her place. Let us know what you need. If you offer to surrender, I am ready to accept it."

　On the other end of the line, Jackie seemed to burst out laughing.

"*Come on, there's an order to things. That kind of thing should be done after recommending surrender first, right?*"

"Excuse me, it looked like you were the one who was cornered."　Gruier continued in a calm voice.

"I thought your transmission was raising a white flag. So, you still intend to continue?"

"*You're brave girls. Well, if you didn't have that kind of guts, you wouldn't just start communications without hesitation in this situation. All right, in respect of your courage and ability to identify me in this situation, I would like to give you some advice. If you don't mind, will you listen to me?*"

"What is it?"

"*I’m about to conduct a rather dangerous operation in this airspace. I can't guarantee your safety because you'll get caught in the middle. So, be good girls and get out of this airspace, will you?*"

"A dangerous operation?"　Gruier asked back in a tone as if she were talking about the weather.

"Could it be related to the mysterious gravitational anomalies currently being observed in this airspace?"

"*Oh, I'm sorry, don't ask me about that, it's my business secret. It would be bad for my business if I blabbed about that kind of thing.*"

"Is that also a highly classified matter related to the Galactic Empire's diplomacy?"

　Jackie's response was a little delayed.

"*Well, it's kind of a technical issue, but I'd appreciate it if you could leave it at that. After all, it's an operation I'm not used to, so it's better for me to get rid of unnecessary worries as much as possible.*"

"Shouldn't you be worrying about yourself?"　Gruier said, in an emotionless voice.

"We will soon have the Lunar Lion in our range. So let's follow the order you gave us. If you surrender now and cease the gravitational interference and electronic attacks you are carrying out in this space, and follow our orders, we will guarantee your safety."

　Instead of a reply, a joyful laugh could be heard in the cockpit.

"*No, sorry, sorry. I haven't had this much fun in a long time. I'm grateful to you for pulling out the ship I wanted without being noticed by the relay station, and for emptying it out and making it ready for me. I have no grudge against you, so I don't want to harm you. When I say I don't want to hurt you, I mean it!*"

"I don't want any unnecessary fighting, either."

Gruier calmly listened to Jackie's laughter.

“If you cause such a commotion and can't take the Odette II away, and you and the Lunar Lion get hurt, don’t you think the situation will become even more troublesome?”

"*That's not true, young lady. The best way to avoid such a messy situation is not to surrender, but to run away. I sincerely recommend it. Get out of this airspace now!　Otherwise, I cannot guarantee your safety or the safety of your ship with respect to what is about to happen.*"

"I see it!"　Lynn exclaimed.

"Odette II secured, accelerating on the Lunar Lion's course!"

"Can you see where they are heading?"　Marika asked from the cockpit.

"Is it still at the center of the gravity anomaly?"

"No, it's a little off. ...... There’s another reaction at the center of the gravity anomaly!?"

　The Silent Whisper's sensitively tuned energy sensors detected the emergence of high energy at the center of the intertwined gravitational anomaly, quickly reaching its operating limit.

"There's something in the center of the gravitational anomaly ...... is this...... a spaceship?"

"The Black Swan, right?"　Gruier called out simultaneously to the two in the cockpit and to Jackie over the radio.

"So the Black Swan is at the center of the gravity anomaly and controlling it?'

　Again, the reply was delayed.

"*Not exactly, no. But, well, there's nothing wrong with thinking that way. I think your sensors should be able to see it by now, don't you?*"

　Unable to accurately read Jackie's intentions, Gruier ran her eyes over to Lynn's operator's seat, which should have the most accurate view of the situation outside the ship.

"Is that the Black Swan?"

　The data obtained was full of noise and heavily corrected because it was observed under strong electromagnetic interference aimed at the Silent Whisper. However, what emerged from the center of the gravity anomaly was a black spaceship with a sharply angled silhouette.

"It has an estimated mass of 30,000 tons and an overall length of over 300 meters...... larger than the Odette II or the Bentenmaru!"

"The Black Swan was originally a battlecruiser. It was one of the largest battleships of its time, a class above the Barbaroosa, and even as a single ship it was capable of competing on equal terms with the regular battleships of the Stellar Alliance."

　Hearing Marika's explanation, Gruier put her finger on the headset.

"We are told that the Black Swan sank at the red giant Garnet A in the final battle of the War of Independence. Why is a pirate ship that supposedly sank 120 years ago now at a planet where it once fought for its flag?"

"*You're a poet, girl. The Black Swan was heavily damaged in the battle at Garnet A, but she didn't sink. It was a dangerous leap into hyperspace as soon as it just barely exited the hot prominence of the red giant star, dazzling not only the enemy but also its allies, and barely avoiding sinking. But it was a leap in the middle of nowhere, in the neighborhood of a high gravity source, and by the time the hyperspace shipwreck returned to this world, the war was over and the ship was no longer usable as a ship.*"

　Gruier asked Lynn with her eyes, as if to confirm the truth of Jackie's words.

"High-energy reactions, high-power antigravity engines that would be useless on an ordinary starship!　No matter how you look at it, it's a shipwreck! If the Black Swan is a real shipwreck, why is it still running?"

"Why is the shipwrecked Black Swan now in the Tau system?"

"*I'm here to pick up our former pirate shipmates.*"　Jackie's voice suddenly became theatrical.

"*To use the final weapon that we were unable to destroy in the final battle 120 years ago, in its original form.*"

"That's what you're after, isn't it?"　At Gruier's quiet voice, Jackie on the other side of the communication device let out a pitiful voice.

"*Oh shoot, I talked too much. Sorry, girl. What I'm about to tell you involves a highly political matter that involves the diplomacy of the Galactic Empire. If possible, please keep this conversation confidential.*"

"No."　Gruier flatly denied it.

"We have heard what you have just said. Thank you for the information. It's not too late to escape, is it?"

"You should let me go, it’s in your best interests. You're the one who's running out of tricks, aren't you?"

"I gave you my advice. Now, fight fair and square until the end."

"*Fair and square is against my principles, but I guess I can't help it if a young lady says so.*"

"Okay, I've got you!"　Lynn exclaimed.

"The Lunar Lion's exact current position, the cracking of the Odette II, and the dummy lines are all concentrated here."

　Marika sent the coordinates from the operator's seat directly to the temporary data line that had been reconfigured from the Bentenmaru's side.

"Marika to Bentenmaru, fire cannon at these coordinates!　Fire main guns, hurry!"

"*Roger!*"　Schnitzer's deep voice responded with a single word. The next moment, six beams from the Bentenmaru's two triple main guns cut through the space, which was filled with strong electromagnetic interference and swirling with gravitational anomalies.

　Both radar and sensors detected the six high-energy beams. The space pierced by the bundle of energy, which was coherent to an order of magnitude greater than the electromagnetic waves, shook and cut the communication lines that had been set up.

"Did you hit it?"　Gruier asked as she put her finger on the headset and waited for the communication to be restored. Lynn shook her head.

"All six beams extended cleanly. If they scored a hit, they should have exploded or diffused or changed in some way, but they didn't, which means they weren't at these coordinates."

"*Hey, hey, hey, hey, that was dangerous.*"　The smiling voice came over the revived communication line.

"*A cruiser-class main gun firing at long range without warning, even the famed Lunar Lion could not take a direct hit!*"

"Next time, I guess."　Gruier said calmly.

"*I'm sorry, but the Lunar Lion has a little magic in it that prevents beams or missiles from hitting it in the slightest.*"

"That's good to know."　Gruier's tone did not change.

"If you insist that the Lunar Lion cannot be hit by beams, then we can concentrate our fire on it without remorse."

"Corrected second shot!"　Marika sent new data to the Bentenmaru.

"This time, one turret at a time, I'll leave the data correction to you!"

　In the previous bombardment, the Bentenmaru simply aimed and fired at the coordinates sent by the Silent Whisper without confirmation. For this corrected shot, the Silent Whisper's re-measured data was sent to the Bentenmaru, who was instructed to make further fine adjustments based on the results of that shot.

　Three beams from one triple turret tore through interplanetary space. Observations from the Silent Whisper showed that all three high-energy beams disappeared without hitting or scattering, just as before.

"'Secret technique, cross search!"　Lynn shouted as if it was a special move.

"Good thing I remembered the frequency and energy pattern of the Bentenmaru's main gun. Thanks to that, I can make accurate observations. The Bentenmaru's beam is being twisted, albeit subtly, around the Lunar Lion!　If it's manipulating gravity anomalies through anti-gravity engine interference, it's distorting the space around the Lunar Lion and deflecting the beam away from its target!"

"Shall I tell the Bentenmaru?"

　Marika shook her head at Gruier's question.

"It’s okay, the Bentenmaru can correct that much."

　A third salvo was fired from the Bentenmaru. One of the three high-energy beams diffused as if it had been bent. Marika smiled when she realized that it had bounced off the anti-beam coating on the surface of the hull, which is often used on warships.

"See? I hit it".

"*Wow, wow!*"　Jackie's somewhat panicked voice came back over the radio.

"*You really guessed it! Damn! That's the third ship to directly hit my ship.*"

“Well, she didn't look it, but she's a tough ship."

　A ship the size of the Lunar Lion would not normally be armored to withstand a direct hit from a cruiser-class main gun.

"*Of course. There's still plenty of shields and plating to block the beams. The first two ships that hit the Lunar Lion have already sunk, so you guys better be careful.*"

"First of all, we are not the ones who fired on the Lunar Lion."　Gruier said especially quietly.

"It is true that the ship was fired upon at our order, but as you can see, it was the Bentenmaru that fired the shots. What happens in this case?"

“*I'll have back at you by the time I'm done, so wash your neck[[2]](#footnote-2) and wait for me!*"

"Next, let's make another recommendation for surrender. Jackie Fahrenheit, I can't make a recommendation for surrender unless you are alive and able to speak, and we confirm your acceptance. You can still surrender to us now."

"*Sorry, but I'm still a stickler for getting the job done. The Odette II will be in contact with the Black Swan soon. As long as you give me the White Swan, I have no further use for this place.*"

"I doubt it will work out that way."

"I got it back!"　Lynn exclaimed.

"I've regained control of the Odette II!　Full reverse and take a breakaway trajectory!"

"*What, what!?*"　Jackie's voice was laced with confusion for the first time.

"I couldn't figure out how to disconnect the Lunar Lion from the Odette II, so I had them fire a volley of shots at it.

　Lynn was hitting the keys on the control panel with such force that it almost sounded like a continuous sound.

"Even without a direct hit, a high-energy beam of that magnitude at close range would be enough to knock out a delicate line. Taking advantage of that opportunity, I tried to take over control of Odette II again from HAL-bou. I wondered what I would do if HAL-bou had been hit as well, but currently I'm in control."

　Lynn typed out the final command.

“And the line with the outside world is completely shut off! Now the Odette II can't be controlled unless you get on board and control it from inside!"

"The reason you asked the Bentenmaru to fire on the Lunar Lion was not to sink it."　Gruier said, summarizing the explanation only she understood.

"But to break the control from there to the Odette II. It appears to have worked well."

"*I'll have that level of control back in no time.*"

"See if you can do that to a spaceship that has shut down its communications equipment."　Gruier said in a tone that could have made anyone laugh out loud.

"*I want the Odette II itself, and I'm going to get it by force with the Black Swan!*"

"Silent Whisper to Bentenmaru, change target."　Marika ordered, confirming that the communication line had been reconfigured.

"Change target, Lunar Lion to Black Swan. It's just a fake that imitates the shape and transponder of the Black Swan, so don't worry about it, just destroy it!"

"*Roger!*" "*Understood!*"

　The response came not only from the Bentenmaru, but also from another location. Marika confirmed the name of the other ship that had joined the communication line.

"...... Barbaroosa!?"

"*Currently, the Barbaroosa is on the outer planet orbital side and is rushing to target a gravity anomaly.*"

　Captain Blackbeard's gruff voice came over the comm.

"*It's a little far for precise range, but with a target that big, there's no need to worry. Bentenmaru, I'll shoot where you say, so send me the shooting data!*"

"*Oho, another pirate ship in the fight!*" Jackie's voice trailed off.

Gruier called out again. "This may be your last chance. Do you want to surrender?"

　We waited, and after a slight noise there was a reply.

"*Sorry, I'm going to have to run.*"

"Oh?"

"*Even though I've lost control of the training ship, it's not a good idea to take on two pirate ships and you in this condition. I say this with admiration, you coward!*"

　The three girls at the controls of the Silent Whisper looked at each other after being cursed in a fresh tone of voice.

"*Tell your pirate friends that I'll be waiting for them at Garnet A. I hope to see you again soon. Well then, I wish you all the best on your voyage.*"

"Gravity anomaly expanding!"　Lynn shouted.

"It's suddenly increased in size and is moving at high speed!

"*Watch out, they're going to disappear!*" Came the transmission from the Barbaroosa.

"*They got away at Garnet A this way, too. They can escape by jumping after stirring up space as much as they like with gravity anomalies!*"

"Can you track them?"　Marika asked Lynn. She answered while moving her hands.

"I’m collecting as much data as I can, but with so many gravity anomalies, a small ship's FTL jump will be drowned out. The Black Swan still has a lot of mass, so it will leave enough of a trail to follow, but I'm sure they know that much. ...... It jumped!"

　First the Lunar Lion and then the Black Swan disappeared from the display. At the same time, the strong electronic interference that had filled the airspace around the Silent Whisper stopped.

"That's right, the Lunar Lion dummy!"

　Lynn, remembering the dummy Jackie had left behind, pointed the Silent Whisper's radar toward the space on the Sea of the Morningstar side.

　As if in anticipation, a small explosion occurred outside the controlled airspace.

"......He got it."

　Lynn looked at the shattered remains of the explosion on the display and muttered, "He’s not dumb enough to leave evidence."

"You called it."

　Two pirate ships, a training ship, and the Silent Whisper were left in a space where the gravitational anomalies were settling like a receding wave.

"You told us to wait for you at Garnet A."

　Marika heard Gruier's murmur and turned the course of the Silent Whisper toward the Odette II.

"It's a trap. It's a very blatant trap. Jackie wanted the Odette II. Maybe there's something at Garnet A that needs the Odette II."

"So, shall we end it then?"

　Marika looked into Gruier's eyes, full of fighting spirit, and sighed.

"Now we are going to retrieve the Odette II, return to the relay station, explain this whole fiasco to the authorities, and be done with it?"

"Don't give me that 'this is not over' look."

　Marika turned to the control panel.

"I don't care if you're a pirate, Gruier, but you need to think about your position."

"If it was only pirates, but this is a fight that has been brought to us as well."

　Lynn was tapping on the control panel in the operator's seat, unenthusiastically.

"Generally, even if we want to end it, they don't want to end it, do they?"

"Let's go!"　Gruier declared emphatically.

"We should also go to Garnet A with the Odette II. Perhaps there we will find the key to solving all the mysteries."

"A practice voyage with all the members?"

　Throwing off the control panel, Lynn folded her hands behind her head.

"If we're going to take a Category II sub-lightspeed ship to a place like that, we're going to need a FTL booster. Where in the world am I going to get a FTL booster for a solar sailing ship?"

"Pres...!"

"Who will be in command of the Odette II?"

"That would be Marika......"

"No!"　Marika couldn't help but shout.

"I have to be on the Bentenmaru. What about you, president?"

"I've realized in this battle that I'm not the captain of a ship. I don't care if I am a professional, but seeing the whole situation and giving instructions in such a fast-flowing situation is not a job suited for me."

"Gruier is no good, either."

　Before she could say anything, Marika said.

"It is bad enough to have such an important person on board, but if she is made captain, it will become a real diplomatic problem. At most, I think Gruier should be given the position of vice captain, similar to the observer position she had on the Bentenmaru."

"What should we do then?　Should we bring in an advisor?"

"That won't work."　Marika murmured.

"I can't entrust the captaincy of the Odette II to someone unless they have some understanding of the situation, knows how to run a pirate ship, and has at least some command experience as a captain."

"Where in the galaxy can I find such a convenient and useful character?"

　Marika's voice lowered even lower as Lynn shouted.

"There is...... I mean, it's not like there aren't any......"

"What?"

　The tone of the voice of Ririka, the mother of Katou Marika, who had once made a name for herself as Captain Ririka in the Cetus constellation, jumped up and echoed through the Katou family kitchen.

"You want me to be the captain of the White Swan?"

Afterword (Asahi Novels edition)

　I am not ashamed of the title this time. No, if you say that the series title ruins everything, you may be right.

　The story of a past relationship, which I was in the process of conceiving in the last postscript, is progressing in this way after all.

　Why does a girls' school have a training ship, and why was it once a pirate ship? I may have been thinking of some profound setting at the time, but I think what I was thinking back then was "I'll think of a profound setting."

　Then, when I finally decide to use the setting, I get into all sorts of deep trouble because I haven't really thought it through. As an author who is opportunistic and leaves things to chance, I believe that settings are to be utilized, not filled in, so I just manage to make it work, but I wonder if I will be able to make it work next time.

　As those who have read the main story know, the episode has come to an end, but the mystery of the basic setting of this story has not yet been solved. It is, so to speak, the first part of a back-and-forth story, and I would like to make the title of the next book (to be published in November) a not-so-embarrassing counterpart to the first part. I hope the content of the story will also be something I am not ashamed of.

　By the way, I started tweeting as an escape from reality when I was in a tight spot before the deadline. As a newbie, I don't quite understand this medium that simultaneously tests my simultaneity and improvisation skills, but if you're interested, I've registered my name as it is, so please look for me.

　From an editorial point of view, Sasamoto's next publication is "ARIEL09" (Sonorama Novels). The Space Shuttle, which started its operation with great fanfare in 1981, is scheduled to retire by the end of this year, and the last flight of a Japanese astronaut is scheduled to be completed while I am writing this volume. I have to do something about that as well as the second part.

　See you in the next one.

　Anyway, it looks like I can't put the date in this time either. I hate the progress of Golden Week, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.

Yuichi Sasamoto

Afterword (KADOKAWA version)

　The jet-black shipwreck after nine years.

　Oh no, I've completely forgotten the story. ←That's my impression after rereading it for the first time in a while for the author's proofreading.

　And of course, the author has completely forgotten how he was going to proceed with the story after this. I guess that's OK, because what the author has to think about is not the story he has written, but the story he has to write in the future,

　As has already been announced, I have been ordered to create a new book. The first part of the book is almost ready, so I will start writing as I think of it and hope that the rest will come out as usual, with momentum and happenings as usual. I've managed up to now, so I'm sure I'll manage. I am the one who has to manage it, and I have mastered the art of forcing myself to manage it after working on it for such a long time, so don't worry.

　And if everything goes as planned, Miniskirt Space Pirates 13, or rather Super Miniskirt Space Pirates 1, should be completed long before the scheduled publication month. Will Sasamoto (and the editorial staff) be able to welcome the new year in peace?

Based on my past experience, I feel that I can make a very detailed prediction, but even if I miss the bull's-eye and fail to hit the target, it will not make much difference to the predicted future.

　And now and in the past, I can only write as much as I write. It's been thirty-five years since I first started writing, and when I was young, I had the illusion that if I became a veteran, I would be able to write manuscripts easily, but the older I got, the more difficult it became.

　I heard a quote from a musician on FM once. "The first album comes out easily, because you have accumulated so much. The second album is very difficult because you have to create all the songs from a blank sheet of paper. And the eleventh album is harder than the tenth."

　It's the same for writers. It is easier to continue a series than start a new series from scratch because the characters and world have already been created, but I still believe in the words of a great author who has been writing for many years: "Don't be stingy with your ideas. Write what you think is the most interesting at the time." I put in a story without thinking about the time and effort required for later development or how to summarize the story, and when I have the luxury of choosing the development, I choose the one that looks interesting.

　Growing up is also to grow old. And getting older also means that your body has been used for many years and has become tired in many ways. Even our eyesight becomes less clear, and we become weaker when we drink.

　When I was younger, I could start working after dinner and have a decent amount of work by the early hours of the morning, but now I can't. The only way to concentrate my limited energy and work efficiently is to start while I still have energy.

　So when do I have the energy? Whether you wake up from sleep or not, have breakfast, drink a cup of coffee, and get to work. There are only so many hours in a day that a person can concentrate on work, and there is a limit to the amount of energy we can use in a day, so we put in work while we still have energy.

　The last time I was writing Jet-Black Shipwreck, I would go out to a family restaurant in the early afternoon and work until my PC battery ran out, and then I would go out and rent a place to work that was a 30-minute walk away. Now, it's the snowy season and it's getting hard to get around on foot, so I'll be working from home until spring.

　So, I'm going back to work on the main part of the project. Hopefully, I will be able to report on it’s smooth progress.

December 18, 2018

Yuichi Sasamoto

This is a new edition of "Miniskirt Space Pirates 4: The Jet-Black Shipwreck" published by Asahi Novels in May 2010, with additions and corrections, and a new cover.



Yuichi Sasamoto

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!

Noriyuki Matsumoto

Worked for a game company for about 10 years. After that, he became a freelance illustrator, working on illustrations for light novels and other works. Currently, his main activity is manga. His representative works include "Rin - Noriyuki Matsumoto Art Collection" (Enterbrain), "Tsubame Yodamari Shoujo Kiko" (Tokuma Shoten), and "Minami Kamakura High School Girls Bicycle Club" (Mac Garden).

A cover of a book

Description automatically generated

1. TL note: The translation seems to be accurate, but the numbers are wrong. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. TL note: “wash your neck” is short for “wash your neck for the executioner’s axe”. i.e., “prepare to die”. I left it in for the flavor. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)