Can Ci Pin | The Defective

Author: Priest

Ship: Charismatic dumb space baby scientist x Calculating space mafia boss asshole

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# Book 3 - Tide of the Raging Waves

## Chapter 59 - The Art of Deception

The current state of the space station could be described in one simple phrase: All hell broke loose.

Lu Bixing’s ‘ready in 20 minutes’ was clearly too generous.

The streets of the residential area were filled with crowds of people screaming and crying like toads after a rainstorm. Rumors of the pirates had spread like wildfire, igniting the fear and panic in everyone's hearts, from the young to the elderly. Some were yelling, some were crying, and even children were hiding behind the cold doorways of mech dock, watching adults run around like headless chickens in a pit of fire. Even the group of elderly that were planning on celebrating a peaceful night for the new year were scrunched up together as they looked up at the night sky in despair.

And as expected, the armed forces of the space station dropped the ball at the last minute.

In the midst of chaos, the Golden Warriors and Iron Knights ran into each other and picked up another heated fight amongst themselves. Creative phrases like ‘dirty substances of the digestion tank’ and ‘butt mosquitos’ made their rounds between the two teams. Some of the older members of the armed forces were stuck behind the civilian crowd and panicked; another group of people took the opportunity to jump onto the launching platform and flew off with their mechs.

Fifteen pirate mechs physically turned the entire space station into a real-life horror movie in less than one night; if this was on the Silver Fortress, Commander Lin would shoot them all dead this instant.

White was still desperately trying to reclaim order in the crowd when someone pulled his shirt collar from the back and picked him up. The pubescent boy yelped in pain as he got dragged out of the crowd with his feet off the ground; before he could react, he found himself dragged to the Model 3 where his peers were already waiting.

“Get in.” Lin Jingheng dropped White on the ground and pointed towards the Model 3’s passenger entrance, “Where’s your teacher? He was gone before I could grab him; call him up and tell him to come over.”

Mint quickly sent a communication request to Lu Bixing’s personal device, but was rejected by the receiving end. The next moment, the multimedia screen in the main plaza lit up as Lu Bixing’s voice rang from the announcements.

Perhaps due to the state of emergency, Lu Bixing didn’t attempt to sell some pep talk this time and went straight to the point.

“If I were you guys,” Lu Bixing turned on the scouting lights to the maximum and directed them towards the few mechs in the sky heading out, “I’d shoot these guys down right now before they can go any further.”

Foucault and Weasel both stopped and looked up from their arguments, and the dock became completely silent. There will always be people who have their own hidden agenda at any given time, whether it’s to fight for authority, to prove one’s worth, or to simply protect their family...and then there will be the few who will run away first when things get natsy.

The escapees were made of people from both teams, there was no point in mocking the other at this point.

Weasel’s face turned green and he shot a glance at Foucault, who also returned a look of mutual understanding. Within the next few seconds, they both took their own men out to the launching station to bring back the escapees. The mental networks of the mech still docked began expanding as pilots got on and pierced right through the slower mechs that were still within reach from ground.

As for the ones that already left the range of the networks, Foucault personally chased them down with a group of soldiers by launching her mech out at maximum speed. Foucault mercilessly launched a missile even before completely flying out of the artificial atmosphere; as one of the most experienced members of the armed forces, her missile went straight for the bull’s eye. The escapees up front were too busy trying to get away that they forgot to turn on their shields, instantly turning into fireworks the moment Foucault’s missile hit.

Ten sailing days away, the invaders were closing in menacingly; yet the first shot of rebellion from the space station was pointed towards their own people.

Dead silence wiped through the entire station as they witnessed the shot, then a small voice broke out: “...Are...are they dead?”

The word “die” began spreading among the crowd again, but Lu Bixing cut in before chaos ensues: “If you guys don’t know who to listen to right now, then listen to me...any armed forces that aren’t already on a mech yet, follow me and get into position on the launching deck. Also, please check here for frontline news.”

Saturday’s photo of the enemies appeared on the multimedia screen as Lu Bixing spoke. From the satellite photos, there were only about 8-9 ships that could be clearly seen while the rest were only blurred silhouettes from behind.

“I’m only going to say it once here. As of now, Prince Cayley has not sent out a heavy combat fleet, this is only a small scouting team of 15 mechs. This is half the size of our patrolling team. The station is currently being protected by the anti-detection system, so it’s not easy for them to locate us.”

Lu Bixing walked up the launch station as he finished. The mech dock was much quieter than the residential area; Lu Bixing stood atop the dock, his figure almost intimidating under the harsh lighting.

He waved towards the outer circle of the dock and commanded: “Unrelated personnel, please move out the way.”

The people on the station were used to listening to his orders from fixing the multimedia screens and energy system and all instinctively stepped aside.

Lu Bixing made his way towards a mech and continued speaking through the announcements: “Today was supposed to be the last day I delivered supplies to Saturday because he planned on disbanding the Self-Defense Squad once he returned. In other words, even though the pirates are just a small team of scouts right now, the only people on the frontline are a small group of people that are about to be disbanded. So what are you all waiting for? For the pirates to locate the space station or until you all die?”

Lu Bixing’s mech entered the runway as he continued his speech. Then, as if the lost lambs of the space station found a light of direction, other mechs began to follow him one by one.

On the other side of the dock, Lin Jingheng led the students onto the Model 3 and entered the runway.

“Zhanlu, mark Lu Bixing’s mech and keep an eye on him.” Lin Jingheng commanded.

“Understood.” Zhanlu said, “I’m sure Mr. Monoeyed Hawk is thinking the same. He is currently 16 standard mech distances away from you.”

With Lu Bixing’s words, Foucault and Weasel’s forces that were at odds with each other were now forced to work together.

Not too far behind, Lin Jingheng carefully expanded his senses within the mental network and watched the mess of a fleet in front of him. He ignored the confused students beside him and quietly counted his heartbeat inside the network to relax.

After a few minutes, he silently let out a sigh of relief as he felt himself slowly calming down from the roller coaster of emotions earlier in his room. He was also relieved that the pirates came in at the perfect time.

The three month promise was coming to an end, and Lin Jingheng needed to pour some cold water to cool down Lu Bixing’s head as he became increasingly more attached to the station. However, to Commander Lin’s surprise, Mr. Lu had started with a spoonful of cake and a completely off-topic conversation. Thankfully there was a crazy man outside starting fire everywhere, otherwise Lin Jingheng wouldn’t know how to continue the conversation.

And the sentence Lu Bixing wasn’t able to finish...Of course, Lin Jingheng knew what it was and wished he could pretend he didn’t know anything.

Within a matter of minutes, the long-distance signal Lin sent out had already passed through a number of transfer portals and extended beyond the Eighth Galaxy. Lin Jingheng recollected his thoughts and asked Zhanlu: “How’s the signal?”

Zhanlu: “Signal is stable.”

“Good, connect me to the captain of that Self-Defense Squad.” Lin Jingheng said.

“Obtained access to Captain Saturday’s communication terminal, currently requesting response…”

Saturday had floated in space like a corpse for the past few days and felt as if his whole body had been emptied out. Now, the sudden invasion broke his peace and an adrenaline rush engulfed him like a water fountain. He could feel his whole body tense up as he stared hard into the screen towards the pirate fleet. He wiped off his cold sweat and mumbled in fear: “C-Check again and see if your replica cannons are turned off. Everyone do a double check and see if you all have your armory opened.”

Holiday started fidgeting his necklace nervously and said: “Boss, you already asked three times.”

“Saturday, I’m scared.”

“I’m also...fuck, who’s interrupting?” Suddenly, a connection request popped up and surprised Saturday. He picked it up instinctively until he realized something was off...they’re not within signal range of the space station, so theoretically the only people that could communicate with him were his own teammates and others around him.

But all his teammates were already in the current communication channel, so who could it be?

Saturday jolted and raised his hand to cut off the communication before he could think.

Just then, Commander Lin’s expressionless face appeared on the screen: “I’m Lin Jingheng.”

Saturday almost broke down in relief when he saw the screen and thought backup was here: “Commander Lin, you’re finally here....”

“I’m still at the station.” Lin Jingheng interrupted. “It will take another three hours before I make it over to your place.”

Saturday’s heart sank.

Lin Jingheng continued: “So these 15 pirate mechs are yours.”

“I...I…” Saturday’s head was completely blank, “We can’t...also, they might have backup too, there’s no way I can do it, you know our strength…”

Lin Jingheng smiled a little.

“I don’t know, but you can gamble on it.” He said cooly. “If I can find your corpse after three hours, I might consider giving you a space funeral.”

Saturday looked at him in despair, then realized something different about the commander. While at the station, Lin Jingheng’s impression always felt kind of casual and unrestrained; Saturday would often see the commander walk off to the mech dock in slippers and undried hair during morning training. Yet despite the way he dressed and how cold he tended to be around others, there was always an air of discipline that surrounded Lin Jingheng. While that made him seem intimidating, it never crossed the line to become fearsome.

However, everything changed tonight.

Lin Jingheng’s shirt was neatly buttoned up from his waist up to the collar with no wrinkles. His short boots held firmly onto his legs; his hands were covered by white gloves, showing no skin aside from his face. Yet what shocked Saturday the most were the pair of grey eyes from the screen; he could feel a hint of frightening madness from those pupils, like a monster that had just woken from a deep slumber slowly cleaning its claws.

“Stand straight,” Lin Jingheng said. “What does the Self-Defense Squad see themselves as?”

Saturday hurriedly pulled himself up and answered with a red face: “A-A sharp blade.”

Lin Jingheng nooded and said: “Not bad, you’re not afraid to think. But I’ll have to make a correction; at your current level, even if you all were employed as private security on a distant planet, you are all only capable of doing back-end maintenance jobs.”

Saturday looked at the screen stupidly as he just got degraded from a blade down to a screwdriver.

“But screwdrivers can still kill.” Lin Jingheng paused for a second. “Remember my words, I’ll only say this once: don’t pick fights head-on with the fleet. I’ve already demonstrated your limitations multiple times during the drills but you never took it to heart. The average sync rate of your squad is currently at 59%. On the battlefield, if you don’t have an average of at least 80% you’re basically free loot, so there’s no way you can be the main offensive team. Scouting squads may have a lower sync rate, but it will not be lower than 75%. Thankfully, both sides are only made of smaller mechs, so just keep in mind the range and don’t let your networks overlap.”

Saturday pinched himself and forcefully calmed his internal panic.

Lin Jingheng continued: “The anti-detection system is your final trump card. Long-distance guerilla style battle is your only chance to survive. Do you know how the ancients captured large wild animals?”

Saturday gulped: “Baits and traps.”

A flash of a smile appeared on Lin Jingheng’s face: “Not bad. But remember, your prey right now isn’t a lion or tiger, it’s hyenas and snakes. You need to be patient and find a convincing bait, one good enough to even deceive your own teammates, or you will fall into your enemy’s trap...I’ve already sent out the first bait for you.”

Saturday: “Wh--”

“Boss, they’re moving!”

“I’m speaking to you through long-distance connection; these types of communications will create a large energy wave that can even pass through protected portals. The enemy probably detected this energy wave already, so cut off the connection now.” Lin Jingheng then sent a protected code to Saturday. “When necessary, you can use this code to enter emergency communication. If you have any last words for anyone, I can pass it on for you. See you in three hours.”

The pirates seemed to have already located a portal hidden within the camouflage of the anti-detection system and were moving towards it. Saturday’s mind blanked out for two seconds before he yelled into the team channel: “Don’t just fucking stand there you fools, retreat at least 10 kilometers away from Portal 006 and prepare your missiles!”

Mint spoke up after listening into the whole conversation with Saturday: “Commander Lin, I saw the simulation you made of this battle in the control room before.”

Lin Jingheng turned around and glanced at her in slight surprise, but Mint almost swallowed her next words at the gaze: “Oh? You can actually read it now?”

“Not at the time. I looked up a lot of information and asked Professor Lu too.” Mint answered anxiously. “Scouting teams for pirates are like disposable tools for the main fleet that can be sacrificed. All of them have fully-equipped recording systems that can record and analyze everything once they enter battle while sending all information directly back to the main fleet. The main fleet can then analyze the enemy in real-time; and if the first scouting fleet gets demolished, they will send out a second ‘sacrifice’ fleet based off of the firepower data they’ve gathered off their enemies. These are the people at the bottom most rank in the pirate fleets, and even if they fail their missions they will usually deal enough damage to the enemy fleets until the main pirate fleet comes in to take them on while their enemy is still recovering.”

Lin Jingheng’s eyes locked on the large communication map laid on the floor of the Model 3. Somewhere outside the shape that was the station a bright dot blinked rhythmically.

He praised her insincerely: “You sure study hard.”

Mint took a deep breath: “If you actually wanted to save them, you would've had Professor Lu find a way to block the pirates’ signals, and then warped over to Saturday’s location to defeat the enemies as soon as possible. The people on the station can’t do this, but you can, Commander Lin. But instead you chose to let everyone take their time...so...the bait you said that could even deceive their own people, was actually Saturday and his crew, right?”

Lin Jingheng’s cold gaze rested solidly on the little girl before him. The other three students took a step forward around Mint like a bunch of baby chicks huddling up together.

The students were always intimidated by him even when their teacher was around, but had never felt like the man before them would actually hurt them. It was as if they were just looking at a sleepy lion through the glass.

Yet at this moment, Headmaster Lu’s mech was two fleets away from them; by the time the students realized, the glass window that separated them and the lion disappeared, and the freshly woken lion was only standing a few steps away from them.

## Chapter 60 - Primal Alien’s Murderer

Lin Jingheng wasn’t mad; in fact, he even found it a little amusing.

A little more than 6 months ago these kids were only baby animals running around with their minds filled with unrealistic ideas, with a slim chance of growing into a self-sufficient predator in the foreseeable future. And now, these little feral creatures actually learned how to walk and use their measly brains to question others.

Just from this, Lu Bixing and his teachings from the ghetto school of the Eighth Galaxy already proved to have more significant educational value than the Black Orchid Academy’s system.

“So?” Lin Jingheng asked, teasing slightly. “Did your teacher not tell you that they were only able to live an extra three months because they still had value as a bait?”

“But…” Mint opened her mouth to respond only to see White tug on her shirt from the back, making faces and gestures at her to back off. Mint bit her lips and pushed him aside as she took a step forward. “Nobody has the right to determine another person’s value...Hey don’t tug on me, let me talk!”

“Don’t hold her down,” Lin Jingheng said with his arms crossed. “Growing a backbone is necessary.”

“Ever since the genetic revolution of the Old Sidereal Calendar, the Interstellar Union banned all non-medical genetic and human body modifications universally. Thus, the human genes have not changed for thousands of years since, so in the eyes of creation all humans are equal.” Mint choppily recited a segment that sounded like something taken directly from a textbook. “Nobody can decide anyone’s fate.”

Lin Jingheng nodded slightly after her speech and answered: “Yes, a civilian’s life and freedom is an inalienable and inviolable right granted to everyone. This is politically correct, your consciousness and understanding is almost on par with Zhanlu.”

Zhanlu’s voice rang across the Model 3: “Thank you for your praise.”

Lin Jingheng’s gaze lowered as he relaxed his arms and continued: “But listen here, little girl, while rights are inalienable, missiles can attack. Particle cannons can deal damage. Pocket-sized laser guns, button-sized biochips, a few milligrams of terminal virus exist for the purpose of being used by people...is this not true?”

Mint: “...”

“‘Should’ and ‘can’ are two separate concepts. If everyone looks from the perspective of “should I”, Ares Von should’ve already been punished for his sins, I wouldn’t even have to lift a finger.” Lin Jingheng gestured towards Zhanlu, and a cooler filled with non-alcoholic ciders appeared by the walls of the Model 3. “Take whatever you like, now go off and play.”

Unable to convince the commander nor have the ability to send out messages behind his back, the students stepped back down quietly. In order to reach Saturday from there, they could only rely on long-distance connection, which Zhanlu was in charge of. Even putting aside that there was no way for them to obtain access to send out the communication request, Saturday was currently playing a life-or-death game of hide-and-seek with the pirates -- who would risk the threat of exposing their coordinates to the pirates by sending out a signal to Saturday?

Saturday felt like his temples were being stung with many needles.

The Self-Defense Squad had already made their first mistake. They intended to hide out by the transport portal and ambush the pirates by sending them a wave of long-distance missiles the minute they entered the portal; yet, despite knowing theoretically how it works, being able to act upon it was a different story.

The fluctuation of energy waves around transfer portals was immense, therefore any sort of high-energy particles that passed through, regardless of how powerful it was, would always face a certain level of deflection. The amount of deflection was dependant on the scale and type of transfer portal and the weight of the mech passing through the portal; there was no quick and accurate way to calculate exactly how much deviation there would be, and soldiers often made up for it with experiences and precise handling built upon battle after battle...The Self-Defense Squad may have had some experience and a good sense of handling their weapons, but shooting out a missile through a transfer portal was still much beyond their skill level.

Saturday just yelled to get his team ready, and the Self-Defense Squad members that were already too swallowed up in fear completely misheard the orders. In panic, a few of the members pressed the button and sent out at least five missiles towards the transfer portal; the missiles deviated from the portal and bounced off to the side like shooting stars.

They’d officially screwed up. They didn’t just beat the bushes to provoke their enemy, they’d also exposed their coordinates.

The pirate squad, while small, had incredible reflexes and mobility. Once they captured the energy waves, they immediately spread out and reorganized into a ferocious hunting team. Pirates, unlike the wastes of the space station, were used to sailing outside the realms of the eight galaxies and were more than capable of cutting off the entire Self-Defense Squad the moment their mental networks touched.

Saturday cried into the main channel: “Run!”

When Lin Jingheng took them out in his Model 3, it was usually as easily done as sweeping up fallen leaves on the ground to the commander. The Self-Defense Squad also became conditioned to run like wild animals the moment they heard Saturday yell ‘Run’ into the channel.

Lin Jingheng wouldn’t randomly drag them out and kill them, but the pirates were not the commander they knew.

At the same time, the scouting squad on the pirate’s side were also shocked. Normally in a situation where both sides seemed to have the same level of firepower, even if one side ran out of fuel or energy they would still choose to continue firing at the enemy as they retreated. Sometimes if the enemy had a harder shell like a proper military fleet, they would even attempt to fend off their pursuers by taking over their mental networks.

The fearsome and experienced fighters of the space pirates stood dumbfounded as they watched their enemy fleet run like cowards. They were currently stuck in an energy field maze with a...very usual enemy.

The scouting squad were stumped for a few moments and missed a golden opportunity to chase after them, allowing the Self-Defense Squad to successfully make their escape through the transfer portal. Lu Bixing’s anti-detection system quickly and efficiently covered Saturday’s traces behind a web of intricate maps, creating a second stalemate between the two sides.

In the beginning, both sides were just playing blind hide-and-seek with each other behind the anti-detection system; however, the pirate scouting squad’s decoding technology quickly found a small loophole in the system and cracked the outer layer to find the hidden terminals within an hour.

Saturday took his entire team and performed an award-winning act of deception without even realizing they were only the opening act.

The pirates were cautious at first, but after seeing the pitiful fleet run around like scared animals a few times, the small pirate squad learned their enemy’s true strength. They began chasing the Self-Defense Squad more aggressively and quickly switched the table from the defense to offense, striking like a wild beast ready to catch a helpless prey.

On the other hand, the Self-Defense Squad could only run from their pursuers. While attempting to cover a teammate that almost got disconnected, Saturday took a direct hit from the pirate squad, breaking over 90% of his mech’s shield. He took out a bottle of cold water from the cooler inside the box of supplies, took a sip and dumped the rest of it over his head to cool down his tense nerves. Saturday shook his head violently and spoke into the channel: “We can’t just keep running here, we’ll need to fight back.”

“But how?”

“Do what Commander Lin told us, set up a trap and ambush them.” Saturday paused for a moment to think before continuing, “Listen up guys. Under normal circumstances, they wouldn’t know that the access to the anti-detection system is code-protected. They’ve pursued us for so long already, it’s about time they got tired of it and are looking to steal a mech from our side so that they can have access to the system. My shield’s already halfway broken, so I can be the bait…”

The channel exploded into a sea of complaints before he could finish: “No way, what are you gonna do if they get you?”

“Who’s gonna give us orders if you pass out?”

“You might actually die if they hack into your mental network!”

Saturday yelled for them to stop at least three times as they all spoke, but nobody wanted to back down. For the first time in his life, he finally understood why the cold Commander Lin Jingheng was always so unreasonably arrogant: when there are too many cooks in the kitchen, no food gets served on the table. If a commander is too compromising, a fleet would never be able to get anything done.

Saturday took a deep breath and yelled once more into the channel: “Can you all shut the fuck up and listen to me already!?”

A short silence finally graced the communication channel.

“Those are scouting squads, they’re professionals at this hacking thing, got it?” Saturday said coldly. “It’s only a matter of time before they decode the system; we can hide while we can due to our territorial advantage right now, but later? Are we just gonna run for our lives? I don’t care if you all just decide to run, but my question is where do you run to? I doubt any of us can survive a month outside of the space station, are you guys okay with this? Are you!?”

He remembered the three months of nightmarish training when he would get up before the sky was bright and drag his team out to train. They all thought they had done everything they could and could protect their homes, only to be crushed by the harsh reality that they were nothing but ants to the vast outer space. At this realization, they were all forced to overcome their grief.

Saturday’s voice grew louder as he spoke, and by the end of it he could almost hear his own voice crack.

Perhaps some people are like this; the quieter and softer they talk, their spirits also mellow out. If anything were to instigate a louder and more aggressive response, even if it’s just a fight, the same people’s spirits can be reignited by their environment.

“The anti-detection system is a maze,” Saturday finally calmed his voice as he pulled up the route map from the system. “Look, the transfer portal closest to the enemy right now is portal 0014, and right beside it is a refraction point. We have the anti-detection system behind us, we can round behind them before they notice. I’ll go out and bait them, and I’m sure they will try and take over my mental network in order to hack into the anti-detection system’s database. At this point, they will lower their defenses, so you guys that are ambushing them from behind can focus all your firepower at them...there’s only one chance, you all have to hit the target! Hit however many you can, if you can’t kill off everyone, don’t hesitate and run, are we clear?”

A member asked: “What about you? Your shield’s already broken.”

“As long as I log off the moment before the enemy attempts to hack in my mental network, I won’t get hurt...I’ve succeeded many times during the simulation battles, otherwise I would’ve already been braindead from the number of times Commander Lin kicked me off.” Saturday said. “Commander said, scouting squads usually have an average sync rate of 75%, and I believe him. My highest sync rate also hits above 75%, so in case any of you guys fuck up, I still have a chance to reconnect to my mental network and run off...is anyone else here able to do that? Holiday, what’s your mental network sync rate?”

Holiday sulked back: “R-right now? 60%.”

“And your highest?”

Holiday then proudly announced: “...61%”

These low-level players usually have a very common virtue: they don’t even have a chance to outshine their own average performances.

Saturday shot back: “And you’re still trying to spew out bullshit, remember who’s the boss here!”

When the Self-Defense Squad was just a newly formed unit and Saturday was just a fresh new player in the game, he had a lot of grand ideas and plans for his team. He once tried to ask Lu Bixing how to get more people to follow and acknowledge him as a leader.

Lu Bixing thought about it for a second, and then answered: “Nobility, prestige, threat and manipulation, choose one out of the four and there will be someone that will follow you. If you don’t have any strengths and experience, or if you don’t have the heart of steel and no money, you’re only left with words of persuasion to lure people in. But remember, people are going to be here because you’ve convinced them to. They’re not here to roleplay emperor and his lackeys with you, don’t hide behind others like your old boss, and always lead them when you need to.”

You were right, Professor Lu.

Saturday laid his hands on the communication equipment, let out a deep breath from his lungs and said: “Let’s go.”

“Target located.” The pirate scouts were quickly exchanging information.

“Chase after them.”

Another game of chase began.

This time, it looked like the Self-Defense Squad weren’t able to find the transfer portal in time and scattered out in the midst of space. With only 15 mechs in the squad, going separate ways was not an option for the pirate scouts, so naturally they singled in on Saturday: “That mech’s shield is already damaged, and judging from the way it’s moving, it’s suspected that the internal engine may also be damaged.”

Saturday purposely turned off a few of the mech’s propellers and only kept one side, running around with his ‘broken leg’ away from the pirates.

Within less than five minutes, the single-side propeller already overheated from the high acceleration of the mech. The internal alarms rang louder and louder as repair notifications kept popping up. Saturday ignored the signals and shifted his gaze towards the anti-detection system, surprised to see that his hopeless teammates were all heading towards the ambush spot. Their brains were still intact, and were actually heading in the right direction.

As the pirates began closing in towards Saturday, the small squad split into two while a missile locked on Saturday’s mech.

Anyone that’s been through a real battlefield in space knows that every missile on a mech is valuable, so most missile shots are fatal on the battlefield.

Saturday howled as he saw the missile aimed towards his mech and desperately changed his course midway. The shock from the mental network vibrated into his ears as the missile barely scratched the edge of his mech. With his lack of experience, Saturday’s turn became too wide and he found himself almost making a full circle around the same spot. This slight delay gave the pirates the opportunity to close in on both sides.

Saturday glanced towards his sync rate: 75%... he was currently at his best.

The moment the pirates closed in, the enemy’s mental network expanded rapidly and hacked into Saturday’s network.

Saturday thought he was used to being wiped off the network, but only now realized that a simulation could not compare against a real battle. During simulations, his vision would blacken and he found himself knocked out of his own network before he even realized he’d entered the Model 3’s range, as if someone just hit him with a pole while walking alone at night.

Yet now, the mental capacity of the pirates was about the same level as him. When they hacked in, they would do it in organized groups, one wave after another until their enemy was completely overwhelmed.

Saturday held onto his network desperately wave after wave, feeling like numerous people ganged up to take turns beating his head with a hammer. Slowly but surely, Saturday’s sync rate dropped from 75% to 55%.

Saturday watched his teammates close in to the amush spot on the anti-detection system as he held in the blood inside his mouth.

His sync rate was dropping steadily. 54%...53%...

While the waves of invasion continued, Saturday still needed to keep the balance of his mech and avoid physical attacks from the other side of his mech. At 51%, he was no longer able to maintain complete control of his mech.

In that instant, Saturday yelled into his mech and logged right off his mental network, allowing the pirates to take over. At the same time, 29 little mechs appeared behind the pirate squad.

Before the pirates could respond, a wave of missiles fired towards them like a bunch of motorboats cutting through a body of water. Saturday took the opportunity to reconnect onto his mental network, then opened his armory and fired a missile towards the pirates. His missile pierced right into the body of a mech, forcing it out of its line like a kite blown by a violent wind before it exploded into another mini fireworks.

“I got one!” Saturday exclaimed, feeling his adrenaline rushing. “I got one!”

Yet the inexperienced Self-Defense Squad didn’t manage to eliminate all the pirates in this attack, as half of the missiles missed their targets. To their surprise, the remaining five pirate mechs still had power to fight back and didn’t run like they expected.

The communication channel was now filled with sounds of explosions, and everyone’s voices began to cut off. The remote assault team of the Self-Defense Squad ran a bit too far ahead and caught a few surviving pirates, starting another storm of cannons and missiles criss-crossing. At the end, no more strategy or plans existed on the chaotic battlefield as it turned into another round of physical combat.

And the members of the Self-Defense Squad that had never pulled a trigger before were all forced to familiarize themselves with their armory at the kill-or-be-killed situation of this merciless battle.

A missile shot towards Saturday; unable to dodge in time, Saturday instinctively turned on his shield...to find that his damaged shield was no longer responding.

“Oh shit.” Saturday thought as he saw the shape of the missile through his mental network.

The feeling of being crushed inside a mech was way beyond Saturday’s imagination as his head slowly blanked out.

Just then, a small mech in front of Saturday and took the missile head-on. Saturday’s eyes widened; the mech’s shield shone intensely as the rest of the mech slowly melted from the high energy of the missile. The armory at the tail of the mech compressed into the body, and a dot of light peeked from the center of the armory like the sun rising from the horizon, then expanded into the overarching sky...the little mech that shielded itself between Saturday and the missile self-destructed.

Everything vanished in the radiating light.

The mechs around it trembled in the explosion. Saturday didn’t even have a chance to see who it was; the fire in his eyes grew rabid as he charged towards the pirates and fired three missiles in a row: “I’m going to kill all of you!”

Humans gamble their lives in the vast galaxy; deep love and hatred swallow up their bodies and souls...yet in the eyes of the universe, they are merely little glares of light in the darkness.

The Prince of Cayley, Ares Von, watched the battle coldly as if he was viewing a movie.

His half-covered face could not express any complicated emotions, always making him seem a little more serious than he really was. He asked slowly with a rusty voice: “Why is there energy turbulence in this area, has it been analysed yet??”

“Your highness, we’re suspecting that this is an area that was laid with an ambush. It’s equipped with an extremely powerful anti-detection system.”

“Extremely powerful?” Ares Von’s metal fingers folded together eerily with his human hands. “An extremely powerful anti-detection system with no barriers? Why are we able to still watch this battle live?”

The subordinate beside him remained in his bowing position wordlessly in fear.

“Such familiar style, such familiar traps.” Ares Von slowly stood up and pulled his subordinate up carefully. “I think we found Primal Alien’s murderer.”

## Chapter 61 - The Silver Ten

The subordinate looked at him in horror.

Ares Von’s metal fingers scratched eerily against the skin under his subordinate’s chin like a master playing with a cat.

“Why, do you not understand?” he asked.

When the galaxy’s maddest space pirate wasn’t live broadcasting his deeds of blowing up planets, he was like a fragile old man that couldn’t even walk properly without a cane. If one were to cover up his terrible face, his figure would almost seem like a kind elderly man.

“Primal Alien has been a little too spoiled these years, to the point where he’s gotten a little nonsensical. But he’s always known his boundaries.” Ares Von spoke as he tapped his cane on the floor rhythmically, “He disappeared in the wasteland of death, but why? The spatial environment of the wasteland is extremely complex and dangerous, anyone with a functioning brain wouldn’t dare venture into that place alone to chase down their enemy. Even if he had reasons to go, he should’ve at least sent me a message, right? But he didn’t. In other words, he was confident that he wouldn’t lose.”

The subordinate turned to the screen of the battle between the scouting squad and the tiny fleet of mechs. He questioned in surprise: “Like them?”

Within a short span of time, the Self-Defense Squad already saw a loss of a handful of mechs.

Hunting as a wolf in sheep’s clothing happened often in the lawless lands of space pirates, but nobody had ever heard of voluntarily becoming the prey of the hunt. If this was all just playacting, it was far too realistic--or perhaps these mechs were all pilotless machines?

Ares Von ignored his subordinate’s confusion, and mumbled quietly to himself: “How can a fleet as large as that possibly get annihilated to the point where nothing is left? If the enemy didn’t have a superdimensional heavy mech fleet, then it’s possible that Primal Alien was backstabbed by someone...perhaps they blew up the entire nuclear armory of the mech, or a transfer portal level of super high-energy source. But even if a transfer portal were to explode, it isn’t possible to completely wipe out a full fleet; except we never received any alarms or messages from them, which meant that they continued to pursue their enemy even after suffering a large damage to their fleet. Primal Alien isn’t stupid, which only leads to the conclusion that their enemy looked extremely weak, something like this little squad of small mechs.”

Just then, the sound of hasty footsteps came closer as a man walked right in: “Prince Ares, I heard that your subordinates found an armed…”

“Merciless and manipulating, do you know who this reminds me of? We’ve seen it multiple times in the Union.” Ares Von continued on as if he didn’t notice another person barging in, “Didn’t the Silver Ten run off on their own ever since Lin Jingheng died? They haven’t done anything these years, maybe some of them ended up in the deserted lands of the Eighth Galaxy.”

The man that barged in immediately stopped at this comment, and pronounced loudly: “What are you talking about? The Silver Ten!?”

The intruder was a tall and thin man that looked a little longer than middle aged and was dressed in a way that struck a sharp contrast with the space mech. His long hair that reached down to his waist was tied loosely in a ribbon, and he wore a collared long robe lined with lace along the edges. Beneath the robes were old-fashioned breeches; this outfit was said to be a mix of ancient Baroque style and Eastern Han style that only the most knowledgeable of ancient historians could wear. While it may be uncommon to see anyone dressed like this nowadays, it’s almost a standard in the Anti-Utopia Society. The Society, also known as the A.U.S., were notorious for their obsession with restoring the ancient ways; in order to become closer to nature and the ancients, there are even people that would voluntarily dress themselves as fruits and berries.

“Good evening, Prophet Roye.” Ares Von finally turned around slowly and responded to the intruder. “I don’t think this is a squadron of the Silver Ten, it may only be a few people. Ever since the fall of the Union, the Silver Ten had voiced out their objection against the government once even though they were immediately forced into political compromise. But the Union’s used to playing two-faced with their political opponents, it’s possible that they would take an opportunity to execute their personal vendetta against the Silver Ten and separate the elite force into different galaxies five years later. It wouldn’t be surprising if some of them ended up wandering off to places further out, don’t you think?”

When Ares Von escaped to the outer zones of the eight galaxies, he aligned himself with the infamous Anti-Utopia Society space pirate organization. Unlike most space pirate organizations, faith was the central source of unity within the AUS. Every fleet of the AUS would be overlooked by a ‘Prophet’ from the main headquarters, who was in charge of supervising the fleets and preaching regularly to the space pirates. Their main job however, was to keep an eye on the space pirates under their control and make sure they upheld the Society’s anti-technology teachings.

This “Baroque Hanfu” enthusiast was the commanding Prophet of Prince Cayley’s fleet.

The Prophet’s face darkened as he fell into a moment of thinking, then responded in agreement: “Yes, your reasoning is correct. We’ve entered the Eighth Galaxy for quite some time now, and if it really was a squadron of the Silver Ten, they would’ve already turned the entire galaxy upside-down instead of hiding in the dark. Prince Ares, what are you planning on doing?”

Ares Von lifted an eyebrow, drawing a hint of bloodthirst onto his calm face: “Blow them up, of course.”

The Prophet stood dumbly for a few moments before he remembered that this madman in front of him had a history of blowing up three planets in a row, and felt a headache come on: “No, you can’t do that. The upper level is very interested in the missing Silver Ten, so if your theory is correct, this may be the only chance we have to obtain information from them - you must not kill them!”

Ares Von licked his dry lips without a word.

From his expression, the Prophet knew that it was useless to try and talk logic with him. As if scared of having his skin bitten off, the Prophet gestured towards the Prince and said, “You stay here then and don’t move, I’ll bring some men and handle this myself.”

Ares Von’s expression grew grim and turned coldly towards the Prophet: “And what do you mean by this?”

“I’m not trying to steal your spotlight, we’re a team together.” The Prophet’s voice softened as he sincerely gave a pat on Ares Von’s shoulders, “The last time you took revenge, the Society had lots of complaints that your action was too extreme, so I took it up for you because I understand you. So now, can you also try and understand me? If we lose our only clue here, I won’t be able to report back to the top, my friend.”

Ares Von gave him a short glance as his gaze softened up. He then reluctantly returned a small touch on the Prophet’s shoulders with the back of his hand and said: “My friend.”

The Prophet smiled and said: “For life and nature.”

Ares Von’s expression darkened as he mumbled back: “......Life and nature.”

The Prophet turned and ran out the door to summon his men, in fear that the only clue he had to the Silver Ten would get destroyed within the next minute. After hearing the Prophet take off with his squad, Ares Von’s helpless expression from before slowly turned into a haunting smile. He turned toward the subordinate at his side and said, “I heard the followers of this shady cult always gather around to meditate, but aren’t they just smoking pot?”

His subordinate responded: “Yes, they said it could help them concentrate during meditation and reach the ultimate truth.”

“No wonder their brains are becoming more dysfunctional.” Ares Von chuckled softly, “Since the ‘sacrificial lamb’ already volunteered themselves into the position, then let them lure out the bigger prey. We’ll see who we manage to bring out, and we’ll take the rest of the loot.”

It was past 1 A.M. at night, and the new year arrived suddenly but quietly during this time of chaos. Through the mental network, Lu Bixing could see the Model 3 not too far off behind him. The large body of the heavy mech was almost like a mini planet that a small mech could hide behind.

Lu Bixing was sure that Lin knew what he was going to say back in his room. He closed his eyes and replayed the scene in his head; he was sitting in Lin’s room, and the alarm suddenly went off while he was talking. The man before him held his hand down and interrupted him. Rethinking about it now, that person also seemed like he was trying to stay calm, his expression also showed a hint of panic and unease.

Panic...what kind of response was this?

Lu Bixing used to firmly believe that Lin Jingheng had a crush on him, but after thinking it through calmly, perhaps he was wrong this whole time.

An old question that he’d thought had died off resurrected in his mind. Lu Bixing thought: “Am I really getting too ahead of myself? Well, that’d be a little awkward.”

Just then, Foucault’s message came in and dragged his consciousness back to reality. Lu Bixing rubbed his face and swallowed his own awkwardness: “Hey, I’m here.”

Foucault’s face popped up on his screen. While she was still less than 200 years old and looked relatively young, the wrinkles around her eyes revealed her age.

“You didn’t arrange for the residents on the station to relocate,” Foucault said. “Is it because you believe we can fight off this wave of pirates?”

“I’d like to answer yes,” Lu Bixing responded with a forced smile. “But even if did say that you wouldn’t believe me, right?”

“I’m not young anymore, so I’ll be straight with you. Don’t try and fool me with those words you use with Saturday and the young ones.” Foucault’s eyes curved a little into a slight smile, then immediately disappeared as she continued. “The population of the station is a little less than a million people, that’s too many. We don’t have a large starship for travel, and even with the mechs and merchant ships combined, we’d be lucky to be able to even take a fourth of the population. The pirates aren’t going to let us go that easily, so the majority of the people are going to be left on the station, right?”

Lu Bixing let out a long sigh. While the youth were busy chasing their dreams, the elderly were the ones that would calculate the cost of protecting their own homes. Lu Bixing responded: “You’re right, Miss Foucault, it’s an accurate estimate.”

Foucault asked: “So you didn’t say anything because you think it’s too cruel?”

“No.” Lu Bixing shook his head. Suddenly he was no longer that friendly ‘Professor Lu’ that most people knew him as. ‘Professor Lu’ was a model teacher and person, always positive and full of energy, ready to pour out some soup of the day to any starving student that would buy into his pep talk about becoming successful in life.

The Lu Bixing now was an objective audience that was almost even a little cold and detached. He paused for a few moments before finally speaking: “The pirates came too quickly, it’s too late to even fabricate a beautiful lie. If even one single person notices the problem you just pointed out, the station is done for good. Nobody can handle the situation down there; we won’t even need to wait for the pirates to come, they’ll self-destruct on their own...Spencer must’ve also considered this problem, which was why he left the merchant ships there without even bothering to keep up with their maintenance, because he knew everyone was done for.”

“Spencer is a smart man, but sometimes a little too smart...Anyway,” Foucault’s expression grew more serious. “I don’t think there’s only one wave of space pirates - if the scouts all get annihilated, the bigger fleets will come in after them. I’ve been to the black markets of the outer zones many times, so I know how they are. If we go against the pirates, there would be no way we could win. Professor Lu, you’ve already made the decision for us, so can you tell us how we can survive when we hit the frontlines?”

Lu Bixing gave her a long look and said, “Miss, did you speak with Weasel already?”

Just then, Weasel’s communication connected into their channel: “Professor Lu, you’re the one that created the anti-detection system. Nobody knows it better than you, so we’ll listen to everything you say.”

Lu Bixing paused for a moment, then asked: “You will obey unconditionally?”

Under the pressure of life-threatening danger, Weasel and Foucault gave each other a glance and nodded in unison.

“I’ll need you guys to listen to Commander Lin’s arrangements,” Lu Bixing said. “It doesn’t matter if his commands are unreasonable, don’t doubt him and carry out the orders immediately. He may not be able to save everyone’s lives, but he will be able to minimize the death count.”

Weasel hesitated a little and noted: “About that...Professor Lu, I don’t think I’m in the right place to say this but...Commander Lin, he’s a great commander, y’know, an aristocrat from Wolto. He doesn’t...he doesn’t seem like someone that would really care about our lives…”

“He took you guys out because he’s treating you all as his soldiers.” Lu Bixing said “It doesn’t matter whether he’s a passionate person or a cold or antisocial person, anyone that doesn’t care about their soldiers’ lives can maybe become a suicide squad captain, but they can’t possibly become a commander of the Union. Let’s not even talk about how anyone could manage a battle record at that point; I think this is pretty logical, right?”

Foucault and Weasel were sold immediately by this objective opinion.

“But while the casualty rate is just a number, to you guys, a destroyed mech is almost a guaranteed death for you. Be careful of missiles.” Lu Bixing pulled up the navigational map, “The transfer portal up front is the last point of transfer - is everyone ready?”

Ten sailing days away, the last ship of the pirate scouts fell.

Saturday’s mech took a direct hit from a flying piece of the broken pirate mech and sounded the warning alarm. He stood blankly inside the cockpit of his mech as the buzzing alarm of the mech pierced through his eardrums with endless recitals of the damage report.

“Self-defense squad…” Saturday’s voice was husk and dry. “Self-defense squad, report in by numerical order.”

The reporting generally went in numerical order from lowest number to highest; if no response was given within 10 seconds, the next number would call in for the missing ship. Lu Bixing once taught them that this was apparently a common method used by official fleets to count up damage; however, nobody had ever used it in practice.

“Self-Defense Number 1, I’m Saturday. Mech shield’s broken, the engine damage is up to 60%. Missiles are all gone and I don’t have any energy left to use the particle cannons.”

The communication channel went silent. Nobody followed up after him.

A horrifying thought struck Saturday’s mind as his heart clenched.

The ten seconds felt like an eternity, like a lifetime.

A member of the squad slowly spoke up in the channel: “Self-Defense Number 3, luckily only suffered minor scratches and still have two missiles left...I...I will check in place of Number 2. Number 2, are you still here?”

The Self-Defense Squad was not familiar with the rules of check-in, and held onto a slim hope that someone would answer; yet as time ticked away, Number 2 was still dead silent. The member that called earlier finally continued: “Number 2 has been shot down, Comrade Holiday...is missing.”

They didn’t have the powerful technology of Eden, therefore everyone that crashed with their mech can only receive a ‘missing’ status in the open space.

“Number 6 checking in for Number 5…”

“Number 11 checking in for Number 10…”

Of the thirty members in the Self-Defense Squad, twelve mechs were lost in the last battle. The remaining half of the squad were still stuck in the void of outer space with no time to mourn.

“Send a message to the station, tell them that the scouting squad has been eliminated, we saved….” Saturday spoke up.

“Saturday!” A member interrupted, “Look at the anti-detection radar, look!”

Saturday turned his head back immediately towards the little monitor on his mech. A crowd of tiny dots shifted towards their direction, indicating that a fleet of mechs were coming their way. The number of mechs only continued to increase until a corner of the screen was only filled with enemy mechs.

The squad had just climbed over the mountain of adversity and found themselves kneeling in exhaustion at the mercy of fate, only to find that fate was not merciful to them.

The main pirate fleet had found them.

It was dead silent inside the communication channel. For a second, Saturday recalled his naive proclamation in the past about how he would rather die on the battlefield than run away like a coward; his naivety now felt like a fleeting dream.

“Why was I so foolish?” Saturday questioned himself.

Saturday cleared his throat and spoke up into the channel: “We only have 18 mechs left on our side, with only 8 of them still in shape for combat. We have a total of 11 missiles left and 4 active particle cannons; if we continue the way we fought before we would only last one round of combat...the enemies are still coming in but we’re almost out of ammo, there’s no point to hide and fight guerilla. Our only choice is to fight them head on or run.”

The frontline of the pirate fleet was already visible through the mental network.

“But I still…” Saturday’s voice trembled after a long pause. “I still don’t want to give up, I want to keep trying and live like a man just a little longer. The pirates will need to break the outermost security of the anti-detection system before they can keep moving forward. We’re the first line of defense here, so that means even if they cracked the code, they’ll still have to get past me before going in, what do you guys say?”

Saturday clenched his teeth as he spoke and continued without waiting for a response: “The shield and armory of mech Number 1 are completely dead, so you guys can hide behind me. The closest transfer portal to us right now is portal 0023 and the security lock is still intact. You’re free to escape through the portal after you’re out of ammo, and everyone else...you all can choose what to do.”

Saturday dragged his mech off with only one functioning engine on the side as he spoke. The engine light glistened on the tiny oval body of the mech like a fragile candle light in the darkness stubbornly burning against the wind and refusing to die out.

Soon after, an equally beaten-up mech followed behind him. Then a second, a third...

Within a matter of minutes, all ten of the mechs with completely empty armories sailed towards Saturday’s side without any hesitation.

A flood of emotions surged as Saturday sent out the coordinates to his teammates. There were no more words left to say, it was time to enter the battlefield once again.

The pirates didn’t waste any time and charged forward speedily. The little dots on the monitor slowly turned into silhouettes of mechs as the fleet closed in, and the alerts from their high energy broke over the mechs like a tsunami.

A short while later, the long-range telescope of the missiles could already lock on individual pirate mechs. Unlike the scouting squad from before, there were no small-sized mechs in this fleet: the trailblazers were all mid-sized combat mechs followed by a number of heavy mechs behind them with the main navy.

The alarms on all the Self-Defense Squad mechs rang almost at the same time to indicate that they had been locked on by enemy missiles.

Saturday accelerated right into the enemy fleet. When mechs got destroyed, the remnant pieces of the mech would create a physical blockade on the screens of the enemies and emit a strong energy wave that would disrupt the radar system. During this time, the last remaining missiles from the Self-Defense Squad could be fired all at once, aiming to take down at least one mech...

It was almost laughable, because only invaluable treasures have guards that would protect up until deaths. Yet would anyone even protect a dumpster like the space station? Was there any reason to?

The enemy fired at the Self-Defense Squad.

Saturday closed his eyes and expanded his senses through the vast web of the mental network, feeling like he’d finally reached his end.

Suddenly, the alarm within the mech silenced.

Confused, Saturday thought: “Did I get hit?”

Yet when he opened his eyes, the bright light of the missile explosions expanded right before his eyes. A wave of missiles from behind Saturday reached out and blocked out the vicious attack from the pirate fleet just outside of their vision.

Within the next moment, countless small-scale mechs lined up to open up a giant wall around the Self-Defense Squad, shielding them from the explosions like the time they blocked off the high energy wave last time.

At the same time, Lin Jingheng’s calm voice rang within the communication channel: “Patrol team’s damage rate is too high, retreat through portal 0023.”

Saturday felt his eyes watering up.

The Model 3 accelerated at an alarming speed, already capturing the frontline of the pirate fleet into the range of Zhanlu’s mental network before the Self-Defense Squad could even act on the retreat order. The frontline of the pirate fleet fell immediately like weeds being mowed on a grassfield, but Lin Jingheng didn’t stop there; he didn’t wait for the copilots to attempt retrieving their hacked mental networks and pulled out on his own. The delay in reconnection then forcefully stopped the movements of the pirate mechs, who were immediately greeted with a wave of particle cannons and missiles from the station’s armed forces.

While the hit rate of the armed forces was much lower than a proper military unit, the large target and forced stall by Commander Lin managed to make up a bit of this problem.

At this time, a communication request was sent to the Model 3.

Zhanlu: “Sir, the pirates wish to…”

Lin Jingheng interrupted him: “I’m not chatting with them, retreat!”

The armed forces of the space station were always more diligent when it came to retreating than charging into battle. At Lin Jingheng’s command, the entire fleet disappeared into the web of the anti-detection system like a crowd of fish swimming off into the depths of the ocean.

The Prophet of the AUS pounded the table in fury and demanded: “Scan the unlocked transfer portal and charge forward, use force to drag out these cowards!”

“You, what’s your name…” Lin Jingheng said, “Wednesday or Friday or whatever, give me access to your mental network.”

Forced into a weekday without permission, Saturday didn’t dare to argue and immediately handed over his network in fear that Commander Lin would take it by force. The route of combat from the previous battle with the scouting squad recorded on Saturday’s mech appeared immediately on the Model 3.

Lin Jingheng took a quick glance and commanded: “Prepare to warp through portal 0078. Turn off all your missiles and use particle cannons.”

The pirate fleet pushed towards the direction of the known transfer portal like a bulldozer. With the command of the Prophet, a few dozen missiles fired directly towards the portal. The high energy concentrated within the area created a chain effect that disrupted the camouflage of the anti-detection system, and leaked a hidden route at that instant.

Before the pirates could make a move, the station’s armed forces suddenly appeared from another hidden portal and fired at the side of the pirate fleet.

Hundreds of small particle cannons merged into a large wave of high-energy blast that shot directly towards the pirates. Unlike missiles, particle waves were less likely to be affected by energy disturbances and had a higher hit-rate for more inexperienced soldiers.

As if a violent wave overturned the current, the side wing of the pirate fleet was immediately swallowed up by the attack. Yet once again, the enemies delved back into the anti-detection system before the pirates could react.

This was what real guerilla warfare looked like.

Inside the communication channel of the armed forces, a loud burst of cheering exploded from the group of delinquents that’d never tasted sweet victory on a real battlefield. The members of the armed forces began chatting loudly about their success earlier against the pirates.

Yet nobody expected the alarms on their mechs to suddenly sound the alert that they’ve been locked on by a missile.

Lin Jingheng said coldly: “Haven’t learned communication etiquette yet? The next person that makes another sound can eat a missile from me.”

The channel became dead silent.

At the same time, Lu Bixing covered his face in his palms and screamed internally in defeat: “Who cares if it’s awkward now!”

Because at this rate, even if he completely misunderstood his crush in the beginning and got ahead of himself, he no longer wanted to let go of this feeling.

## Chapter 62 - They Say You’re Cold-hearted, But It Was All A Lie

“They are only able to carry out successful guerilla warfare because the commander in the heavy mech is experienced.” Ares Von’s eyes narrowed at the screen, “See that ‘life and nature’ one who’s all talk and is actually scared of dying? His frontline is made up of the AUS’s elite pilots that have an average mech sync rate of over 80%, enough to scare off most people on the battlefield just by showing their faces. Yet they were all wiped out within minutes, just how strong is the enemy’s mental strength? It’s just a shame that his subordinates are a bunch of useless animals.”

The subordinate beside Ares Von was originally just a nurse who was in charge of taking care of the Prince’s Frankenstein body. After spending so much time around a crazy serial murderer, the nurse also earned himself the unofficial title of ‘General’ of the fleet. The appointed ‘General’, while a qualified caretaker, was by no means experienced in warfare and could only stare back at his boss blankly.

“Fool, you still don’t understand?” Ares Von let out a long sigh as he scolded his subordinate. In contrast to his complaint, his expression remained calm; he was a fan of fools, and very fond of people he could easily manipulate. In the eyes of the pirate prince, witty people were as dangerous as pointing a laser gun right at his own head and should be eliminated promptly. On the other hand, he was a lot more patient with average people who were not quick-witted and explained, “Particle cannons are much less deadly than missiles. If they fired missiles out instead of particle cannons on the last ambush, they could’ve at least completely wiped out one side of the fleet. The enemy travels around at ease and is clearly an experienced fighter, which means they would normally not make this kind of careless mistakes. I’m guessing that those useless shrimps don’t know how to aim properly and have no idea how to fire a missile...the fleet under this top-notch commander must be newbies that just learned how to pilot a mech, so they can only use particle cannons for make up for their lack of skill.”

A mech’s shield could deflect a certain level of particle beams and be fortunate enough to not suffer grave damage, but after two waves of attack even the Prophet’s fleet needed time to reorganize. All the mechs that fell during the last ambush were victims of the missiles fired from the Model 3.

Even though Ares Von used the Prophet as a tool to draw out the enemy, it was simply because he completely underestimated the pirate prince. The Prophet wasn’t actually stupid, and soon realized the same problem after a few rounds of crossfire. His face twisted into a wicked sneer as he stomped on the floor and ordered: “Pull up data for the Silver Ten within the last 20 years and run it through a preference analysis!”

The highest-class of all heavy mechs were usually always equipped with equally high-grade mech cores. The mechs of the AUS were no exceptions despite all the talks of anti-technology.

While the Prophet spoke of modern technology like beasts of the apocalypse and AIs like illegal drugs, the AUS still utilized these ‘evil inventions’ in practice in order to achieve their goals of saving humanity.

The AIs under the AUS all had strictly regulated databases that essentially eliminated its cognitive functions to learn, making it only slightly more advanced than a supercomputer. These AIs equipped on the mechs were designed for combat and to swiftly carry out orders; naturally, they didn’t have the function of talking, let alone chatting endlessly like Zhanlu. If Commander Lin were to see it, he wouldn’t hesitate to trade Zhanlu in for one of those AIs.

The wordless AI quickly scanned through the AUS’s database for all the records of the organizations who’d harassed the IU and then subsequently gotten their asses kicked by the Silver Ten over the past 20 years. Within ten seconds, AI completed its analysis and reported its findings on the screen by sectioning off all the possible missile ranges on the map. Each section of the map was marked by percentage of the likelihood of the armed force’s hideout based on the data collected from the Silver Ten’s fighting style.

The Prophet glanced quickly at the report and quickly selected three locations of the most likely hideout. He split his fleet in thirds and immediately ordered his subordinates to fire missiles towards the designated areas on the map, and ordered: “Release disruption signals!”

The communication channels on the armed force’s side immediately cut off.

A well-trained fleet of space militia normally wouldn’t be fazed at an interruption like this as it wouldn’t affect their combat abilities on the battlefield; the mental network’s field of vision was far more extensive than the naked human eye, and pilots could still see their comrades and commander while remaining connected. When the commander moved, his soldiers usually followed and knew what to do without having to communicate to each other.

However, the armed forces of the space station clearly had no sense of cooperation. They’d only just learned the channel etiquette from Commander Lin’s threat not too long ago, how could they possibly compare to a properly trained military fleet?

The lost lambs of the farm just barely got to celebrate a small victory and boost their egos when the communication channel cut off and slapped them in the face. Suddenly, the inexperienced thugs of the armed forces downgraded into a bunch of lost toddlers scrambling around headlessly.

At the same time, a wave of missiles swarmed into their fleet.

Statistically speaking, firing blindly into space wasn’t the most effective method of combat; the enemy probably just made a lucky guess.

If it was only Lin Jingheng by himself, he wouldn’t even bat an eyelash at the missiles. Yet, he was currently stuck with a bunch of lost lambs that just lost their shepherd after the communication was cut off; the sudden missiles scared them into thinking that the camouflage of the anti-detection was broken. The entire armed forces immediately lost their composure in panic. Disregarding those that were shocked to immobility, some who jumped the gun too quickly started sailing out in hysteria and revealed their coordinates as they ran directly into the missiles. The once fully collected fleet instantly fell apart during this chaos.

Inside the Model 3, the four students collectively took a cold breath in as they watched the 3D livestream on the screen. It took them a few seconds to finally realize that they weren’t just playing games and losing some points; these were real missiles and real mechs that got destroyed, and the people that were hit would no longer come back.

Their heart rates shot up in fear as the realization sank in.

On the other hand, it was hard to tell if Lin Jingheng was just used to remaining calm in chaotic situations or if he really didn’t care about the lives of these lambs. His facial expression remained cold and emotionless as he sent out a long-distance signal through the nearest portal directly onto Lu Bixing’s mech.

The signal that passed through the portal was immediately caught by the pirates. Yet before they could point their cannons toward the direction of the Model 3, Lin Jingheng made an emergency warp without any notice, pushing the four students into the corner with air cushions. In the midst of the pirate fleet, the Model 3 appeared soundlessly like a ghost.

At the same time, Lu Bixing swiftly set up a communication network the moment he received the signal from the Model 3. Without bothering to decode the signal message, he quickly sent out the communication passcode included in the signal and installed it onto all protected and non-protected portals around him. He then connected to the anti-detection system’s administrative control without any delays. Like a spider spinning its web, Lu Bixing glued the signal he received from the Model 3 containing the passcode onto the anti-detection system, and turned his own mech into a signal station. With his administrative access, Lu Bixing reconnected all the mechs of the armed forces through the anti-detection system and created a temporary internal communication channel.

The moment the connection was back on, Lin Jingheng’s voice rang inside all of the armed forces’ mechs: “Warp through #004, fools!”

The fools almost broke into tears of joy as they heard his voice and followed his order immediately without thinking; only to be greeted by a party of pirates right before them.

Lin Jingheng: “Missiles!”

The terrified lambs of the armed forces started firing their missiles as they cried out in terror. The pirates, while still having their attention on the Model 3, weren't expecting their enemy’s communication network to be fixed this quickly and ate a wave of missiles head-on as they stood still in shock.

As the missiles made their way into the pirate fleet, the Model 3 wiped out the mental networks of a small dozen of pirate mechs around it. The enormous shield of the Model 3 covered the heavy mech in a bright silver light as it deflected all the missiles firing in its direction. At the same time, the Model 3’s particle cannons all came out and charged to full-power.

Lin Jingheng took a quick glance at the armed forces. These clueless earthworms of the self-proclaimed armed forces probably lacked the brain cells to comprehend complex commands. An order like ‘carry out a pincer attack on the enemy fleet’s tail end’ would likely end in some spaceship accident. Lin swallowed his own commands and ordered in the simplest way possible: “Males at Portal 0045, females at 0031, go!”

Thankfully this was a command that even a child could carry out. The mess that was the fleet of the armed forces immediately split into two teams and sailed towards the directions they were ordered to. They all swarmed into the portals at the fastest speed, looking almost as organized as a real military fleet.

The Prophet of the AUS looked at them in shock, questioning if he had been fooled all this time.

This was the first time Lin Jingheng had commanded a fleet like this; he almost felt like he was a toll guide standing outside a public restroom directing a bunch of strangers into the proper stalls. He took the Model 3 and ran directly into the closest pirate mech beside him in frustration, sending it off to the periphery of the fleet. At the same time, 3 missiles fired towards him from behind; Lin Jingheng pulled up the particle cannons of the Model 3 and shot mercilessly towards the missiles, deflecting it off to the side. Then, the Model 3 accelerated ahead of the missiles and once again disappeared into an emergency warp. The missiles that followed him proceeded to fire straight into a portal right ahead.

The pirates around the portal all yelped in fear that the portal would explode and ran for their lives. Watching the chaos before him, the Prophet scolded: “Why are you running? Don’t you idiots know that it takes a high level of energy to blow up a transfer portal? A few missiles won’t do anything, go chase after them!”

The pirates all turned back towards the portal and saw that nothing had happened. Just as they prepared to chase after the Model 3 into the portal following their strategic analysis, all the communication channels in the pirate mechs suddenly got cut off.

Just then, the transfer portal exploded without warning, wiping out the entire vanguard team of the pirate fleet.

At the same time, a team of mechs from the armed forces appeared from Portal 0045 and fired directly at the ends of the pirate fleet. While the pirates were scrambling to pull up their shields, another team of mechs appeared from their blind spot and tossed another wave of missiles from behind the pirates. After another scramble, the guerilla forces once again sunk back into the maze-like camouflage of the anti-detection system.

The once grand and fearsome fleet of pirates now became a naked rooster that just lost a fight in the midst of the battlefield.

Lu Bixing blinked dumbly and asked: “What did you put in the portals? A timed bomb?”

“A fuzed system that lowered the energy range of explosions inside the portal.” Lin Jingheng paused for a second before adding on, “Only a small portion of the portals speculated to become the frontline of battle have them installed, it’s a common setup for homefield battles.”

Lu Bixing asked: “When did you install it? How come I never saw this?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t answer, and nobody else dared to speak, leaving the channel awkwardly silent.

Lu Bixing then realized the answer: it was during the few days Lin avoided him.

He silently praised the commander for being able to remain productive and prepare for battle even while hiding around like a ninja.

Lu Bixing cleared his throat and appointed himself as Lin’s personal engineer advisor:”...They selected three areas as points of interest to fire their missiles after they disrupted our communication signals --there’s no way this was randomized. It’s possible that they used some sort of strategic model for analysis with very high accuracy. The energy emitted by a portal explosion is extremely high, and if the pirates have such powerful AIs, the entire system might be broken through very soon. We’ll need to change strategies.”

As if sharing the same mind with Lu Bixing, the supercomputer on the Prophet’s spaceship immediately collected a large amount of data the moment the explosion happened and had already mapped out a silhouette of the anti-detection system. Just like before, the supercomputers referenced the fighting styles of the Silver Ten and drew out a number of potential ambush locations around the nearest portals.

After receiving the orders, the remaining pirate fleets made their way swiftly towards the target locations.

When the fleets of the AUS mobilize, they follow orders like a machine. Yet when the former elites of the Silver Ten reigned the Union, they were like a group of barbarians that blocked off Eden just like their boss.

Perhaps all extremes in this world were meant to delve into the opposite direction as it reached its limits.

Lin Jingheng’s gaze rested on the vast and ever-expanding long-distance communication chart.

“Understood,” He said as he mapped out two retreat routes and sent them to the two teams he split up earlier. “Split up and retreat immediately. Those that don’t retreat within five seconds can leave their wills with me.”

The pirates quickly detected the armed forces’ movements: “Prophet, the enemy’s retreating!”

“Analyze their escape routes!”

Within seconds, the supercomputer collected numerous data and calculated two escape routes that weren’t too far off from the routes that Lin Jingheng mapped out.

“The Silver Ten…” The Prophet could feel his blood boiling. “Send out interception signals!”

One of the Cayley Pirates’ signature strategies was warp disruption; as long as they could calculate the landing coordinates of their enemies, the pirate fleet could send out interception signals to forcefully change the course of the warp.

Yet while the pirates were fast in sending out their interceptions, the armed forces reacted even faster under the threat of Lin Jingheng, scattering like rats running for their lives. Within five seconds, aside from a few that were slower, most of the fleet had completely disappeared from sight.

The pirates’ interception only managed to hold off the few that reacted too slowly. Without any delays, the pirates extended their mental networks in an attempt to hijack the mechs caught in their webs, only to be knocked out immediately the moment their networks touched the armed forces’ mechs. What the pirates didn’t know was that Lin Jingheng had already taken control of all the mental networks in the smaller mechs and launched a violent counterattack as if he had already predicted their next move. A powerful and fierce force of mental energy struck back at the pirate fleet and forced the hijacked pirate mechs to start up their self-destruction function.

With this brief gap in combat, the Model 3 took the handful of little mechs around him and disappeared into the energy field of the transfer portal like a tornado that just passed.

Lin Jingheng had said five seconds, and indeed five seconds later, the pirates charged in.

Suddenly, something in Lu Bixing’s mind clicked; the enemy likely had Lin Jingheng, or perhaps the entire Silver Fortress’s, battle preference data on hand. And Commander Lin himself wasn’t just aware of that fact, he was purposely playing along with it and making the enemy believe that they truly were fighting against the Silver Fortress.

“You’re so cold and emotionless on the outside, but in the end it’s all just a lie,” Lu Bixing thought in defeat. “Just how canny can you be?”

“Commander,” Lu Bixing spoke sternly into the communication channel. “The core of the anti-detection system is inside portal 001; if you continue forward, the long-distance communication connection will expose the location of the space station to the pirates.”

Lin Jingheng laughed softly from the other side and didn’t respond.

He was indeed planning on exposing the location of the station.

Lu Bixing understood the wordless message and said: “Understood.”

From the other end of the channel, Monoeyed Hawk spoke up: “Wait, understood what? Lin Jingheng, do you even know what you’re doing?”

On the side of the pirates, the Prophet wiped away all the remnants of the self-exploded mechs with a wave of particle beams and exclaimed: “Useless pirates, bring up the heavy mechs!”

Unlike smaller mechs, even if a heavy mech’s mental network got hacked, it would take a short while before the hacker could activate the self-destruction function. This gap in between would provide enough time for copilots to regain their control of the network, making it much harder to take control from the outside. The giant body of the heavy mechs entered the battlefield like chariots from the heavens, chasing after all the armed forces’ little mechs.

The game of chase continued as the pirates closed in towards the armed forces. Yet every crossfire only ended with damage on both sides and nothing decisive. The Prophet’s frustration increased as time passed by while the strategic analysis of the supercomputer on his mech continued to stay one step behind the actual battlefield.

Ares Von watched the battle on the sidelines as he realized the Prophet of the AUS was becoming a prey that already had one foot in the enemy’s trap. He praised the unknown enemy: “Amazing, truly amazing- it looks like our ‘sacrifice’ really is going to end up becoming a sacrificial lamb. Order the fleets to gather up, we’re going to prepare for a rough battle.”

At this time, the armed forces were closing in towards the area of the anti-detection system’s core.

The pirate fleet closing in was also starting to realize something they hadn’t noticed before: the energy signals coming from the direction of the space station soon popped up onto the pirate’s radar.

The Prophet was stumped at the two different energy signals he saw at first, then clapped his hands in realization: “I was wondering why they had prepared such a complex anti-detection system, it was to hide something else all along!”

Foucault, who just discovered what happened, yelled into the channel: “Shit!”

The entire armed forces freaked out at the moment, completely forgetting the order to carry out every command from Commander Lin without fail and started sailing off in the opposite direction.

Strangely, Lin Jingheng didn’t stop them.

The Prophet’s supercomputer had already caught the source of energy disruption: “We found the core of their anti-detection system!”

Like a bunch of lost cattle, the armed forces were herded back into their farmland by a wave of particle cannons from the pirate fleet. Then, as the armed forces scrambled back into position, they witnessed the Prophet take his fleet to sail directly towards Portal 001.

The armed forces panicked; if the pirates passed through Portal 001, the anti-detection system would no longer be in effect. Except their ironically honest reaction became the road sign towards the portal. After gaining more confidence about his speculation, the Prophet led the fleet closer towards Portal 001 and activated a warp; however, things didn’t go as he planned.

Portal 001 self-destructed while carrying the core of the anti-detection system.

The Prophet didn’t even have a chance to react, and the main pirate fleet was completely wiped out by the enormous energy from the explosion like a shattered vase.

An eerie silence followed as the energy waves from the explosion died down. The entire anti-detection system, being the final trap, shattered into pieces like the pirate fleet.

What felt like an eternity of silence was suddenly broken by Monoeyed Hawk’s whisper of awe: “...Holy shit.”

Lin Jingheng turned off the Model 3’s shield and ordered coldly: “Gather up, get ready to return to the base.”

The remaining armed forces followed behind him dumbfoundedly.

Suddenly, Saturday asked inside the channel: “Did we….win?”

His one line unintentionally broke the rule of ‘no chit chat’ within the communication channel.

“We won?”

“We fought off the pirates!”

“Really!?”

Some people cheered, others sobbed quietly; the entire communication channel suddenly gained new voices.

Yet Lin Jingheng still didn’t stop them. And Lu Bixing never turned off his shield as he continued to scan the surroundings.

Ares Von watched the armed forces from afar: “Ah, they’re already celebrating their victory.”

## Chapter 63 - The Heart of The Rose

Usually after an intense battle, people tended to go through four phases of emotional rollercoaster: first was the phase of disbelief, then celebration for victory, then grief for the loss of their comrades, and finally overcoming their grief.

Unfortunately for the poor souls of the space station’s armed forces, circumstances around them forcefully dragged them out of the celebration phase.

“Everyone…” Lu Bixing finally spoke into the channel, only to have his voice drowned out by the loud chattering.

He scrunched up his eyebrows and sent the energy wave chart he just scanned into the channel, which also got ignored.

Lu Bixing: “Hey!”

He was starting to think that only missiles could quiet down these losers. Yet thankfully Lu Bixing was a man of honor and composure who didn’t make it a habit to pull out a missile towards his comrades when disagreements happened. Under desperation, he finally announced into the channel: “Excuse me, I have a marriage proposal to make!”

A response finally came from this line. From the other side of the channel Monoeyed Hawk yelled back in a louder voice: “Lu Bixing you little shit, how dare you!”

The noises in the channel finally settled with the cooperative effort of the father and son duo.

“Thanks dad,” Lu Bixing presented the energy chart from before and continued in a serious manner. “The ripple effect from the explosion in 001 has already passed, there shouldn’t be such a strong energy signal coming around here. We’re not done yet, everyone, stay alert.”

The crowd was ready for some relationship gossip only to be hit with military news. They remained silent for a few seconds, and then collectively exploded into panic within the channel.

Saturday scolded: “Shut up! Keep quiet for a bit!”

Foucault also added a line to calm her team down: “Professor Lu, what does this mean?”

Weasel asked timidly: “Where’s Commander Lin?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t respond. He had already muted the channel due to the noise and couldn’t hear what was going on. Lin held up an empty glass and ordered Zhanlu with no context: “One ounce.”

Luckily, Zhanlu understood what he meant and poured a shot of hard liquor into his master’s glass.

Despite ordering the fleet to retreat, Lin Jingheng completely disregarded his own command and remained in his position. He didn’t bother forcing the armed forces to carry out the order. The shot of liquor coated his tongue and throat as his gaze remained fixed on the long-distance communication chart; his side profile calm and collected like a quiet beast waiting for bloodshed ahead.

Huang Jingshu noticed his expression: “Com-...”

Lin Jingheng held up a finger and gestured for her to keep quiet.

At the same time, the yappering ducks in the communication channel finally quieted down. Lin Jingheng turned the channel back on to hear a silly lost lamb question: “Why is nobody talking anymore? What happened?”

Nobody answered him.

Because at this point, Lu Bixing no longer needed to give a lecture on how to read the energy wave chart; anyone that wasn’t disconnected from their mental networks could see it already. In the darkness of space, waves and waves of silhouettes began appearing from the shadows like lurking beasts bringing forth despair.

Not too far behind the fleet, a more obnoxious group of dark-colored mechs appeared with the Cayley Pirate’s symbols plastered around. Yet unlike the last time, this fleet was completely made of heavy mechs.

This was a superdimensional fleet of heavy mechs.

A fleet of mechs like the ones that surrounded the Silver Fortress years ago.

A fleet of mechs like the ones that shot down and buried two Commanders of the Interstellar Union in the Heart of the Rose.

A fleet of mechs like the ones that demolished Beijing-ß and Egret.

The battle-worn fleet of the armed forces stared in shock at the pirate fleet before them. They gathered helplessly around the Model 3 like a group of ants waiting for a storm to pass.

Yet their sandcastle- the anti-detection system- was already shattered from the last wave of enemies.

White breathed in a mouthful of cold air and attempted to ask casually: “C-commander, why are you still drinking?”

Lin Jingheng downed the last shot of liquor and gave a quick look at the four students behind him. The students were young and naive, fearless even in the face of a great threat, but Lin Jingheng could feel his limbs grow cold as the alcohol entered his body.

It wasn’t that he was scared of dying or losing, he simply didn’t want to talk to the Prince of Cayley.

The peaceful world was falling apart, yet Lin had been stuck inside this tiny space station for three months. On one hand, he desperately wanted to know what was going on outside during these times of turmoil; on the other, he was also scared to hear the news. Regardless of what his intentions were originally, the Union was now on its last leg right now because of him. If this was the result he wanted, he would be just as mad as Ares Von. If this was unintentional, he would simply be a fool; and neither option was better than the other.

Except he didn’t have the option to ignore the conversation. The useless bunch of the Ninth Squadron were probably getting too comfortable with their unpaid vacation and had forgotten how to run. Commander Lin stood alone on the battlefield while carrying a load of handicaps behind him; he had very limited cards on hand and could only rely on talking to buy some more time.

A communication request was received on the Model 3, and through the internal network, sent into the armed forces’ channel.

Lin Jingheng let out a sigh and accepted the communication request.

At that moment, the chilling and traumatizing face of Ares Von appeared before everyone. Monoeyed Hawk’s cannons almost fired at the screen on instinct.

On the Model 3, the four students clearly remembered the face of the madman that blew up Beijing-β; Mint covered her mouth in horror while Rickhead clenched his fist and growled as he stepped forward, ready to punch the hologram of the man. Lin Jingheng’s hand pressed onto his shoulders and carefully pulled the boy behind him.

If Ares Von’s family left anything valuable in their graves, it would have already been stolen out of spite by graverobbers around the Eighth Galaxy. He ignored all the vengeful stares from the fleet and rested his gaze on Lin Jingheng. His pupils shrunk in shock for a split second before he spoke: “It seems as if I’ve been granted the honor to speak with you now. Greetings, I am the current Ruler of Cayley, Ares Von. May I ask who this familiar gentleman here is?”

Lin Jingheng answered mockingly: “Who do I look like?”

Back when he was still the head of the Silver Fortress, he’d had multiple identities throughout the galaxies. For one, he was a headache for the seven galaxies that had been pushing for military autonomy within the IU. Second, he was a wildcard in the eyes of some political leaders of the Union; and finally, he was also the greatest threat to all space pirates. His photo had been hung up numerous times as a target for shooting practice by his enemies -- there was no way Ares Von didn’t recognize this face.

Though of course, he also refused to believe that the man before him was the real Lin Jingheng.

Ares Von’s eyes twitched in frustration: “If I remember correctly, changing your face to someone else-especially a celebrity- was a violation of the IU’s right of portrait.”

Lin Jingheng laughed at his words and responded boldly: “Only fools would talk about legalities in a lawless land, it’s not like Lin Jingheng can crawl out of his grave and sue me. Worst case scenario I can just remind everyone in the eight galaxies that he’s dead. Anyway, Your Highness, I’m just taking some of my brothers out for a walk to feed our families, what have we done to offend you?”

Ares Von didn’t answer his question: “You’re one of the Silver Ten.”

Lin Jingheng gave a vague sneer back at him.

“You can change your face and identity all you want, but you can’t change your nature. Data doesn’t lie; we can analyze your battle preferences.” Ares Von explained quietly, “With your abilities, you must be at least a major general - which squadron are you from?”

Lin Jingheng raised an eyebrow in slight frustration: “Your Highness, the Silver Fortress is in shambles thanks to your missiles, what makes you think the Silver Ten is still around? What do you want from us?”

Perhaps it was because they’d never seen Commander Lin talk so much, but the entire armed forces held their breaths in alarm as they watched the two men taunt each other.

Ares Von answered in a surprisingly cordial demeanor: “I wasn’t the one that brought down the Silver Fortress, nor did the AUS. I only manage the Eighth Galaxy; everything from stars to planets, from corpses to space wastes, all belong to me. I will not allow secret portals and underground tunnels to exist without my knowledge within the Eighth Galaxy.”

Lin Jingheng looked as if he was sold by this reasoning, and only nodded slightly without any trace of annoyance on his face: “So you want the map to our underground tunnels.”

“I do. The Eighth Galaxy is my backyard; I will not tolerate a bunch of rats digging up holes in my yard behind my back.” Ares Von answered. “Not too long ago, a subordinate of mine went out to scout on my orders with a fleet of mechs. They never returned; both my subordinates and the mechs just vanished out of existence in the wasteland of death. I just wanted to know if you had seen them before.”

Lin Jingheng wasn’t the type to announce his feats to the world, so aside from Lu Bixing and Monoeyed Hawk, most people were completely lost on what the pirate meant. Yet from the tone of his voice, they could all feel the air around them drop a few degrees.

Commander Lin looked up at him and questioned back: “So you’re saying that I’m the one that killed your subordinates and you’re here for revenge--where’s your proof?”

Ares Von laid out his hands in an awkward attempt to give a shrug with his metal shoulders: “The Primal Alien followed me for over a hundred years; he was the one that helped me escape Cayley back in the day. Even though he’s gotten a little bit more whack in the head these past few years, I can’t afford to lose him. There aren’t many people as loyal as him around me, nor was there anyone that’s been around for so long, so it breaks my heart that he died mysteriously in the wasteland like that.”

The armed forces grew more puzzled at the conversation about proof and heartbreak, and started questioning if their signals had gotten disrupted again. Ignoring the lost lambs, Lin Jingheng swiftly sent a visual message into the channel with the move of his finger: “Turn on your shields, prepare to make an emergency warp.”

The anti-detection system may be gone, but there were still portals to be bombed.

Lights on the small mechs lit up one by one as the armed forces began setting up their shields. Those with damaged shields hid behind others in an organized fashion while holding their breath.

Yet the half-baked fleet was still too slow, and before they could finish setting up their shields, Ares Von added: “I don’t have proof, but since I’m so heartbroken and you guys are all here as the most suspicious culprit, why wouldn’t I seize the opportunity to take out my frustration? Missiles don’t require proof to fire.”

The moment he finished, a wave of missiles from the heavy mechs fired towards the armed forces.

Zhanlu had once said that Ares Von was like a pirate version of Lin Jingheng, and now the commander himself could see why it wasn’t an inaccurate statement. Lin Jingheng blew up the portal that Lu Xin left behind and put the blame onto Primal Alien as an excuse to beat him up; the Prince of Cayley was heartbroken from the loss of his beloved subordinate, and therefore came out to put the blame on the next unfortunate soul he ran into.

There were no transfer portals nearby the armed forces, so everyone was forced to make an emergency warp. Normally, a high-level skill like emergency warping was not easy for beginners like them, but under the pressure of a life-and-death situation they somehow managed to successfully make the warp. For many, it was the first time they had a taste of the mech’s air cushion as they crashed into it from their pilot seats after the warp.

The entire armed forces were split up from each other while Lin Jingheng himself warped near portal 0051, which was located not too far away from the blown-up portal 001. For some reason, he didn’t choose to cut off the long-distance communication signal with the space station, and now the exact coordinates and location of the station were completely exposed to Ares Von.

It was almost as if he had exposed the space station on purpose.

Ares Von’s gaze glazed over the station, and chased directly after Lin Jingheng while ignoring the rest of the armed forces.

Lin Jingheng turned and sailed towards the underground tunnel to the space station. The waves of energy signals from the direction of the station flooded through the radar of the pirates as if they were travelling through numerous portals, and almost as menacing as the breath of a dangerous beast.

Ares Von soon realized something was wrong and commanded: “Stop, don’t chase after him!”

Yet it was too late.

The vanguard of the pirate fleet was too fast and had already passed through portal 0051. Lin Jingheng then quickly turned around and forcefully stalled the chaser with a wave of powerful cannons; his eyes quickly ran through the channel and rested on the closest person: “Hawk, set off 0051.”

Monoeyed Hawk gave a small laugh as he turned his mech around. Disregarding the risk of potentially catching Lin Jingheng in the explosion, he fired three rounds of missiles into the portal without hesitation. His small mech then immediately disappeared from the corner into an emergency warp.

Under the violent shower of cannons and missiles from the Model 3, the heavy mechs of the pirate fleets didn’t have time to react when portal 0051 exploded unexpectedly. At the same time, the pilots around portal 0051 all collectively lost consciousness and control of their mechs as Lin Jingheng hacked into their mental networks. After taking over all the mechs, Lin Jingheng turned the cannons of the heavy mechs towards the pirate’s own fleet and fired a few dozen missiles all at once.

The expanding explosion of the portal swallowed the few dozen pirate heavy mechs around it. Before the energy waves could hit Lin Jingheng, the Model 3 once again made an emergency warp directly into the Cayley pirate’s main fleet.

Enraged from falling into the same trick that demolished the AUS’s fleet earlier, Ares Von’s pride was damaged: “Take him down!”

Numerous mental networks expanded their webs toward Zhanlu like a pack of wolves hunting down a prey in an attempt to hijack into the Model 3. The pressure from the layers of mental network could even be felt inside the Model 3; the three students were just released from the air cushion when they saw a sea of cannons and missiles firing towards the Model 3. All the beams and missiles were deflected by Lin Jingheng, but it didn’t stop the alarms inside the mech from ringing.

Lu Bixing: “Follow me!”

The lost armed forces finally reacted to a reliable command and quickly gathered up behind Lu Bixing’s little mech like a group of pond fish swimming upstream. He led the fleet up behind the tail end of the Cayley pirates’ fleet and fired a missile towards a nearby portal before the pirates’ heavy mechs could react.

Traumatized by the reckless trigger-happy armed forces that wouldn’t blink at blowing up transfer portals, the pirates closest to the portal all scattered immediately when they saw the missile. The Model 3 took this opportunity and swiftly escaped the barricade of the pirates.

At that time, Lu Bixing sailed behind the missile he fired into the portal with the rest of the armed forces following behind him.

Weasel laughing: “Professor Lu, was that all a bluff?”

“Unfortunately,” Lu Bixing said. “I don’t have any better ideas, this was the only option I could think of.”

Despite that, Lu Bixing didn’t show any sort of remorse for fooling the pirates. Before they could rest after exiting the portal, they were forced to use the same tactic again to escape. The first time they’d successfully fooled the pirates, the second time was less effective; but by the third time, nobody was dumb enough to fall for the same trick.

The pirate fleet sent out their warping disruption signals and fired a wave of particle beams to physically blockade the armed forces. Lu Bixing could almost hear the shields of the small mech breaking; yet before he could react, the alarm that he had been locked on by a missile rang inside his mech.

At the same time, Zhanlu’s massive mental network reached over like an invisible protection. The pirates before them froze instantly as their mental networks fought internally against Zhanlu.

“Holy…” Someone suddenly forgot about Commander Lin’s golden rule in the communication channel and praised in awe, “I should consider myself lucky that he wasn’t this brutal when he knocked me down my mental network back during the drills.”

“Follow the underground tunnel route back to the base…” Lin Jingheng’s voice came up inside the channel, “Hurry!”

The fleet of small mechs squeezed through the opening that Lin Jingheng created by stalling the pirates and sailed towards the underground tunnel.

Saturday: “But the station…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lu Bixing interrupted, “Listen to the commander.”

On the other hand, Ares Von sneered back maliciously: “You’ve only stolen his face, and now you really think you’re Lin Jingheng himself?”

Lin Jingheng pulled a relaxant out.

Just then, both Ares Von and Lu Bixing received an alarm at the same time: there was an unknown signal of energy coming from the direction of the space station.

Weasel asked dumbly: “...Professor Lu, is this also part of your tricks?”

Ares Von mocked coldly: “You guys sure love to use the same tricks, is this the only thing you have up your sleeves?”

Yet this abnormal wave of energy almost seemed too cheap for a joke. It was moving at an extremely high speed, almost like a full fleet of superdimensional mechs charging directly towards the battlefield.

But where in the Eighth Galaxy could anyone possibly find that many fleets of mechs?

Lu Bixing didn’t answer the question, and only called out: “Move!”

The armed forces split into two under his command. Within the next second, a bright beam of light passed through everyone’s mental network and shot directly into the Cayley pirate fleet.

Then, a fleet of high-speed heavy mechs descended from the skies.

The Ninth Squadron of the Silver Ten.

Everyone on the battlefield stood dumbfounded for a second as they questioned if they were having a mass hallucination.

Thirty heavy mechs pierced through the core of the Cayley fleet like a deadly bayonet and forcefully cut the fleet in two. The two rows of missiles that split the fleet in half were like the ancient myths of parting the ocean; the gravity systems of Ares Von’s mechs were almost completely destroyed by the attack, but the man himself didn’t seem to mind the warnings and stood up abruptly: “Silver…”

A communication request was received before he could finish, and his subordinates accidentally answered the request at the spur of the moment. Soon after, Lin Jingheng’s target-worthy face appeared on his screen.

A few drops of cold sweat remained on the side of his pale face, the only sign of mentally subduing almost an entire pirate fleet by himself. Lin Jingheng tossed the broken relaxant syringe to the side casually and said: “Maybe I should reintroduce myself now, Mister Von. I’m the real one, not a fake violating rights of portrait. That reminds me, I still haven’t personally thanked you and your pirates for helping me escape the Union from the Heart of the Rose a few years ago.”

## Chapter 64 - Will You Shoot Me Down If I Want To Pursue You?

It was quite unfortunate that the entire Eighth Galaxy’s communication was cut off from the rest of the Union and there were no reliable live reporters on site, otherwise the news of the legendary Ares Von’s absolute shock right now would be enough to fill up the headlines for at least a whole month.

The poor pirate scouting squad was all a bait, and the complex anti-detection system was also a bait. But were the exposed underground tunnel and the fake energy wave signals not also a bluff? Didn’t the AUS already confirm earlier that these were all just cheap tricks to cover up the space station?

How did the energy wave signals become real?

Ares Von couldn’t decipher the truth behind all of this; he wasn’t able to during his life, and he never received an answer in the face of death either.

Were there really Union fleets hiding within the Eighth Galaxy? If there were, how was it possible that they would let him roam free and blow up three whole planets in a row without moving a finger? Or was this a long and elaborate trap to hunt him down that started three months ago when Primal Alien went missing?

Most importantly, how was it possible that Lin Jingheng was still alive?

Just like how eco-friendly Prophets of the AUS who would rather sleep inside an ancient treehouse would still rely on data analysis during war, the Prince of Cayley was a mortal enemy of the IU and everything it stood for; yet he would never believe that the almighty Eden could have any loopholes.

During this lustrous time of unprecedented civilization, mankind was reduced to spots of shadows behind the grand stage of society.

The Ninth Squadron descended like a nightmare before Ares Von, who almost couldn’t believe his own two eyes. However, the rest of his fleet that was made of simple-minded fools was completely scared soulless. Except it was already too late to control the spread of fear among them.

The horrified pirates were jumbled up into a disastrous mix of space hotpot by the Ninth Squadron. Lin Jingheng didn’t leave room for them to reassemble and charged right into the pirate fleet, locking on the commanding mech of Ares Von. The Ninth Squadron quickly followed behind him and split evenly into three teams, each taking out a portion of the pirate fleet without any delays. Two missiles from the Squadron fired towards the center and took out the two guarding mechs beside Ares Von’s commanding mech.

In the next instant, Lin Jingheng fired a missile through the vacuum of space towards the armory of Ares Von’s heavy mech with precision.

Ares Von desperately turned his mech back and made an emergency warp. Yet, as if Lin Jingheng already knew which portal the pirate was going to warp to, another missile behind Ares Von reached the portal at the same time. Coincidentally, this was also a portal that had been tampered with previously and immediately triggered an explosion the minute the missile touched the entrance. The high-energy waves instantaneously carried the Prince of Cayley into the midst of the explosion.

The man, the living nightmare of the Eighth Galaxy along with three planets and millions of innocent lives, disappeared into the void of space.

Artificial intelligences and supercomputers weren’t the only ones that could do preference analysis.

The moment Ares Von died, the spirits of the pirates also vanished. Despite having higher numbers than the Ninth Squadron, they were just floating targets without their commanding mech.

The rest of the battle ended more abruptly than a sudden thunderstorm; under the keen skills of the Ninth Squadron, the remaining pirates that managed to escape were forced to voluntarily remove their armory, log off the mental network and surrender.

Lu Bixing looked down at his watch; from the time the Ninth Squadron made their appearance to cleaning up the battlefield, it had only taken 10 minutes and 21 seconds.

He exhaled deeply and thought: “So this is the Silver Ten...the ultimate fortress that the Union tore down with their own hands.”

The next moment, a communication request was received into the armed forces’ channel and the legendary Ninth Squadron finally showed their true faces.

Perhaps it was because the Silver Ten already left the Union five years ago, quite a few of them seem to have decided to take advantage of this vacation like their boss. And in particular, the Captain of the Ninth Squadron...didn’t really fit the image of a soldier.

Despite wearing her uniform, the Captain had her hair tied up in a ponytail; under the laws of the IU, official military personnel under the Union were not allowed to keep long hair past their shoulders regardless of race or gender unless you were not an enlisted soldier. Yet the person before them didn’t just have long hair, she had two highlighted side fringes that draped from the side of her face down to her chest in a stylish way. The Captain was fairly tall for a woman, but also stood straight like a proper soldier. Her features were fairly sharp but maintained a youthful aura; upon closer look, one could also see that she also had some makeup on, as if she was a model who had just walked out from a military-themed photoshoot.

The “model” Captain took a step forward and made a proper salute to: “Captain of the Silver Ten’s Ninth Squadron, Elizabeth Carla Turan, reporting in.”

The hermits of the armed forces had never seen such a flashy female general and held their breath as they stared dumbly at her.

Lin Jingheng was already annoyed that the Ninth Squadron came in later than he expected, but now that he had witnessed the current state of his subordinates, his anger rose a few notches.

He first ordered a few medical capsules to come carry the poor students away to wipe their nose blood away, then turned his gaze coldly back at the female general. He turned off the channel with the armed forces and blocked off the curious eyes from the armed forces, then slowly opened his mouth: “Captain Turan, did I send out the wrong signal or did you misread my message? If I remember correctly, I asked you to come immediately to the frontlines, not come for a date, right?”

The Captain of the Ninth Squadron froze up immediately and knew she was a word away from becoming dead meat from the tone of her commander’s voice.

And of course, Zhanlu just had to make matters worse by choosing to butt in at this time and greeted her cheerfully: “It has been a while, Captain Turan, you look very beautiful and charming today.”

Lin Jingheng: “Right, you still had time to get her hair done on your way over. Did I make you miss an audition?”

Turan felt the muscles on her tense back twitch as she lowered her head and answered softly: “This...this was for hiding, so that we can better collect more information.”

“Oh, sorry I didn’t realize I’m getting old,” Lin Jingheng said. “I thought the Ninth Squadron was supposed to be the vanguard, I didn’t realize you all became special service spies now.”

Turan: “...”

Lin Jingheng’s expression grew colder: “Why were you late?”

“These heavy mechs were originally illegally kept by the Sixth Galaxy, I had to find ways to get my hands on them. Most of these were old models that are already out of production; they look alright on the outside but the software and system are too outdated and can’t handle high-speed warping. We also couldn’t find any reliable mechanics- it was all we could do, commander.”

Lin Jingheng’s expression relaxed at the logical excuse.

Then he heard Turan add: “S….Small delays don’t hurt, right? Commander, you’re so heroic and powerful, I figured that with the current state of battle that you could still handle things by yourself if we were a little late.”

Lin Jingheng could almost feel his veins snap: “So if I wasn’t able to handle it and ended up getting caught in crossfire, you guys will be free from work, right?”

Turan shivered a little and feared that the commander would skin her alive if she said another word and kept quiet.

The former powerhouse of Wolto, the Silver Fortress, had always kept a model image of proper militia throughout the eight galaxies.

Though it was all thanks to the rigorous curriculum of the Black Orchid Academy.

Over 90% of the members of the Silver Fortress were elite graduates from the Academy, all from families of high class and influence. They were the poster children of the Union’s Military Council that gave the Silver Fortress its military image.

Yet the core of the powerhouse, the Silver Ten, were far from any stereotype of a proper galactic soldier.

The frontline vanguards were lawless, the special agent spies never played by the rules, and the mechanics were all a bunch of conceited delinquents that would bargain shamelessly with the Military Council every year for their budget. In addition, the main combat squadron were a bunch of wild dogs that only listened to Lin Jingheng. They always picked fights with other military units and executive councils when released into the wild, like a pack of untamed dogs that would always attempt to bite back anyone that came near them.

Lin Jingheng: “We’re retreating.”

By the time they returned to the space station, the artificial sun had already completed its orbit and lit up for daytime.

New Year’s Eve passed silently like ashes from the frontlines.

The limited space on the station already had trouble fitting a Model 3 on their mech dock, and now with 30 more heavy mechs there was no way to accommodate all of them. The poor mechs that the Ninth Squadron brought over were therefore forced to orbit outside the artificial atmosphere of the station like giant satellites. Turan then organized the squadron into three teams that rotated shifts every eight hours to monitor the heavy mechs’ orbits.

Both the famous squadron from the Silver Fortress and the residents of the space station studied each other like the other were rare animals at a zoo; it was only thanks to Lin Jingheng that neither side actually picked a fight with one another.

Turan tossed a playful wink at a station resident that kept his gaze on her, and jogged over to Lin Jingheng. Despite having the looks of a model, one could never judge a book by its cover; Turan was actually quite a chatterbox with endless gossip. The biggest mystery, however, was the fact that everyone around Lin Jingheng, from human to AI, were all chatterboxes that didn't know how to shut up. For the commander who enjoys peace and quiet, everyday felt like purgatory.

Turan said as she jogged over: “Hey Commander, you know we can’t just have those mechs fly around forever, they’re going to run out of power soon. The armory is also almost completely depleted like an over-milked cow. If those pirates hadn’t run off like cowards earlier we might actually be out of missiles...thank god they’re actually just losers...By the way, this space station is pretty nice huh? You got food and drinks and even a movie theater, how about the military supplies? Since I’m here now why don’t you…”

Lin Jingheng gave her a cold glance.

Turan let out a little awkward laugh and used up all her guts to finish the sentence as she carefully nudged her fingers: “Why don’t you share some with me, please?”

Lin Jingheng stopped and took a good look at her. As if he just saw some disgusting scene in front of him, he announced sternly at her: “I’ll give you 20 minutes to get rid of that hair. Wash up like a proper human being before you talk to me, you can leave now.”

Turan: “...”

Lu Bixing kept quiet ever since this pretty girl who was also Lin’s ex-subordinate fell from the sky. He silently watched them from the side with an objective perspective for the sake of science, mostly to learn a little more about the cold-hearted commander.

Back when the scandal between Lin Jingheng and Yvgeniya was all over the headlines of the eight galaxies, the media had painted Lin as if he was a stone-hearted monk. Lu Bixing always thought that people were just being dramatic, but after witnessing the interaction between Commander Lin and the pretty girl, he suddenly felt like there might be some truth in those rumors.

“Seems like this is still an unsolved math problem.” Lu Bixing thought shamelessly as he secretly planned out his future Nobel Prize and Interstellar Union Freedom Contribution award breakthrough.

He then found the right time to interrupt the conversation: “I can take care of the parking and energy problem.”

Turan’s eyes lit up as she turned her head towards him. She stepped over and held out her hand, “And your name is?”

“My name is Lu Bixing.” Lu Bixing answered politely and shook her hands, “I’m kind of like a temporary mechanic of the fleet, right, Commander?”

Lin Jingheng quickly nodded his head without a word like he just saw his creditor.

“A military engineer?” Turan stared hard at Lu Bixing’s face and didn’t notice the awkwardness in her own boss’s expression. She squeezed his hand tight almost flirtatiously and continued: “What a handsome engineer, where did our commander find you? See, I’ve always said we should’ve fired the weirdos of the Third Squadron sooner…”

“Elizabeth Turan.” Lin Jingheng suddenly called out her full name.

Turan jumped up straight like she just stepped on a mousetrap: “Yes, sir.”

Lin Jingheng lowered his voice: “What did I just say?”

“For me to leave, sir.” Turan turned towards her squadron, “Everyone--turn around, follow me and off we fuck!”

Foucault followed behind to find a place for them to stay while Lin Jingheng turned and walked into the main control room.

The calendar was still from last year, yet the entire station looked completely different after just one night.

Looking down from the main control room, the once-new fleet of mechs were now covered in a layer of blood and ashes. The scars of battle were like a new skin of armor that grew out of the mechs, making the repair robots work nonstop. All mechs were parked in an organized fashion, with gaps in between. And, like the gravestones behind the Parliament of the IU, the mechs now only exist in memory.

Many residents gathered around the outside of the mech dock. Some saw their friends and family return and cried in joy, others that didn’t find their loved ones didn’t give up and tried to look for them inside the dock. Yet they all walked back soulessly when they found no signs of return.

As for most of the Self-Defense Squad members that never returned, nobody was waiting for them even when they were alive, and nobody asked when they died. This was another story.

Lin Jingheng leaned on the window bar with both his arms on top and slowly lowered his head. He closed his eyes as he carefully let out a deep breath he had been holding in.

Turan hadn’t officially reported to him yet and only glossed over how she’d gotten the mechs, but a bad feeling set his senses tingling the moment he learned of it.

Just then, he could hear the sound of footsteps behind him.. Lin Jingheng quickly wiped the traces of anxiety off his face and put back on his normal cold expression. He turned around...only to almost run right into Lu Bixing.

Right, there was also this man right here.

Lin Jingheng quickly stepped back out of reflex. He wasn’t sure what was up with Lu Bixing that night, but because he was also in a state of unease he swore to himself that if Lu Bixing said anything stupid to him, he’d kick the poor scientist out the room.

Even though Lin Jingheng didn’t curse out loud, a lift of an eyebrow indicated that he was ready to go off on another round of scolding if necessary: “What is it?”

Lu Bixing held onto his arms as he leaned on the window, and said deeply: “Thank you.”

Lin Jingheng: “...”

The “leave me alone” remained at the tip of Lin Jingheng’s tongue as he forcefully swallowed the line back when he realized that it was probably not an appropriate response.

“You still helped them at the end,” Lu Bixing said. “You knew the Ninth Squadron was coming, you could’ve just waited for them and ignored the rest of the armed forces like what we said in the beginning.”

Lin Jingheng made his way around Lu Bixing without giving him a look in the eye: “Primal Alien’s dead, you think Ares Von is easy to fool?”

“Wait,” Lu Bixing called him. “I heard from Mint and the kids that you used a relaxant again!”

Lin Jingheng didn’t want to answer and ignored him like he ignored Zhanlu on a daily basis.

Lu Bixing didn’t give up and quickly caught up to stand in front of him: “The aftereffects of using a relaxant is harsh, does it hurt?”

Questions like “Does it hurt” and “Are you tired” were a little too personal to Lin Jingheng. The last time he’d heard someone ask him these questions was when he was a kid, so from his perspective it was like Lu Bixing was casually talking about personal hygiene with him. It made him feel uncomfortable, and he wasn’t sure how to follow up.

“Stop wasting your time here,” Lin Jingheng patiently warned him. “Go do what you need to do.”

Lu Bixing sensed the unease in the man before him, but purposely stood in front and refused to let the other pass. He wasn’t afraid of Lin Jingheng’s temper because he knew the biggest reaction he could get was a simple “leave”, which wasn’t even a threat. Even though he understood logically why everyone else deflated into timid animals before Commander Lin, he wasn’t able to empathize.

“Hey Commander, why are you hiding away like you’re avoiding a plague? It’s not like I did anything to you.” Then, a sudden feeling of delight surged within Lu Bixing as he spoke, and immediately continued before Lin Jingheng could respond, “My confession last night got cut off by those pirates, so I wanted to talk to you a little more today. But you won’t even look at me, so what do you want me to do? Should I drag myself out and do maintenance for your mech dock instead?”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

Turan, who just finished cleaning herself up and opened the door to the main control room: “......”

Lu Bixing shot a quick glance at her; he wasn’t shocked or embarassed by the sudden intrusion, and was in fact quite amused by the colorfully astonished expression on Turan’s face. The same young scientist that once injected biochips inside his own body felt as if his equally crazy predecessors from ancient times all sent him endless courage and curiosity from the heavens, pushing him to pursue the impossible.

While Lin Jingheng’s face remained blank, Lu Bixing took the opportunity to grab a hold of the commander’s wrist and said: “If I said I wanted to pursue you, would you shoot me down right now?”

## Chapter 65 - Annihilated

Captain Turan, the head of the Ninth Squadron, gasped a breath of cold air and thought: “Oh my god, what was that ancient proverb about beautiful damsels always living a short life, what kind of misfortune do I have?”

She wanted to flee the site, but the sound of her boots stepping on the floor already gave her presence away. Lin Jingheng commanded her: “You stay where you are!”

Turan frantically stood back up straight, and then turned her face towards the wall quietly after deciding it was more appropriate to pretend she didn’t exist.

Lu Bixing carefully let go of Lin Jingheng’s wrist and adjusted his cuffs while casually ignoring the murderous intent emitting from the man before him.

If Lu Bixing was going to act playful and flirtatious like he normally did, perhaps Lin Jingheng could actually find an excuse to punch him.

But the young man stood straight, with bright eyes looking deeply into his own--too brightly and too innocently, almost like a child’s....perhaps all scientists had this same kind of light in their eyes when they saw the fruit of their labor after all of their research. Lu Bixing was also standing a little too close; Lin Jingheng could almost feel the energy radiating off of him and breathed in his warm scent..

Lin Jingheng felt a shot of cold air stuck in his throat. He remained silent for a few seconds before taking half a step back away from this intimidating enthusiasm, and responded as calmly and as patiently as he could: “Thank you, but I can’t accept it. I don’t think your father would be happy about you getting too close to me, so don’t waste your efforts here.”

For a second, Turan wondered if the man behind her was really her boss and almost wanted to scan his DNA.

Lu Bixing blinked innocently and didn’t mind the honest rejection. Perhaps he had already spent too much time cooking his soup for all his students; he still had an endless supply of lines that could be compiled into books for reading in the bathroom: “Liking a flower doesn’t mean you have to see it bloom; liking a person doesn’t mean you need to have your feelings returned. The process of pursuing love and beauty isn’t a waste of effort. This is a very wonderful process, don’t you think?”

Of course Lin Jingheng didn’t think that, and was completely speechless at this comment. After filling up his kindness and patience quota for the day, he took off the pretentious facade and returned to his normal asshole-self: “You sure are bored and have nothing to do, now get out of here!”

Lin didn’t pull out a gun so it couldn’t really be considered a furious response. It was as if a lion carefully gave Lu Bixing a little push with its paws, making him feel feel oddly loved. With a heart full of affection, Lu Bixing strolled towards the exit as he gleefully greeted Turan: “Good morning Captain, love your haircut. If you need mech maintenance or anything, just let me know anytime.”

Turan stared at his disappearing silhouette as if she was sending off a brave soldier.

Lin Jingheng felt as if his wrist had just been burnt by hot steel, the heat from it lingering all around. All his worries from before got awkwardly jumbled up in this mess of emotions that Lu Bixing had just dumped on him; he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, but at the same time he also felt some unexplainable emotion inside of him.

He poured himself a glass of cold water and waved for Turan to come over.

Turan didn’t want to make her boss wait and carried out his earlier order quickly; she only wiped off her makeup and cut the long hair she’d let grow for a few years to her ears. Only the two fringes of the side were left untouched and rested on her chest in an attempt to smuggle its way past the commander’s inspection.

Lin Jingheng gave her a quick glance and concluded that the look had no aesthetic value; she looked like a longhorn beetle that had gotten a little perm on its whiskers.

“So tell me, how’s the Union right now?” He asked.

“Commander,” Turan erased her playful demeanor and stood up straight as she heard this question. “There is no Interstellar Union anymore.”

Her tone was calm, but the words were like dynamite that dropped into the ears of the listener.

Turan asked: “Where should I start?”

Lin Jingheng paused for a moment before he answered: “The Silver Fortress.”

Turan lifted her gaze up a little and spoke in a neutral tone uncharacteristic of her chatter-box personality: “At the end of June of this year...last year, at midnight, without any warnings, the central power system of the Silver Fortress completely collapsed. The defense system was down and could not be rebooted; thousands of uncharted heavy mechs invaded the artificial atmosphere without notice and began firing at the station. The Silver Fortress suffered great damage.”

The Silver Fortress, home to countless elites built up by hundreds of generations of Black Orchid graduates; the fortress that Lin Jingheng protected and managed for decades...

Turan corrected herself: “No, I should say that it was pretty much annihilated.”

Lin Jingheng always thought he had just been using the Silver Fortress as a pawn, and nobody besides the Silver Ten were what he would consider allies. Yet at this revelation, he could still feel his blood begin to boil.

“How did this happen?” Lin Jingheng lowered his voice, “Are the network securities dead? What about the patrol team? Are they all blind?”

“The Fortress’s energy system was hacked through internal systems. Someone inserted a chip into Zhanlu’s mech body - because nobody could start him up, the regular checkups were scheduled for once every two months with high authorities; nobody caught the chip in time. As for the patrol team...many left the Silver Fortress ever since Commander Lee took over. He was just a flower vase with no real power to stop people from leaving, so he replaced many of the existing members with humanoids. It just so happened that the patrols were also a team of humanoids that day, and they were all hacked as well.”

Lin Jingheng grasped the entire complicated political situation with just these few lines.

The Military Council of the IU owned the property rights to both mechs and the AIs that made up the cores of the mechs, but humanoids--despite simply being a less complex and mass-producible version of AIs--became an exclusive trademarked property of the Eden Committee after they discovered its profitability.

Just how much profit and production output could be obtained by replacing human soldiers with humanoids? Just how many people’s interest would be affected by this? It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that the profit would be an astronomical figure. The former General Lee had nothing to put on the table, what other way was he able to buy himself a position in the Silver Fortress? And why did he immediately push for building a humanoid military unit the moment he secured his position?

Clearly, this was the result of the political tug-of-war between the Military Council and the Eden Committee. But to both side’s surprise, this political game ended up digging an irreversible hole in the status quo.

Lin Jingheng asked: “This is just your theory, where’s your proof?”

“No, it’s not my guess. Commander Lee said this himself.”

“Lee is still alive?” Lin Jingheng was a little surprised that he still had the guts to stay around.

“The little stove that Commander Lee’s personal fleet used as their energy source was a separate system from the Silver Fortress, so they managed to escape. Lee and a few of his personal guards were the only ones that made it out of the Silver Fortress alive.” Turan shrugged, “But they didn’t get to live long. They were assassinated while they were on their way to the City of Angels.”

Lin Jingheng scrunched up his eyebrows: “Was it you or the Tenth Squadron?”

The Tenth Squadron was also a commando squad like the Ninth, but specialized more in assassination and ambushes; they were a full team of highly-trained galactic assassins.

“It was me.” Turan admitted without hesitation. Her gaze met the commander’s sternly and unmoved like a murderous longhorn beetle.

“We’ve shared meals with the Silver Fortress, shared the same training grounds, and trained those fresh graduates of the academy together. If we add up the total distance we’ve patrolled around the Fortress, we could circle around the entire First Galaxy more than once. I don’t think this is right, Commander. The reason why the Silver Fortress collapsed was because of this bastard Ares Lee; 10,000 soldiers lost their lives because of his mistake, and he still wanted to escape to the City of Angels to save his own ass so that he could live peacefully for the rest of his life...No fucking way! If you want to punish me for my actions, I will take responsibility.”

Yet Lin Jingheng only waved it off and didn’t further question this small incident. “So what’s the current status of the government?”

“The government is alright, just kind of spineless.” Turan let out a breath and relaxed a little. “Before the communications got cut off, I’d heard that the IU gave up Wolto and escaped to the City of Angels and set up a temporary headquarters of command there. The First Galaxy still had quite a few military fortresses around, so they still have soldiers on hand. In addition, the Military Council’s main production warehouse was already on the City of Angels, so they’re well-equipped. Old man Woolf is currently in charge, so there aren't many issues, the pirates still have a long way to go before they’ll be able to take them down. All residents in the First Galaxy that had connections to military groups and politicians all fled over to the City of Angels...Pirate fleet ‘Glory Troops’ made their way into the First Galaxy through the Silver Fortress and made it their homebase.”

“What about the other civilians?”

“Residents of the First Galaxy? Not bad. They’re all mostly respectable people, so even if the Glory Troops want to build their own government, they’ll still have to play by the rules and win support the proper way. The only thing is that aviation control is strict, but as long as you’re not randomly flying around through the terminals you’ll most likely be fine, and the quality of living is ensured.” Turan laid her hands out casually, “But ever since the communication networks collapsed, the entire Eden system also fell apart...I don’t know if the Committee had their hands in this in fear that people would side with the pirates or something, but despite having basic living conditions met, the death count rose steadily after Eden crashed. I’ve heard that many places began organizing their own patrol teams to prevent suicide.”

If the “barbarians” of the Eighth Galaxy were to hear of this, they would think this was a complete joke.

How can anyone think of ending their lives when they’re financially stable and even have space pirates attempting to appease to them? Even the most luxurious standard of living in the Eighth Galaxy was only comparable to the current state of the First Galaxy.

Even Beijing-β, the once-most-flourishing planet of the Eighth Galaxy couldn’t provide adequate temperature control for its residents. In the long and tortuous three-years of winter, people would wander the streets like stray animals; freezing to death or dying from starvation was not uncommon. Even on their deathbeds, the poor souls of the Eighth Galaxy would have never known of the extravagant lifestyles that exist outside of their galaxy.

But Lin Jingheng knew this wasn’t because the First Galaxy was just being melodramatic.

The entire civilization of the IU was built on the system of Eden, and aside from the Eighth Galaxy, every person was born under the protection of Eden like a carefully nurtured plant inside a personalized greenhouse. When the greenhouse broke down, these indoor plants that had never felt the harsh winds and weather conditions of the outside world would be suddenly thrown out into the wild without any support. Sometimes, these conditions would be harsh enough to end lives.

“Only the First Galaxy is somewhat stable, I can’t say for the others. Commander, you know that the other galaxies don’t have military sovereignty so their only line of defense is the central militia stationed in each galaxy. The main key to their mech docks was in the Silver Fortress, but nobody expected anything to happen to the Silver Fortress.” Turan paused and let out an almost unnoticeable small sigh. “Those annoying pirates were still causing trouble everywhere, and the Silver Fortress cannot be contacted, so the central militia in a lot of places panicked. Modern war isn’t like how it was in the ancient times where we could still make a comeback if we missed our chances--if you can’t bring out your mech, you can’t even expect the anti missile systems to protect you from the rain of gunshots and beams from those crazy pirates. Getting blown to ashes would even be considered lucky.”

Lin Jingheng slowly strolled over to the window. Through the glass, he could see the armed forces of this little space station lining up down below. These people didn’t even bother to head back home and rest up before celebrating their survival, instead deciding to hang around the mech dock gathering up like some shady cult ritual. Lin Jingheng felt something choking up in his throat; Turan’s words were like a violent storm of bloodshed that almost filled the air inside the main control room.

“Even among the pirates, there were multiple factions; the Glory Troops that took over the First Galaxy are ones that want to walk down the dynastic path. See, that means they have to win support from the civilians, which is completely different than those crazy bastards in the AUS. That’s why the Glory Troops made a statement very soon after they took over the First Galaxy and said that they would completely cut ties with the rest of the pirates, and went even so far as to label all the others as illegal terrorist organizations.” Turan explained, “Then all these foreign pirates that followed and previously took the Glory Troops as some sort of leader for their unofficial alliance went wild. Since their leader one-sidedly severed their alliance, it’s like these pirates wanted vengeance or something and became more aggressive and violent than before. They became less picky about their prey and killed whoever they wanted.”

“Since you left, we’ve been tracking the Sixth and Seventh Galaxies’ moves. My team and I have been doing ‘deliveries’ between the Sixth and Seventh Galaxies.” A shady name like Turan’s ‘deliveries’ was of course just a facade that the squadron worked under. “Our last order was a perfectly timed jackpot prize from the remains of the Sixth Galaxy’s central militia. They didn’t have mechs, so they dragged a portion of non-military personnel to form a civilian armed forces to find some underground connections to help smuggle a few old mechs from the Seventh Galaxy over. But when we arrived with the order, our client was already gone.”

Lin Jingheng lifted his gaze up at her.

“The secret station they were hiding in disappeared from the map--it got blown into pieces, so I guess the mechs are mine now. The pirates that took over the Sixth Galaxy thought the people over there were too rowdy, so they completely locked down the air terminals and transportation system on the capital planet. From the central executive buildings, they started playing a game of massacre with hundreds of heavy tanks on the ground.” Turan continued, “I felt bad just taking our client’s mechs, so I took the boys and blew up the pirate stations and bases on the capital planet and used up quite a bit of missiles. Then after we escaped outside of Union territory, we had to rely on some shady connections to replenish our energy and ammo…...otherwise we wouldn’t have been so late today. Sorry commander, it was my fault for acting on my own.”

Lin Jingheng didn’t catch the little excuse she gave, and went silent for a few moments before asking with a difficult expression: “Are all the central militia this useless?”

“No.” Turan hesitated a little and shook her head, “There were some that reacted promptly, they were all ex-subordinates of Commander Lu Xin. I’m not sure where or how, but they all managed to obtain the key from the Silver Fortress.”

Lin Jingheng didn’t need to hear the next line to understand the picture: the system of the main control key was extremely complicated. The only way to have been able to get past the system to obtain the key was to have enough time to decode it, meaning that it must have been a secret plan created very early on. Yet whether it was a part of an elaborate conspiracy plot or something else, nobody could tell.

The two looked at each other in silence for a long while.

Turan then broke the silence and asked: “Commander, you got anything to eat?”

Lin Jingheng gave her a look.

Turan explained: “I haven’t stepped on land for over half a year, and we were low on supplies. I’ve lived off nutrition syringes for the past while and I can feel my stomach contracting. I rushed here to give you the report and didn’t even have a chance to take a sip of water.”

Lin Jingheng pointed at the food cabinet near the door of the control room.

The students often came here for classes, so the cabinet was always filled with food and snacks. Turan cheered happily as she randomly grabbed some bread to munch on.

“Supplies are already looking tight outside?”

“Don’t mention it,” Turan choked a little from eating too fast, and slapped her chest a few times. “Those foreign pirates got too used to being poor, so they steal everything. They steal while they go out and preach their shady cult. Now that Eden’s down, the entire Union’s credit and trust is also down, so nobody has money anymore. People don’t even know what to trade items for on the market, and nutrition syringes are almost becoming the new coins across the galaxies. I almost can’t believe I’m still alive to see you, commander.”

Lin Jingheng nodded slightly in acknowledgement: “Did you contact anyone else?”

“Nope,” Turan shook her head, “It’s complete chaos out there with everyone fighting for territory. I’ve had people monitoring the transfer portals ever since I got your order to wait for your long-distance. The astral maps of territories outside of the Union were too complicated. We’re not familiar with the routes, and all the major terminals are taken over by pirates everywhere. We couldn’t obtain a reliable map of all the underground terminals so we didn’t want to risk it.”

Lin Jingheng opened his mouth as if he had more questions: “Li…”

Turan wiped off the cream at the edge of her mouth: “Hm?”

“Nothing.” Lin Jingheng lightly tapped his fingers together as he realized there was no point in asking the other question he’d been keeping in his heart. The First Lady of the Secretary-General would be in the City of Angels with guards surrounding her. She wouldn’t go out and show her face without any reason. In addition, Turan might not have heard anything either, so he swallowed his question back down. “Take your time. I’ll give you all 24 hours to regroup and do what you need to do, then gather up. I need to clean up the surrounding pirates and make a temporary base in the Eighth Galaxy.”

Lu Bixing was piloting a small mech for repair and maintenance, currently resting by the mech dock. He took a peek inside the heavy mech the Ninth Squadron brought over and discovered that it really was a bunch of old models from the last century. While it looked powerful on the outside, the inside was almost like a history museum that made Lu Bixing think he could almost smell preservatives.

It was almost hard to imagine that the Ninth Squadron had really defeated the Prince of Cayley with these large pieces of rusty metal.

After this battle, the family feud among the armed forces finally made a truce with each other. Saturday, Foucault, and Weasel were gathered up peacefully discussing something.

The artificial sun began leaning westward, dragging a trail of light throughout the streets of the station. The peace of the evening almost made the deadly battle feel like a lucid dream.

The Ninth Squadron took the opportunity to walk around the station with clear intentions on learning more about it. Meanwhile, Turan had her eyes glued on the multimedia screen that was currently playing an ancient romance movie.

Across the mech dock, Ms. Plump dragged a group of people, each holding pots and plates full of food. The smell of freshly cooked food spread throughout the dry and boring air of the mech dock, and a child jumped from the crowd to rip down the calendar from last year.

After placing the food and drinks down, they placed a circle of candles on the floor outside the door to the dock.

Saturday stood up; his head still felt wobbly from exhaustion, and walked over as he pulled out a small stack of notes and placed them under each candle. Each little piece of paper he placed had a name of someone that was no longer with them.

## Chapter 66 - My First Profession Is War, Second Is Sleeping With Men

This was the first time Lu Bixing witnessed the funeral of wanderers in space. It was a silent memorial.

There were no graves, no eulogies, no corpses, and no ceremonies.

White candles only a few centimeters tall lined up on the ground, each representing the name of the person attached to them. Ms. Plump lit up the candles as everyone else stood before them silently until the flames burned out, signifying the end of life. Like the short-lived candlefire, the memories of every lost life vanished into space.

To the people that lived on this station, they were just like grains of stardust within the wasteland of death. They’d never had a background, a family, nor had any achievements in life worth celebrating. They’d struggled to live for hundreds of years, facing countless hardships over time, only to die quietly when their times came without leaving a trace.

A number of small mechs made their ways in and out as members of the Ninth Squadron changed their shifts. The heat waves from the mech engines and artificial sunlight jumbled up the air circulation inside the mech dock, creating an interesting artificial evening breeze. The flames on the candles extinguished one by one, and the evening breeze gently caught the small notes with names written on them, carrying them into the streets and alleyways of the residential areas until they also disappeared from sight.

And then it was time for dinner.

The team of Ninth Squadron members that had just ended their shifts were just as self-serving as their Captain and mingled into the party as they smelled food from afar.

Ms. Plump poured a glass of home-brewed ale for Lu Bixing; while still rough, it still didn’t taste too bad. Lu Bixing took the glass and walked over to Saturday, giving him a light tap on the shoulder.

Over the last few months, Saturday was thrown into the harsh training of patrolling by Lin Jingheng. The hellish training had taken a physical toll on him; the old roundness in his face sunk in like he’d hit his second puberty. His facial features had sharpened too; he no longer looked like a child.

“I can’t believe the Prince of Cayley just died like that.” Saturday looked down and stomped hard on the ground to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating and that he was really back home. “It’s like a dream...what do we do now? Are the pirates going to send other people over?”

Lu Bixing answered: “That I can’t say, it will depend on what game the AUS decides to play in the Eighth Galaxy. Or maybe Ares Von was just a pawn in their hands.”

“That’s true,” Saturday held up his glass and cheered with Lu Bixing. “Besides a madman like Ares Von, who else would even want a hand in the Eighth Galaxy? Even pirates know there’s nothing of value here.”

Lu Bixing thought about it for a moment and then asked: “The station’s coordinates are no longer safe, what do you guys plan on doing?”

Saturday’s whole body sunk as he heard the question, arching his back like a spineless old man as he responded enthusiastically: “Tell me, Professor Lu, did you have a high drop-out rate for your school when you were still headmaster back then?”

While the drop-out rate in Starry Sea Academy was indeed unusually high, Lu Bixing never thought it was his problem.

“Your expectations are too high. I can’t believe you’re asking me what I plan on doing…” Saturday’s gaze remained glued on the ground while he muttered. “I really want to just take my brain out, put it to the side and lie on the ground so I don’t have to think about anything. I just escaped a close death and used up all my energy.”

Lu Bixing was well aware of his limits and didn’t question him any further. The two just sat next to each other wordlessly as they watched the artificial sun set under the station.

As the others downed their sorrows with the rest of ale and beer that had been brought over, the mech dock grew lively with chatter. Complaints and gossip flooded the dock as drunk residents gathered up like a vulgar choir.

“Foucault just said earlier that we’ll still call ourselves the ‘Eighth Galaxy Self-Defense Force’ from now on, so we don’t even need to change the name of the executive building.” Saturday suddenly spoke up with this strange background music without really thinking, which quickly turned into a ramble. “I remember when I first started the Self-Defense Squad, it felt like I chose my own fate. I was full of myself and filled with blind confidence from the pep talks you gave me...and now I finally know that you were just being nice and giving us lies of kindness. I’m actually not in control of fate, it’s fate that pushed me and dragged me to this point without me knowing. When I sat down here, I felt like I suddenly lost all my memories and couldn’t remember how I got on a mech to the frontline, how I raised my cannons up at someone. And for a second, I thought the person sitting next to me was Holiday…”

Lu Bixing didn’t notice the sudden choke up and change in his tone when he said the name “Holiday”, and turned over to look at Saturday a few seconds later.

“I thought…” Saturday tried to relax his expression but couldn’t, scrunching up his eyebrows and nose in pain. A painful whimper came out of his throat as half a kebab stick remained in his mouth. A trail of blood also rolled down his face from his nose. Saturday subconsciously wiped it with his hands, only to leave more bloody marks on his face.

Nobody else heard this mournful whimper while they all released all their stress and emotions out like there was no tomorrow.

Lu Bixing stood up quietly, and made his way towards the mech control room past the crowd.

Lin Jingheng didn’t leave the control room. Perhaps annoyed by the noises, he pulled down all the noise-cancelling window layers and turned off the lights. The only light in the room was the 360 hologram screen that replayed the entire battle with Ares Von around the control room. He held a digital pen at the tip of his fingers like a professional strategic board game player.

From the day the three-month contract ended, Lin Jingheng had been awake for almost 48 hours. Perhaps he was really at his limit from overloading mental and physical energies - the moment the elevator door opened, Lu Bixing saw the commander almost fall asleep as a cigarette fell out of his hand.

Lin Jingheng shot up in surprise and clicked his tongue in annoyance. There was nobody else around here so he didn’t even bother picking up the cigarette with his hands; he tried to pullit back with his foot, but accidentally kicked it up towards the other person’s direction instead.

Lu Bixing announced: “Nice shot! That was a three-pointer!”

Lu Bixing’s voice somehow hit a fight or flight button in Lin Jingheng, making the latter sit up instantly and switch to a proper composure within seconds. Lin’s posture was straight and proper like a textbook image, it was hard to imagine he had been half-falling asleep only moments ago. Lu Bixing felt like he’d just stepped on the commander’s tail 20 meters away, and subconsciously lightened his footsteps as he carefully made his way over. He took out a freshly cooked shish kebab stick and held it in front of Lin Jingheng, who left an empty packaging of condensed nutrition packs on the side.

Lu Bixing: “You know, I used to eat condensed nutrition packs too. But now I feel like this thing can be a candidate of humanity’s top 10 worst inventions.”

The size of a standard nutrition pack is about as big as the palm of a hand and only a little more firm than konjac. It melts in the mouth as one consumes it and doesn’t really fill the stomach, almost no different than drinking water. But the nutrients get directly absorbed without needing to digest solid food, making it a very convenient replacement. Despite not being filling, nutrition packs have special ingredients that suppress hunger within the consumer for a while; so even if it doesn’t feel filling, the craving for food would drop drastically.

By eliminating digestion time, risk of hurting the digestive system and cravings, these nutrition packs were almost inhumanly healthy.

The inhumanly healthy Commander Lin didn’t even blink at the fresh meat before him and gestured for Lu Bixing to take it back.

“I heard the cafeteria in the Silver Fortress only serves nutrition packs.”

“What’s wrong with nutrition packs?” Lin Jingheng shifted his attention back onto his notes and answered nonchalantly, “The quality of the nutrition packs on the Silver Fortress were much higher than what you’d normally get in local markets; they’re almost as expensive as hiring a kitchen full of chefs from five-star restaurants. Besides, the individual packs are customized to fit the needs of every soldier, it saves us a lot of time.”

Lu Bixing questioned: “Wasting time is helpful to improving the quality of life, what’s the point of being so conservative all the time?”

Lin Jingheng rolled his eyes at him and responded, “I don’t want to think with my stomach when I still have functioning brain cells.”

Lu Bixing was used to his sour responses by now and didn’t mind it. He picked up the shish kebab and bit off a piece of mushroom from in between the meat as he spoke: “When I was still a kid on Planet Cayley, there was a piece of land next to my house that my old man bought out to build a multi-level farm. It was originally supposed to be a garden, but he didn’t like the idea and decided to grow some crops instead. Have you seen a farm before?”

Wolto was known as having the universe’s most beautiful gardens and natural landscapes, every tree planted was a work of art on its own, so they did grow fruits or vegetables. The Wolto-born Commander Lin judged the Monoeyed Hawk’s farming interests and sneered in response as he quietly thought to himself: Maybe this old man actually is a mutant farm cat.

“There’s a sensor beside each plant in the farm that has colored indicators. When the lights turn red, that would mean the fruit or vegetable is at the prime time for harvest. You can see where the red lights are by scanning it with your personal device; going inside the farm was always like a game of treasure hunting, and when you picked your harvest you could give it to the robots to prepare it for you to eat...My favorite was the grill inside the mushroom farm.”

Lin Jingheng’s eyes remained on his notes quietly as Lu Bixing spoke, but surprisingly he showed no sign of annoyance on his face with the extra noise beside him.

Lu Bixing then continued: “When all the fighting and war is over, I’ll build another school. I’ll even save some space in the back to build an indoor farm, and I’ll make sure to design it like a maze inside.”

Lin Jingheng circled the word “ammunition” on his notes as Lu Bixing shared his grand dream, and thought: “*You sure have a childish interest.*”

“Too bad I wasn’t particularly healthy as a child and had some dietary restrictions, so my old man wouldn’t let me go inside the farm. I annoyed him enough to the point where he finally agreed to take me in and grill some mushrooms for me when it snowed. Cayley wasn’t like Beijing and didn’t have a winter that lasted three years; in fact, the area we lived in only had two seasons: dry desert weather and rain. When it was dry, it barely rained, and when it was rainy it was still too hot to snow, so you can imagine how rare it was for our place to snow. In the 20 years I lived there, it only snowed three times. So to me, snow was like a big surprise to me...does Wolto snow?”

Lin Jingheng: “......Yes.”

The snow on Wolto was all artificially controlled. During daylight savings, the Black Orchid Academy would rain once a week. In the winter, snowfall was controlled every twenty days, which always led to half-day off school and extra homework. In Lin Jingheng’s memories, snow was very much associated with the library for this reason. His heart sank slightly at Lu Bixing’s words; Monoeyed Hawk wasn’t a model parent, and fell into the category of being easily persuasive. To make someone like him keep such a strict eye on Lu Bixing meant that ‘not a healthy child’ was perhaps an understatement.

“Oh, right,” Lu Bixing suddenly remembered something and continued, “I know you guys at the Black Orchid Academy are always on the clock and accurate down to the second, that’s boring...Hey, this thing is pretty good.”

He bit off a beef ball from the kebab stick, but as he did, the juice inside the beef poured out inside his mouth, almost burning him to tears. The smell of food slowly engulfed the main control room; the virtual fleet of the Cayley pirates on the screen also looked as if they were stumped by this strange smell. Lin Jingheng felt his eyelids twitch and finally put down his notes in defeat as he realized he could no longer concentrate. He then asked: “Your health was bad?”

“When I was a kid, a kid!” Lu Bixing answered hastily as he desperately attempted to breathe in some cold air to ease off the burn, almost making him sound like an annoying direct marketing agent. “I’m completely fine now! I go to sleep and wake up at regular times and work out regularly, I can live in zero-gravity in space for a year without any problems. You can trust me on this, don’t worry.”

Lin Jingheng wanted to nod in response, but caught something off about the explanation: “Why should I be worried?”

Lu Bixing gave him an awkward smile with half a meatball still in his mouth: “Nothing.”

Lin Jingheng could also feel his vein about to snap again until Lu Bixing quickly covered up: “You asked first! Hey hey, why are you frowning again? I’m not leaving...I just came here, why do you want me to leave already? Commander, I’ve noticed this for a while but why are you so easily embarrassed? Here, have some meatballs.”

Lin Jingheng: “...”

“Especially around me,” Lu Bixing remarked joyfully. “I’ve noticed this. You don’t have this problem around anyone else - why am I the special one?”

Lin Jingheng was still hung up and sympathetic at the shocking background about how this boy could only eat mushrooms during snowy days and couldn’t scold him too harshly. Yet he didn’t know how to respond to Lu Bixing’s playful lines, so he angrily grabbed a meatball and shoved it in his mouth to forcefully swallow his frustration.

Unlike Monoeyed Hawk, the maturity and dependability from Lin Jingheng was something he was born with. Having been the head of the Silver Fortress for so long, there was a strong air of authoritativeness that surrounded him, making him easily the most adult-like person around Lu Bixing. The silent approval and tolerance especially pulled out the inner child inside Lu Bixing-- the more Lin ignored him, the more he wanted to annoy and bother Lin.

The bothersome child made Lin Jingheng eat an extra meal in the control room. Exhaustion from overwork also made Lin Jingheng admit defeat and secretly send an S.O.S to Monoeyed Hawk, who busted in the control room to physically drag his son away. After finally getting a moment to rest, Lin Jingheng took the Ninth Squadron out the next day to clean up the remaining pirates of the Cayley fleet before the sun even rises, leaving Turan to watch the station by herself.

But even the wisest of men could still make mistakes, and the one big mistake Lin Jingheng made was to leave the number one gossip queen of the Silver Ten with Lu Bixing.

Turan very quickly filled herself in on the relationship between Lu Bixing and her boss and proceeded to suffer from two whole days of PTSD before she finally digested all the information. After getting over her initial disbelief, she voluntarily jumped into the mess and initiated a conversation with Lu Bixing: “I can’t believe this brickhead didn’t kill you yet, that must mean he’s got something for you. There’s no other explanation. Watch, I bet the long-time abstinence just screwed with his head too much so now he doesn’t even know what he wants either. My first profession is war, second is sleeping with men. Here, let me teach you some useful tricks to get the man of your dreams.”

## Chapter 67 - Ice-Cold Bastards Are Delicious

Lu Bixing couldn’t believe that the legendary Silver Ten actually had a character like this. He first stared in shock at Turan, then remembered that a young woman was speaking to him and proceeded to wave off the inappropriate suggestion while his face reddened.

On the other hand, Turan was also shocked that the “professor” these hooligans of the space station had referred to really was someone that had some shame and was equipped with an appropriate ‘embarrassed’ skill. She found this reaction amusing and poked Lu Bixing’s face with a finger, attempting to find out if there was some nanotechnology under his face that could change his skin color.

“Being thin-skinned will get you nowhere, my friend,” Turan playfully gave him a punch on the shoulder. “Look how shameless Yevgeniya was back then and didn’t even manage to lay a finger on our commander. You have to learn from other people’s mistakes, young man!”

Lu Bixing took a direct hit from her and lowered his head slightly.

“So I’ve tried it with a few men like that, same cold-face type.” Turan licked her lips excitedly, “I know exactly how to deal with these types of men, from how to flirt to how to pace yourself - I can guarantee that you can learn everything from me. Let me tell you, these ice-cold bastards are delicious; you especially can’t miss out on a high-quality brand ice cube like our boss.”

“Okay.” Lu Bixing scratched his head and carefully adjusted his collar as he pulled out some notes from his personal device, “Then I hope you don’t mind me asking some questions.”

Turan quickly crossed her legs and attempted to make a decent impression as she awaited his questions.

“Uh…” Lu Bixing pondered a little before he asked, “Does he have any interests?”

The Captain of the Ninth Squadron blinked multiple times as she awkwardly twirled the little ‘whiskers’ of hair on the side. She wasn’t expecting the first question to already be way out of her league and responded: “.....Huh? What kind of interests does he have?”

Lu Bixing looked at her with his innocent eyes.

“Do artful insults count?” Turan thought hard for a few moments, “No that doesn’t...then I’ve got nothing, because he really doesn’t do anything and I’ve never seen him gamble or party.”

“I...I wasn’t asking about those kinds of interests.” Lu Bixing sighed and continued with the notes still in his hands, “Does he like music? Any type of art he likes? He must have at least a favorite sport, right? He can’t just be born with a nice body like that.”

“Our commander isn’t that refined or elegant.” Turan shook her head, “If he listens to music, then it’s only because Zhanlu got too annoying. His aesthetics were always a mystery, but I feel like he doesn’t even know the way to an art museum. As for sports...physical training is part of our jobs, but I wouldn’t say it’s a hobby. Like me, I absolutely hate exercising. If I can lie down I wouldn’t even want to sit, so I hate it when men talk about sports, but what can I do? It’s not like I can just skip work.”

Lu Bixing was starting to think Turan’s bluff was getting him nowhere: “Then what did he do with his free time back when he was still in the Silver Fortress?”

“Every living being is his entertainment, his biggest hobby is to shit on us. Also he almost never had free time, he was always busy.”

Lu Bixing was shocked: “You guys don’t get vacations?”

“We do, by shifts.” Turan said, “How else would I have time to play around? Sleeping around with coworkers would get me a death sentence from my boss. Except nobody shifts their vacations with him, and from what I could tell besides business trips to Wolto, I’ve never really seen him leave.”

“Not even for sick leave?”

“The medical technologies and health management on the Silver Fortress were top-notch even for the Union, so we just cured any illness on site, there was no need to request for sick leave. Those weird diseases and stuff outside couldn’t even make their way in.” Turan spread her hands in front of her, “Let me tell you this, I’ve heard that he didn’t even attend his own sister’s wedding and had his vice-admiral send the gift on his behalf.”

Lu Bixing shoved his notes back into his personal device after confirming that this pretty girl in front of him was not going at all helpful: “Alright....then does he have any dreams or goals? Long-term or short-term, anything counts.”

Turan looked at him dumbly.

“What about aspirations?”

“How is his relationship with his family? You mentioned that he had a sister earlier, but they sound pretty distant. Aside from his sister, does he have any other siblings?”

“Besides coworkers, what group of friends does he interact with the most?”

“Does he have any unresolved matters in the IU?”

“Bro,” Turan interrupted him in disbelief, “Do you want to fuck him or write a biography for him? Can’t we just sit down and discuss how we can get this sexually stupid ice-cold bastard to drop his pants? Look, we’re all busy here and I still have a bunch of heavy mechs without a place to park, can’t we stop wasting time and get down to business here?”

“Even though I am quite fond of his body, the feeling of pleasure from sexual intercourse is fundamentally just a chain of chemical reactions caused by nervous stimulation. Massaging more sensitive areas of the human body will yield a similar effect.” Lu Bixing explained in a professional academic manner to the party girl before him, “It’s like stroking the good spot of your house pet. Captain, do you really think a pointless topic like this is worth discussing? If you have such interests, I suggest you pick up a few episodes of Animal Planet.”

Turan: “...”

Suddenly, she felt like she wasn’t a lowly deviant of society and was simply an uneducated delinquent.

“Learning about a person and a relationship can bring joy and excitement. If you just want to feel physically satisfied, you might as well just get a full-body massage inside a medical capsule, because finding a partner means you have to communicate and interact with them.” Lu Bixing said, “Don’t you agree that slowly getting to know someone, learning about their personalities and caring for them is a wonderful and very rewarding process?”

Turan felt like she just got dragged into a classroom and was forced into a lecture that completely overturned her own set of values by Professor Lu. It was like someone dumped a bucket of holy water on her and purified her sinful soul, in which she finally admitted defeat and walked out in a daze.

Lu Bixing pulled out a cigarette he picked up somewhere from his pocket and lit it up without putting it in his mouth. The smoke that surrounded him made him feel a sense of loneliness- a solitude that came from Lin Jingheng that was both clear and heavy.

In the eyes of others, Lin Jingheng was like a symbol, a metaphor, a legend that was untouchable; he was everything except human. It was as if he had no emotions, no interests, and no character.

The weight of this feeling pressed on his heart like carrying a boulder on his chest, immovable even after Turan finally left.

The topic of this discussion sneezed twice in this invisible air of gossip pollen.

A human-form Zhanlu beside him commented: “According to ancient superstition, this means that someone is insulting you behind your back.”

Lin Jingheng shot him an unamused glance.

Zhanlu’s mechanical body felt the icy breeze from his stare: “That was a joke- ha ha ha…...Okay, have you heard of this joke before?”

Lin Jingheng had no intention of arguing with a mech and proceeded to move his attention

towards his personal device. A wide scanning map appeared above his device marked with various circles indicating areas with abnormal energy reactions.

The planet they are on right now was a planet called “Qiming[[1]](#footnote-1)”, which got its name from the fact that it could be clearly seen rising like the morning star from the old capital planet of Cayley. It was the third largest planet after Cayley and Beijing, and the former base planet of Ares Von’s pirate fleet.

Two soldiers of the Ninth Squadron dragged a man wearing clothing of the Cayley Pirates to Lin Jingheng’s feet. He was a hostage taken in by Lin Jingheng that let the fleet sneak onto the planet without alarming the existing patrols.

The pirate hostage kept his head low and spoke in a husky voice: “The area with the strongest energy reaction is the weaponry, the next would be the armed mobiles….ahem...the armed mobiles were used to patrol and suppress civilians. Right now is the time of prayer for the AUS, which is the time when security is the weakest;the patrols will also have a 15 minute break...but they’re all equipped with energy fields for territorial teleportation towards the mech dock. You guys will need to prepare signal blockages, or it will become quite troublesome if they run through the energy fields.”

One of the soldiers that held him down asked: “And everyone inside is part of the AUS?”

“I guess so,” The hostage responded in a whimper, “We were all taken in by the Prince from outside of the Union, so we don’t really believe in all of that weird cult stuff. But since we were taken in by them, we still have to kind of pretend to abide by their rules. Except our people all followed the Prince, and they were all pretty much eliminated under your guys’ hands. People that are still here in the headquarters are probably all from the AUS...Commander, I can take you in, but please spare me. We never really had much of a life living outside of the Union for so long, and even when we finally got fed, it was by a bunch of maniacs. Everyone in the AUS are madmen that have their heads filled with incomprehensible things; we have to be careful of every word we speak - if they suspect that you’re not loyal to them, they will beat and torture you by forcing you to live their lifestyle. They’ll take away your personal device and even monitor all your conversations; if we weren’t at war with the Union right now I almost swore we would have never been able to see a mech for the rest of our lives.”

Lin Jingheng coldly stared him down and gestured for the soldiers to shut him up.

The soldiers swiftly stepped forward to cover up the hostage’s mouth and drag him away. At the same time, the interference signals interjected quietly out the door as the Ninth Squadron passed through the locked doors inside the headquarters like a breeze of wind.

The AUS was in the midst of some shady cult ritual that had a sea of followers praying with knees and faces on the ground following some prayers through a speaker. Despite being galactic soldiers, the soldiers of the Ninth Squadron were no less organized and effective as land soldiers. They divided themselves up into teams of four and quickly invaded the main control room with impressive teamwork. With just a few blinks of laser, the patrolling pirates were all on the ground without a chance to call for help; the team of soldiers carefully placed the bodies neatly onto the side as they hacked in and took control of the entire armed mobiles of the AUS on land.

By the time the AUS realized what was happening, it was already too late. Their energy fields had been blocked by the interference signals and they stepped right into the trap of their enemies.

It took less than 20 minutes for the Ninth Squadron to take control of the entire headquarters from the moment Lin Jingheng gave them the order.

“From the military maps we’ve obtained, it seems like the main target of the AUS is the other seven galaxies of the Union. Even pirates generally agree that the Eighth Galaxy is a desert with no useful resources, so aside from Ares Von, nobody planned on wasting their time here.” Zhanlu reported as he walked behind Lin Jingheng. “Ares Von had been prioritizing destruction ever since he came to the Eighth Galaxy. He first destroyed three planets, then started hunting down underground terminals; we managed to find the original order of the AUS on the Cayley pirate mechs, which indicated they originally wanted to have the Cayley pirates take control of the Eighth Galaxy within 6 months so that they could open up a new terminal and passage into the Union. The AUS would then build a remote base of operations here while they sent the main fleet into the seven galaxies.”

“Ares Von is a two-faced man.” Lin Jingheng commented quietly. “He wanted to be the dictator of the Eighth Galaxy.”

Of all the Eighth Galaxy, only Cayley and Beijing-β were equipped with anti-missile protection and a sizable armed forces, so naturally Ares Von would decide to point his cannons at those two planets.

He was a hundred-year old mummy that wasn’t completely dead; he carried his half-broken body across the galaxy in a desperate attempt to revive the old glory of the Cayley royal family.

“That is correct, sir. I took control of the internal communication network between the AUS and Ares Von and intercepted the messages. I’ve discovered that Ares Von hadn’t reported his whereabouts and plans to the AUS, and as of now, news of his death has not been made public yet. The Eighth Galaxy is still currently closed off to the rest of the galaxies.”

“Very well,” Lin Jingheng said. “Let Turan bring her mechs over and tell her that Ares Von’s base is now mine. Inform…”

Lin Jingheng stopped abruptly in the middle of the sentence and looked towards the corner of the headquarters. Zhanlu’s gaze followed him and saw that Lin was looking at a mini eco-park.

The teachings of the AUS emphasized the relationship between mankind and nature, and therefore their living spaces and territories were often filled with numerous plants and flowers. If it was possible, they would even turn every habitable planet into a natural preserve. In the corner of their headquarters, fruits and plants peaked out of their greenhouse as a handful of small animals ran around the mini garden, creating an ironic contrast to the brutal pirate organization.

At the bottom of the mini eco-park was a farm of fungi.

Lin Jingheng made his way over and leaned down to look at the culture of mushrooms.

The group of shrooms under the shadow held up their little umbrellas against the moisture.

Lin Jingheng took off his gloves and reached down to pick out a tiny mushroom, not minding that the wet molds of the shroom covered his bare hands.

According to Zhanlu’s behavioral analysis, he concluded that Lin Jingheng wouldn’t enjoy having these things take up space inside an operational base, and kindly suggested: “Should we move this out, sir?”

“Leave it.” Zhanlu heard his master gave an uncharacteristic response after a moment of silence.

Lin Jingheng tossed the shroom away and took a few steps forward. Then, as if he suddenly remembered something, he turned around and pointed towards the medium of growing mushrooms: “That...growth medium and fungus mold, ask someone to take a few samples and move it onto the Model 3.”

Zhanlu was completely lost: “Sir, where do you plan on growing them on the Model 3?”

“Isn’t there a greenbelt?” Lin Jingheng answered without turning back, “Get rid of all the useless greens and replace them with this.”

Zhanlu: “...”

The mech felt slightly insulted that its greenbelt would now be filled with shrooms.

## Chapter 68 - Uh...With Just This Adaptor

“Zhanlu, cover the entire headquarters with your network. I want to see a full panoramic image of the infrastructure including all natural and artificial energy reactions.”

“Yes sir.”

“Limit the monitoring access, verify the basic communication system, and block out all mech connection ports. Send the completed panoramic image to everyone’s personal device once it’s ready, and order the Ninth Squadron to split up into six teams to clean up the headquarters for our use. Operational base name is....” Lin Jingheng wiped his hands clean as he scanned the headquarters and paused slightly, “temporarily called SPMF1, codename Base One.”

The former soldiers of the Silver Fortress would not even dare to question the commander’s naming, even if he’d decided to call the base “chihuahua” - only Zhanlu had the guts to speak up against all political incorrectness: “Sir, according to the universal code of the Union, terrestrial military bases do not have names that start with the letter ‘S’, and…”

Lin Jingheng pointed at him and ordered: “The panoramic image!”

As a high-spec AI with an incredible processing system, as long as there was enough battery, Zhanlu could multitask without any issues. He continued to nag and complain as he scanned and created the map that Lin Jingheng requested. Within seconds, a large 3D panorama image of the entire facility along with lines of complex data appeared in midair. At the same time, a more compact version of the image and data was sent directly to every soldier’s personal devices.

Zhanlu also finally ended his rant: “......Codename ‘SPMF1’ has already been used by the Silver Fortress.”

Satisfied with the results, Lin Jingheng didn’t lose his temper at the AI and only responded calmly: “Fuck the rules of the Union.”

The sudden disturbance left the praying followers of the AUS in panic. Yet while they attempted to reorganize in response, Zhanlu’s vast mental network engulfed the entire facility like a giant surveillance camera that allowed the soldiers of the Silver Fortress to disarm them immediately. The members of the AUS were dragged out of their little huts by the armed mobiles like scraps of garbage.

Members of the AUS were all dressed in outlandish outfits as if they were in a wild historical costume party; Lin Jingheng scanned the crowd quickly and felt as if he just walked into a giant gathering of freaks.

Amongst the crowd was a single middle-aged man who was cleanly dressed in comparison, earning himself an extra second of Commander Lin’s attention.

The middle-aged man didn’t seem like a high-ranking official as he quietly followed the crowd without causing a commotion. From the lack of reaction from the other followers when they got dragged away by the armed mobiles, it didn’t seem like he was anyone of particular importance.

The man looked about 200 years old from appearance; lines of wrinkles surrounded the corners of his eyes, but his pupils were clear and calm as if they were looking out a window. His hair was cut short, his fringes on the side whitened from age. Unlike the others who had many accessories on their clothing, the man wore a simple but fitting beige coat that lifted slightly with the wind as he got pushed by a robotic arm off of the armed mobile. His posture remained still and collected despite being in a hostage situation, looking uncharacteristically well-put-together.

When the middle-aged man passed by Lin Jingheng, he immediately called out the commander’s identity: “Commander Lin.”

Lin Jingheng stopped at that instant. The armed mobile also made a stop, its mechanical arm raised up as a laser gun reached out from inside the mobile and pointed directly at the temples of the elderly man.

Lin Jingheng’s gaze sharpened: “What did you call me?”

The elderly man answered cordially: “Commander Lin Jingheng; I’ve seen photos and videos of you before, so I am quite familiar with your looks. Allow me to introduce myself: my baptismal name is Hope, a nameless member of the AUS. It is an honor to finally meet you in person.”

A nameless follower was perhaps an accurate description; anyone worth a title wouldn’t have been sent to the Eighth Galaxy with Ares Von as most of the main forces of the AUS were busy spreading their influence in the other galaxies.

“I gave a detailed introduction to your boss, Ares Von; but from his expression, he still firmly believed I was an imposter, even on his deathbed. And you are sure that I am Lin Jingheng just based on one look?” Lin Jingheng gestured for the mechanical arm to release Hope from its restraint, “The death of ‘Lin Jingheng’ was confirmed by Eden, did you not hear about it?”

Hope dropped to the ground as the mechanical arms released him violently, but did not show any signs of anger or fear. Instead, he turned to give a nod of thanks towards the armed mobile and answered the commander kindly: “I have heard of this, but I don’t believe that you are simply a man obsessed with plastic surgery. That you were able to take control of the headquarters here must mean that Ares Von’s fleet has been completely annihilated, correct? To be completely honest, Ares Von was like a wild animal with very extreme values. He often played games with the organization, and has...defied nature by altering his body, making him a very hostile figure within the organization. The reason we still offered him a helping hand was because we saw military potential in his madness. Within the last few years, he had organized countless strategies against the Union with his careful planning and experience in battle; he was a formidable opponent even amongst pirates.”

Hope paused and looked up courageously to meet Lin Jingheng’s gaze.

Perhaps the infamous commander didn’t have the rumored look of a thug in his eyes, but the middle-aged follower didn’t shy away from those grey eyes and spoke,implication heavy in each word: “Eden is not perfect, am I right, Commander Lin?”

Lin Jingheng sneered slightly, but didn’t deny it: “Maybe.”

“Nothing is perfect,” Hope continued slowly. “Including mankind. From ancient times, the wise man slowly conquered the food chain, the environment, earth itself, the Milky Way, and now the Eight Galaxies. From then on, time, dimensions and space...virtually every untamed living organism has been eradicated by mankind and then reborn through genetic rebuilding. In the Union, natural occurrences like climate and weather are all controlled by man. We’ve crossed the line of mingling with nature and tapped our hands in creationism, arrogantly acting like gods-- Commander Lin, what do you think will become the next enemy of the wiseman?”

Lin Jingheng was shocked; he’d never met anyone crazy enough to attempt to preach at him even after being captured as a hostage.

He was already unwilling to talk, but his desire to even give a snarky reaction dropped to a negative at this cult missionary attempt. The commander turned his back expressionlessly and walked away.

“Commander, did you know? Since the first city of human civilization was built in ancient times, mankind has voluntarily given up their freedoms to build walls in order to keep themselves in. Thousands of years passed, and mankind only learned how to fight amongst themselves over worthless ownership of property and land like insects inside a container. And when the insects age, the next generations follow their example. They’ve now given up the freedom of their minds and spirits, along with the freedom of their senses in favor of building a giant web of connection that allows everyone’s thoughts and feelings to become transparent in the form of quantitative data. Everyone’s thoughts are now buried in a sea of information controlled by others in an endless process of invisible brainwashing that forces them to follow the current of the mainstream. This was already dangerous in itself, and now mankind even built Eden! Mankind has finally given up on the freedom of their souls!” Hope announced loudly behind the commander, “Commander Lin, Eden is just a beginning, what are we going to give up next? The Union doesn’t have freedom or equality - we are all just fooling ourselves into believing it does! If mankind continues like this, we’ll become extinct!”

Lin Jingheng kept walking.

“Please open your eyes,” Hope sighed deeply as the drivers inside the armed mobile dragged him away. His coat danced along with the wind as the man looked forward like a savior facing the guillotine. The followers around him were touched by his earlier words and turned quiet; some began to tear up while others began chanting with Hope about enlightenment.

“Open your eyes, my brethren,” they chanted, “may nature bless you.”

The mumbling voices of the followers merged into a large stream until they were gone with the wind..

Lu Bixing arrived two days later onto Planet Qiming. Due to the technological differences between the AUS and the Union, the energy plug of the mechs didn’t match with the ports; in other words, the charger didn't match up and required a mechanical engineer to fix.

Lin Jingheng was at a meeting on the fourth floor of the new operational base when Lu Bixing landed. The meeting room had a spherical window that reached all the way to the ground facing directly towards the mech receiving dock, creating a very open space. Inside the meeting room, a commissioner of the Ninth Squadron was giving his report on developing a channel to replenish military supplies. Lin Jingheng listened in without a word, but the unamused expression on his face had everyone else in the room standing on their toes.

Just then, a large sound from the mech dock pierced through the noise-canceling walls of the meeting room. Lin Jingheng subconsciously turned to look and saw one of the Ninth Squadron’s old mechs parking, letting out a whole circus as its door opened.

The members of the newly formed Self-Defense Force rolled out like a party; some people had perhaps never stepped on an actual planet in their life and got a little too excited. There were some that jumped in excitement, others who reached their hands up to cheer, and others…who laid on the ground to study the soil.

This circus completely killed the deathly serious mood of the newly obtained operational base.

Lin Jingheng: “......”

The reporting commissioner saw the expression on the commander’s face grow grim and slowly shut his mouth.

Lu Bixing casually strolled down the mech after most people stepped out. Perhaps the message that the soldiers sent back had been worded poorly, but Lu Bixing didn’t seem like he was here for work and was actually here for a vacation. He wore a very stylish long coat paired with shoes that carefully managed to stay on the fine line between casual and formal. The dress shirt he wore was a slim cut that fitted nicely to his waistline with the collar propped up fashionably. The whole look was completed with some snazzy shades on his face, along with a little Rickhead minion holding his bag at his side. The other three students plus a ferocious Monoeyed Hawk as entourage seemed like a bunch of cheap bodyguards around a rich model who were there to send the model off to his next fashion show.

Maybe there was a telescope built in the sunglasses, but Lu Bixing only scanned around a few moments before he locked his gaze at the meeting room. From far away, he gave a bright grin and waved in the direction of the room.

The commissioner studied the commander a little and noticed that even though his expression was still dark, his eyebrows lifted a little and the frown on his face returned to a straight line. He then attempted to continue: “.....Shall I continue on about the future development of plan two?”

Lin Jingheng lowered his gaze and finally gave a response: “That won’t work out, move on to the next one. Just say the main points, make it short.”

Despite it being a rejection, it was at least an advice from the normally-wordless commander. The commissioner finally received a clear order and could almost feel tears run down his cheeks as he efficiently reported the rest of his plans.

By the time this meeting was over, Lu Bixing had already fixed the charging problem with an electromagnetic configuration.

“The Eighth Galaxy was originally a hub of underground trades, so I’ve seen plenty of wild mechs. You know a lot of private mech designers work with underground engineers, so they’re super flexible and don’t care about whether something should follow IU or Intergalactic regulations. As long as it functions as it should, anything goes, even if they don’t fit on the launching decks or tracks.” Lu Bixing said off-handedly as he held a digital pen in his hand inside the mech dock. “So my suggestion is, if you don’t know the sources of your mechs and weapons, it’s best to set up a ‘negotiation platform’ or something and make all ports removable so that you can adjust them as necessary.”

Turan stood dumbfoundedly: “Isn’t that a lot of work? How long will it take?”

“If you let me do it then it shouldn’t take too long. Let me borrow the Ninth Squadron’s repair team, and should be done in about a week.” Lu Bixing reached out and pinched the digital pen, turning it back into a dot of light as it returned to his personal device. “I was the one that rebuilt the mech storage my dad used back on Cayley.”

Turan, who had never seen this kind of rural civilian scientist, and stared in surprise: “Just...with this adaptor thing…”

“It’s an electromagnetic configurator.”

“....The electrowhatever, if we had that back on the Silver Fortress, we’d still need to gather up those useless losers of the Third Squadron for a meeting that’d last about the whole afternoon while we got people to take meeting notes. We’d then need to go through the Captain of the Third Squadron, the Military Council, and the Secretary Office before it got approved and sent to our boss's hands. Boss’d then need to approve that before the Third Squadron could take the proposal to request for funding and send a report to the Council, which’d take at least three days even if you ran faster than light.” Turan grabbed his hands in sincere thankfulness, “Three days, and you took care of this in five minutes. Professor Lu, having good looks really saves the world!”

Lin Jingheng’s voice passed through like a chill down her spine: “Sure, once we getcommunication back, you’ll be in charge of informing the Third Squadron that they can all commit suicide right on spot.”

Turan frantically let go of his hand and stood up straight.

Lin Jingheng nitpicked at her without shame: “Captain Turan, you’re quite familiar with the procedures. So tell me, when did I say you could bring those useless animals from the station over?”

Turan took the blame for no reason and felt that she was wrong from inside the Eighth Galaxy and out: “I…”

“It was me.” Lu Bixing quickly pushed the sunglasses above his head, “I asked them to come help. Saturday and them are pretty good helpers, and most of them don’t want to return to those gloomy days after experiencing war firsthand. The Self-Defence Force reassembled and wanted to become your secondary fleet. Elites may be elites, but even if the whole Silver Ten comes over they wouldn’t be able to watch out for the Eighth Galaxy, right? We’re going to need a new fleet at some point.”

Lin Jingheng had no comments after those words. He pretended nothing just happened and left quickly after inspecting the dock that Lu Bixing just reformed.

Lu Bixing nudged Turan and asked in a small voice: “Do all your mechanics have to get the commander’s approval to everything they do?”

Turan complained in mental exhaustion: “Of course, the Union’s Military Council is steeped in bureaucracy. There’s a lot of eyes on the Silver Fortress, and if you don’t follow all the internal procedures, everything will be sent back by the Council. Even our commander can’t help it, he had no say in this. Those tech geeks of the Third Squadron also have way too many ideas, making it so that the Captain’s always following the commander around with a giant stack of proposals. He got shot down and insulted every day by the commander because of this, but for some reason he never got sick of it and would even pay to live inside the commander's personal device.”

Sometimes Lin Jingheng would purposely mess with the Council when he received the proposal and wouldn’t even write ‘approved’ on it, only make a little mark-- a period meant it was approved, a question mark meant the proposal needed further detailing, an exclamation mark meant it needed to be sent back to revise, and a X mark meant ‘you’re a dumbass.’

Lu Bixing quietly digested this information.

A rural military mechanic didn’t need to attend meetings nor did he need to speak with anyone; he only needed four students with their notebooks to complete the negotiation platform in one afternoon. Lu Bixing raised his invisible tail up to the sky proudly as he excitedly made his way to find Commander Lin for his turn to be scolded.

The reporting time ended up taking longer than the actual planning, yet Lin Jingheng didn’t scold him nor send him away with markings on his papers. He only listened silently as Lu Bixing rambled on about his project, and even managed to pull out the main points from the rant to ask three questions. He then nodded his head and answered: “Sure, you can try it. Let me know if you run into any problems.”

The sunglasses were still resting on top of his head as Lu Bixing stood up after finishing the report. He leaned on Lin Jingheng’s desk with both arms and shot a cheery smile at the commander.

Lin Jingheng had a bad feeling.

“It’s already past dinner time,” Lu Bixing said. “We finally made it on land -- are you still going to eat your nutrients?”

Lin Jingheng quietly let out a sigh. Even though this unconventional engineer could replace a whole team of mechanics, he was still quite delicate at heart and needed extra care and attention. Lin Jingheng placed his hand on his personal device and was ready to call in an AI to serve this spoiled brat.

“Don’t bother, AIs also have rights,” Lu Bixing grabbed his wrist. “Commander, we’re only 300 kilometers away from the biggest city of Qiming, let’s go out and eat.”

## Chapter 69 - There Won’t Be A Next Time

The temporary office door was half opened when Turan dropped by to hand Lu Bixing a list of their repair team and check in with her boss. Yet before she could announce her arrival by the door, she overheard this, almost choking on her own words that rolled straight back down her throat in shock. She closed her mouth shut and stared wide-eyed at the scene before her, shocked to the point where she didn’t even want to breathe.

The culture of the Eighth Galaxy was a symphony of smugglers and wanderers, its cities were centers for recycling artificial idiots, the executive heads were the mafia and gangs of each planet, and the people were constantly struggling just to live in these hellish living conditions...Lin Jingheng concluded that the young scientist Mr. Lu probably burned off all his brain cells from overworking a whole afternoon, just hearing this wild suggestion.

He swallowed down the urge to spit out vulgarities and asked, “What do you want to eat that isn’t already available here that requires you to go outside, dirt?”

“It’s been over 6 months since we landed on a natural planet,” Lu Bixing softened his voice as he leaned in on the desk with one leg standing, the other tapping around like a restless child. He lifted a bright smile as if a stranger to negative emotions and looked towards Lin: “Hey Commander, you know I’ve never really been around the Eighth Galaxy despite my age. I was stuck on Cayley for so long until I finally managed to go out, and halfway out I had to stop in Beijing because I picked you up…”

Lu Bixing reminded himself of the awkward days when the two had first met and had to interact through the ecopod. This slightly awkward event was forced into becoming an even more awkward memory as Lu Bixing pulled it out in this context.

Lin Jingheng felt himself tense up subconsciously: “Okay, okay, just go off and stop wasting your time here. Hurry up and go, just make sure to come back before midnight.”

And then the man that couldn’t even spell out the word ‘fun’ lowered his head in frustration and started flipping through a random report with absolutely no intention of moving from his current position.

Lu Bixing slowly stood back up straight as his gaze swam around for a split second to reflect on his own words. He felt that he’d made a slight mistake with the excuse earlier and now Lin Jingheng was just pretending to not catch the hint of invitation.

Oh mighty human civilization, it was one thing to let people invent inhuman nutrient packs, why did mankind also have to create AIs that could take care of all daily meals?

Without a good plan to continue the fight and unsure whether or not Lin Jingheng was really that reluctant to go, Lu Bixing gave the man before him a longing look as he admitted temporary defeat in his head: “*What a stonehead; oh well, I’ll have more chances in the future*.”

As he consoled himself with his big heart, Lu Bixing turned around to meet Turan’s gaze right by the door. The two quickly exchanged glances as Turan called out from the doorway: “Pardon, sir!”

Lin Jingheng: “At ease, what is it?”

Turan walked in with a heavy expression on her face and said: “Commander, the scanning system just extended its outer boundaries to a radius of 200 kilometers, and we’ve discovered that there’s a small group of unidentified personnel spying on the base. According to the energy levels we’ve observed, we suspect that they are armed!”

Lin Jingheng and Lu Bixing were both taken aback at the instant.

Lu Bixing had grown up in the Eighth Galaxy and understood the kind of people that lived here - if there was any chance of survival in staying, they would never choose to venture out towards danger, and was quite shocked at the news. He thought to himself: “*Do the people on Qiming really have some guts*?”

Just then, Turan gave him a small wink from an angle that Lin Jingheng couldn’t see.

Lu Bixing: “...”

Curiosity killed the cat, and a meddlesome nature would kill a Captain; maybe this girl loved jumping into a pit of fire.

“Stay right there,” Lin Jingheng first called out to Lu Bixing, then turned towards Turan, “How far away are they from the base? What grade of armory?”

Lu Bixing still had his back turned towards Lin Jingheng and was desperately trying to communicate through facial expressions to Turan-- telling her to not make too big of a fuss, because he still wanted to go out and tour around even if Lin Jingheng didn’t want to.

Thankfully, Turan was mentally tough and thick-skinned enough to fully show off her talent in bluffing when she realized she may have exaggerated a little too much and amended her previous statement without a change in expression: “Their position is constantly moving, armory level is ‘terra negative’ and not very professional, I’m suspecting that it’s a civilian unit that may have been victims or hostages of the AUS from before.”

Armories were all categorized into different grades--for example, mechs or terrestrial anti-missile systems were considered “cosmic grade”. Non-stellar armories were categorized into “terra grade”. Normally, a “standard terra grade” would mean the overall force of armed vehicles on land, which generally includes armed tanks and mobiles. Armed vehicles that were more destructive, such as fighter jets, aircraft carriers, and ground cruise missiles, were categorized as “terra plus”. Thus, a “terra negative” was a grade lower than the standard grade, and while they were considerably weaker, they still possessed enough firepower to pose a threat. A terra negative would be equivalent to a bunch of unorganized criminals carrying bricks and metal poles patrolling a certain area, and normally wouldn’t require properly armed units to take care of them. However, it didn’t exclude the possibility that they could potentially be hiding a greater threat underneath.

“Terra negatives shouldn’t be a big deal.” Lu Bixing wasn’t too keen on dragging Lin Jingheng down like this and found an opportunity to cut in as he got ready to take his leave, “Don’t underestimate mechanics -- in this era, as long as electromagnetic waves still exist, we can hack into any system in this world. If it really comes down to it, I can also just jump into an energy field and escape from there--see ya!”

Both Turan and Lin Jingheng stopped him at the same time: “Wait!”

Lin Jingheng lowered his eyebrows in slight distress. Lu Bixing wasn’t his soldier -- despite being a self-proclaimed military engineer, he was mostly around to just help with various tasks. On top of that he was already a grown adult with a decent handle in mech piloting that knew how to navigate his way through society. If he wanted to, he even had the ability to build an entire armed unit in the midst of chaos; he wasn’t a helpless minor, so Lin Jingheng didn’t really have the right to supervise him like a parent.

Lu Bixing said: “Don’t worry, if they really turn out to just be civilians, it’s even better for me. I’ll go and talk with them about the situation, and maybe even recruit some extra soldiers for you.”

Lin Jingheng was afraid of this ‘talk’. He wasn’t sure what kind of fertilizer had been used to raise Lu Bixing; this boy was extremely optimistic and had a big heart--one so big that even Lin Jingheng wondered if he really was a carbon-based organism that could live off of anything and everything. Lu Bixing’s friendly nature made him want to befriend everyone he crossed paths with, especially when he didn’t need to worry about any gains or losses. Sometimes Lin Jingheng suspected that he would go off and let people beat him half dead before he would even attempt to lift a finger.

“Go find…” Lin Jingheng paused as he quickly decided that Monoeyed Hawk would not be a reliable person in this situation, and turned to Turan: “Is there anyone in the Ninth Squadron that isn’t busy?”

“No,” Turan responded regretfully, “The base is too big and we only have so many people. Our engineering team just got transferred over to Professor Lu and are currently working on preparation, so we’re very short on people. We have some that are currently at break right now, but they’ve all just ended their shifts, and in less than a few hours they’ll have to…”

Lu Bixing quickly interrupted: “Oh no, don’t worry, I’m just going out for dinner; it’s not like I’m out for some diplomatic meeting, you guys don’t need to worry so much.”

Turan made a face like she'd just had a sudden realization: “Oh, is Professor Lu going out? How about...hm, I don’t really have a lot to do right now, how about...I go with you?”

She also proceeded to shoot him a playful wink.

Turan was an infamous thug back in the Silver Fortress that often went out for shady businesses and activities behind closed doors during her vacation breaks. Her complaint letters in the Silver Fortress always ranked the highest, and at one point her playful deeds even got up to the attention of the higher-ups of the Council, forcing Lin Jingheng to keep her in check for over six months.

In her own words, not getting some goods from pretty boys was her own loss; if there was a chance, at least get a hookup with them. And right now, Lin Jingheng could’ve sworn there was some drool at the corner of her mouth as she looked toward Lu Bixing.

“The Ninth Squadron is all busy, but the Captain doesn’t have much to do?” Lin Jingheng shot her a cold glance. “Get out, and turn in your report before training tomorrow morning.”

Turan quickly took back her thirsty stares and answered without complaint: “Yes sir!”

Lin Jingheng then sat at his seat with his brows still glued together for a little while, then stood up and turned towards Lu Bixing: “Wait for me.”

Then, he walked into the inner room with the same frustrating expressionless face to change.

Lu Bixing: “......”

Turan spread her hands the moment Lin Jingheng walked away and spoke tonelessly to him: “You’re writing my report for me.”

Lu Bixing could only give her a weak smile.

Turan still looked a little displeased, and finally gestured for him to lean in closer after thinking for a bit. Lu Bixing leaned over to hear the Captain of the Ninth Squadron shadily say: “So your...heterochromic dad, how come he always just comes and goes as he pleases? You should introduce him to me sometime.”

Despite being a man of culture that had seen and experienced many things, Lu Bixing almost felt his heart jump out as he jolted back and hit a table behind him: “Hey sister, that I can’t do, my dad’s not for sale, especially not like this!”

Turan burst into laughter from his dramatic reaction into a feral longhorn beetle.

Just then, the door to the inner room opened-- Commander Lin changed faster than people taking off their socks, walking out as swiftly as the wind. Turan quickly turned towards Lu Bixing at the sound of the door opening and said quietly: “I’ll send you a template of the report to your personal device later.”

She then ran off before her boss could give her another scolding.

Lin Jingheng pulled out a cigarette from the pocket in his casual wear, and lit it up as he walked toward the door. He didn’t lift his head up to look at Lu Bixing , walking quickly like a mafia boss patrolling his territory; a cloud of smoke blew out from his mouth as he gestured towards Lu Bixing and ordered: “Let’s go.”

Lu Bixing almost ran over with overflowing excitement but suppressed the urge to do so with his entire being and remained calm: “How are we going out?”

Lin Jingheng: “The AUS left quite a few armed mobiles here disguised as civilian automobiles, probably for their secret services. We can just take one of those. I’ll need to check the geography around the base, the size and identities of the enemy, so you’re going to organize all the data.”

Lu…the newly appointed secretary of the commander felt a sense of helplessness. He felt that Lin was born with some sort of deeply rooted antisocial nature that always pitted the man against the world, and even against Lu Bixing himself. Going out to relax and eat was like breaking the laws to him -- he needed some legitimate reason to get down off of his throne and walk outside so that he wasn’t wasting his time.

Lu Bixing mumbled to himself: “You sure are going out for business, your highness.”

Armed automobiles were the kings of warfare on land that could be categorized into weapons of mass-destruction. With enough energy supply, equipment, and a good handler, it would even be possible to strike down fighter jets with them. The mobiles were armed with a shield similar to the build of a space mech, but because the controls were a lot less complex, armed mobiles didn’t require mental networks to maneuver.

From the looks of the mobiles left by the AUS, they were not that different from civilian cars; in fact, they were even more beaten-up than an average car, fully equipped with a manual steering wheel that might indicate it was possibly an ancient piece of equipment from Earth.

Lu Bixing sat carefully inside the car, worried that even the doors might fall apart. On the other side, Lin Jingheng bypassed the security system and brushed a finger against a fingerprint scanner. The entire mobile transformed into a fully-equipped high-spec vehicle within seconds, its quality almost on par with a standard IU unit; the beaten-up look had really just been a facade.

Lin Jingheng saw out of the corner of his eye that Lu Bixing had fastened his seatbelt and entered the command code into the system. The armed mobile received the command and like a ground missile, pierced through the air and shot out the base.

The area outside the operational base were empty lands. Qiming’s rotation period didn’t follow the standard 24 hours of Wolto, making day and night seem to pass by much more slowly compared to the time they were used to on the artificial space station. It was already dusk; nameless plants and corn had already grown as tall as a person and blocked off the roads. If it wasn’t for the armed mobile, it would be difficult to travel around it. There was no deserted land in the First Galaxy as every piece of land was carefully planned out by the IU; even undeveloped lands were cleaned up properly by gardening robots for aesthetic purposes.

Lin Jingheng wasn’t joking around when he’d said he wanted to map out the topography. The armed mobile’s scanning system remained at a radius of above 1 kilometer since it drove out and automatically recorded every piece of energy wave signals it captured. A wave of invisible particle beams shot out from the front of the mobile to put down the obstacles on the road. The soft light of the equipment and screens gently shone on Lin Jingheng’s marble statue-like face; he sat silently, the lines of his shoulders and back clean and straight underneath the cotton dress shirt. Lu Bixing was recording the energy signals disinterestedly as he looked over, subconsciously reaching his hands out to frame Lin Jingheng between his fingers like a movie poster.

“Hey Commander,” Lu Bixing said, “Have you ever taken your girlfriend...or boyfriend out of school when you were in Black Orchid Academy?”

Lin Jingheng was quiet for a while, and just when Lu Bixing thought he was going to ignore the question again, Lin Jignheng answered: “Black Orchid is a military school, the security is much more strict than this garbage base. There’s no way out, and you’d be locked inside if you got caught trying to run.”

And the one time he escaped from school, he was locked up inside the 'coffin’ for three days as punishment.

Night on Qiming was blissfully quiet and peaceful without any obstacles on the road. Three hundred kilometers passed by quickly as the armed mobile passed through the desert at almost the speed of sound. Soon, the roads began to grow smoother and expand into highway terminals up ahead. The quiet energy radar finally picked up some small signals from lights and silhouettes of buildings in front, and the view of a city became visible.

Lu Bixing pondered a little before speaking up: “Captain Turan was just…”

Lin Jingheng didn’t respond. From the lack of reaction from the radar since they left the base, it was more than obvious what Turan’s intentions were.

“...She was just trying to help me ask you out on my request.” Despite being half-dragged into the mess, as the winner of this strange game, Lu Bixing heroically took the blame for Turan and glanced carefully at Lin Jingheng. “Lin, are you mad?”

There was a whole minute where Lin Jingheng was completely silent, until he finally spoke up without answering the question: “We’re almost there.”

Lu Bixing looked up instantly.

Lin Jingheng: “There won’t be a next time.”

Lu Bixing turned his head towards the window suddenly and saw the excitable smile that had spread uncontrollably across his face. It took him a full five minutes to force his facial muscles to relax back to something normal. He then pulled out his personal device and played around with it for a few moments; a loading bar flashed across his wrist and a virtual screen appeared. The screen was displaying an old satellite map-- the master hacker had just hacked into the city’s internal network.

Lu Bixing blew out a whistle as he proudly shared his signal with Lin Jingheng: “3.5 seconds, that’s a personal record.”

He poked around enthusiastically and flipped through some information about the city: “This place is called the Milky Way City, average population about 3 million...look, there’s a central shopping district and some famous cuisines! Hey Lin, do you like chocolate pancakes?”

“.......What the hell? No.” Lin Jingheng turned the speed of the mobile down to an average driving speed as he pulled out another cigarette and shoved it in his mouth. “*This kid is extremely talented, he just doesn’t grow up*.” He thought to himself.

Lin Jingheng lifted an arm and rested it on the disguise steering wheel, slowly driving the car into the “Welcome to The Milky Way City” highway entrance. He wasn’t sure if he actually scared some inanimate object, but the moment he passed through, the lights on the sign vanished and emitted some smoke.

“There are even casinos...didn’t they say that the financial trust system was completely destroyed? What are they gambling with? Hey Lin, wanna guess what they’re using instead of money now?”

Suddenly, an ancient philosophical question resurfaced in Lin Jingheng’s endless sea of thoughts.

“Where am I?” He thought, “Why am I here?”

It was impossible to find a legitimate urban city within the Eighth Galaxy, and in terms of development, Qiming was still behind what Beijing had once been. The only positive was that Qiming’s climate was significantly better, so the cities seemed livelier. The central shopping district was really just a bunch of complicated alleyways filled with small tent shops and eateries that surrounded the streets and buildings. The uneven ground was filled with trash and bodily fluids, its stench mixed with the smell of food looming in the air.

A small robot announced with its mechanical voice: “Three nutrient syringes for 1000 banknotes, foreign travelers please line up here! Evening special, three syringes for a whole night of service!”

Lin Jingheng stood to the side and observed for a short while, discovering that this little city had established its own little economic community. Travelers exchanged nutrient syringes for a type of monetary points, which could then be used to purchase goods and services from the merchants within the city. The merchants then exchanged the points they earned with the city for syringes, eliminating the hassle of finding change for commodities.

While Lin Jingheng studied the city, Lu Bixing had already shoved three syringes into the robot’s stomach. The robot swallowed the syringes and shot a beam of light towards Lu Bixing’s wrist, indicating that the 1000 banknotes had been transferred to him.

“Tonight’s on me.” Lu Bixing said as he grabbed onto Lin Jingheng’s hand to not lose him in the small alleyways. A group of small vendors passed by with a cart full of stock through the alleyway up front, and suddenly he felt the hand he’d been holding subconsciously pull back a little, then suddenly turn into a full-force tug that pulled Lu Bixing’s entire body back.

Then, a bucket of water poured down on the spot Lu Bixing had just been standing on.

Lin Jingheng: “Be careful.”

## Chapter 70 - Doomed Fate

Lu Bixing shoved the fingers of his empty hand in his mouth and blew a long whistle. A vague figure appeared behind the window above where the bucket of water had been tossed from to stare down at him.

Lu Bixing called up as if he was talking to an old friend: “Hey don’t hide, I saw you already, how can you do that! Look at me, I’m just a humble scholar, and you guys are using these same underhand tricks to get my attention? Not even special treatment for a handsome lad like me, my pride’s hurt!”

A wave of laughter sounded off from the surroundings as the window opened. A woman in pajamas peeked her head out and laughed out loud; it was clear from the way she was dressed that she was involved in some shady business.

“What are you laughing at?” Lu Bixing waved playfully, “Hurry up and throw two packs of cigs down as an apology!”

Some chattering sounds came from behind the window as more heads peeked out. There were men and women of all different looks like a hub of different flavors; most of them were not dressed properly and were playfully pushing each other around. They played around for a little bit before pulling out two packs of unbranded cigarettes and threw them down to Lu Bixing.

From ancient times to the New Sidereal Era, luxury commodities were almost as old as human history. Some had evolved to contain new technologies and become extremely expensive while others maintained their traditional forms, like hand-rolled cigarettes. The cigarette box was decorated with an illustration of a male pin-up model that winked playfully at the consumer; inside the box was a ‘special’ brand of low-quality tobacco from the Eighth Galaxy that emitted a strong and spicy stench even after it was wrapped. Some of the paper inside wasn't properly wrapped up and folded out from the cigarette head like a little tail.

Lu Bixing waved back towards the window as he striked a similar pose, then took Lin Jingheng’s hand once more and continued walking off: “Thanks, pals!”

The crowd above saw this well-mannered but playful lad leave and blew a number of kisses at him.

Lin Jingheng had been pondering how to pull his hand away without making it seem too awkward and was completely in daze as he watched the whole confrontation. At first, he was just surprised that a nerd like Lu Bixing had acquaintances on Qiming, but then noticed something was off when that same eccentric scientist shoved a box of cigarettes into his hand. It took only about 100 meters of walking before this Wolto-raised Commander Lin finally realized something and asked with an uneasy expression: “Wait, those were prostitutes and scammers earlier, weren’t they?”

Buildings that looked a little more proper than others in a busy city street were often hidden redlight districts. They tended to be considered the lowest of the low in quality, from basic hygiene to its workers and didn’t make enough money normally to sustain their shady businesses; so naturally they resorted to scamming with underhand tricks.

The typical structure of scamming was usually as such-- they would have someone wait by the window with a bucket of water, then splash it down when they saw a potential ‘customer’ pass by. The passerby would normally pick a fight or complain to the business, giving the people inside the excuse of an apology or drying of clothes to lure the customer indoors. Then, the apology and service would usually turn into a full package of drinks and partying, where the businesses would strip the customer naked of all valuables.

Lu Bixing turned around and stared into Lin Jingheng’s eyes for a few moments before he finally burst out laughing: “Commander, this isn’t just a slow reaction anymore, you’re at least half a movie late!”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

He’d spent the whole trip pondering the philosophical question of his existence and was not functioning normally since the moment he left the operational base. Half his brain was a daze, almost so much so that he didn’t even notice this entire event happening right before his eyes.

Lu Bixing keenly read the darkening expression on Lin Jingheng’s face--- did those fools want to die?

“Hey hold on wait here, we’ve already left, what’s the point of going back just to give them a scolding?” Lu Bixing held out his arms and blocked the way, laughing.

The way he was looking at Lin Jingheng right now was through heavy bias from his heightened hormone levels; watching Lin brutally roast people was cute, insulting others was cute, and even that anti-social and murderous face looked unreasonably cute in his eyes. Lu Bixing felt like a psychotic artist with this newfound appreciation for an extremely questionable sense of aesthetics.

“There must be a lucky star shining above that building today that saved their lives because our commander was in a daze. What is this? Lucky koi fishes! Hold on to the pack of cigs from the lucky fishes in the pond, it must be destiny...hey, look! There’s a fortune teller over there, let’s get some good fortune while we’re still blessed with this luck!”

An old man wrapped in a headpiece sat under the broken tent. The old and crippled table in front of him was a peculiar Bagua board with a deck of old tarot cards that looked like it had been chewed on by rats on it. A small sign saying “Ancient Fortune Telling” hung above the old man’s head.

Lu Bixing called out to the old man under the tent: “Hey gramps, how much for one round of fortune telling?”

The old man gestured at him: “20 notes.”

“Here’s 100, we want to hear some good things.” Lu Bixing poked around his personal device and sent 100 points to the price meter beside the old man. He grabbed Lin Jingheng’s shoulder and pushed the commander in front of him and said, “Read this gentleman’s fortune!”

The old man had probably been here a long while with fairly poor business. He was unhealthily thin and the meter beside him had only racked 200 points up until now. Yet this walking piggy bank by the name of Lu Bixing popped out of the blue and delivered enough points for him to exchange for a syringe that would last him several months.

Overjoyed by this sudden blessing, the old man held up the old deck of cards: “Good sir, please pull a card from this deck and place it in the center of the mystic Bagua map.”

Lin Jingheng: “...What the fuck?”

Lu Bixing took advantage of the situation and leaned in, grabbed Lin Jingheng’s hand, and pulled out a random card from the colorful deck.

The old fortune teller took the money and put on a serious act. He quickly held the card in between his palms and chanted a long line of some unknown sutra, then very confidently said: “My good sir, I could see your bright future from the card. I saw you abandon your doubts and break through the mist of uncertainty to return to your true self. You will be blessed by the power of your fate; you will become an immovable force as you find the answer that you’re seeking. May all the gods bless you.”

Lin Jingheng knew this old man was just bullshitting, but the moment he heard “abandon your doubts and break through the mist of uncertainty to return to your true self”, he felt something touch his heart. As if a rusty chord got pulled by a sudden gust of wind after being left alone for too long and made a strange sound, he looked up and almost wanted to ask “What’s the answer I’m seeking?” The old man looked at him and grinned brightly with a few missing teeth.

Lin Jingheng: “....”

He turned around and left without a word.

Lu Bixing followed behind with a grin on his face: “Wasn’t that nice to hear? Smile, commander.”

Lin Jingheng turned to press his hand on Lu Bixing’s forehead, pushed the loud noise machine back a few steps and walked off as he put his hands back into his pocket.

The old man took his survival money and thanked them as the two men left. When Lu Bixing turned around to give him a wave, the old man took his hat off and exposed his whitened hair to return his gratitude. He stood until the two men walked off into the distance, then sat back down as he carefully turned the card that Lin Jingheng pulled earlier.

In ancient times, the Tarot fortune-telling culture was also quite popular at one point before it became a complete joke thanks to the hands of scammers, even to this day it no longer was a proper business or tradition. The deck that the old fortune teller had was just a five dollar ‘beginner’s deck’ he’d bought off a random merchant for people to play with. Unlike proper tarot cards, they were simpler versions that just had a line of the card’s meaning printed on the edges that didn’t require the reader to actually memorize all of the meanings.

The old man placed the card near his face as he closely deciphered the small line of text on the bottom right corner--

“The Tower: doomed fate.”

The fortune teller shivered as the evening breeze blew by and looked up in the direction that Lin Jingheng had gone, only to see that the two had already left his sight. He struggled to get up, closed his little shop and went off to collect his nutrient syringe.

“There were also night markets like these on Cayley,” Lu Bixing exchanged credits for a few oranges on the way and started peeling them as he walked, “It was filled with a bunch of little shops and scammers inside like these, usually the same pattern. Naive potential victims that didn’t know the rules would come in and join the fun...like you--people would lure you in like it was some sort of festival, then scam you from the inside out. After that, the entire street would party. I used to hang out around those people when I was a kid, just finding a place to read books in some corner, and when I got bored I’d just watch them scam people. When they succeeded, someone would come by and give me a pat on the head and a small toy.”

Lin Jingheng: “Didn’t you say you were sick when you were younger to the point that the Hawk wouldn’t even let you eat barbeque? He just watched you hang out in places like these?”

“Of course he wouldn’t let me run off on the streets,” Lu Bixing continued as he handed Lin Jingheng the freshly peeled oranges. “The little townstreet on Cayley was a place my dad leased out to them, and the entire piece of land behind was his too. The place was just empty anyway, so he built a little house there. If you opened up the windows to the backyard you could pet the little animals that the street performers raised; I was the one that asked him to let me move in. My legs had some atrophy issues during that time and needed rehab, so when I was walking around the house for rehab it was nice to hear the outside be so lively.”

“I don’t eat this.” Lin Jingheng waved off the oranges. “What happened to your leg?”

“Got sick, and got better later.” Lu Bixing answered briefly.

Lin Jingheng: “What kind of illness, exactly?”

A hard expression flashed across Lu Bixing’s face for a few seconds as if he didn’t want to answer. Then, he quickly turned around and said: “Lovesickness, Commander, can you cure it?”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

Lu Bixing quickly turned his attention to somewhere else-- he had been trying to feed Commander Lin various foods for a while now, but unfortunately the commander wouldn’t even bat an eye at anything. Only this orange was strangely valuable and was given the grace of a single comment from him. Lu Bixing blinked, then peeled a piece of the orange off as he quickly tapped it against the corner of Lin Jingheng’s lips. “It’s really sweet.”

Lin Jingheng: “...”

“You’re not gonna eat it? No way, you won’t even eat an orange you just kissed?” Lu Bixing pulled the orange back and made a purposeful show of going to eat the orange himself.

This type of filtering was definitely too much for him. Lin Jingheng quickly stole the poor orange out of Lu Bixing’s hand.

“Commander, a lot of things exist for your own pleasure,” Lu Bixing started his endless galactic train of ramblings, “Look, this orange spent so long to grow ripe all its life, and finally managed to grow little ‘capsules’ inside it body after long days and nights, just for you to eat while it’s at its peak sweetness. The taste will spread through your tongue, the fruity flavor taking over your taste buds--don’t a lot of romance movies and novels have this kind of scene? Someone prepares a wonderful and surprise show of fireworks, stars, or fountain for their loved ones, and then invites their loved ones at the right moment to present the show. Everyone is so surprised and impressed with the main character, but if you think about it, isn’t the orange also doing just as much work to win your affection? You look so forced and uneasy, don’t you think you’re letting the orange down?”

Lin Jingheng answered: “If you could stop watching and reading those weird things and save your braincells, you wouldn’t accidentally burn all of them off in one afternoon.”

Even though the words that came out were ruthless insults, Lin Jingheng’s expression relaxed. Perhaps his taste buds were naturally slow, never picking up the flavor of anything he eats and swallows, so he never really developed a particular taste for food. Instead, Lu Bixing’s shady cult-like ramblings on that orange somehow managed to make him pick up an appetite -- before he knew it, he had already finished a whole orange and even surprisingly tasted some flavor.

Lu Bixing was following beside him and a little giddy. He felt like this hard puzzle by the name of Lin Jingheng finally showed some signs of having a pattern; he’d discovered that things Lin really had no interest in wouldn’t even earn a glance from the commander. That moment of attention was extremely valuable. And if the commander purposefully made a comment to reject something, it meant that isn’t wasn’t truly something he disliked, perhaps even something that he liked; except it didn’t fit his normal behavior so he would naturally reject it on principle.

He recalled the formal but courtesy rejection he’d received from the confession before, and Lu Bixing felt like he was the orange that the commander had just kissed, feeling like he could almost melt into a puddle of sweetness onto the ground: “Commander…”

Just then, a heavy object flew in and hit the window right behind Lu Bixing. The glass window shattered immediately, shards ricocheted off into the air. Lin Jingheng lifted his hand, the personal device on his wrist linked to the armed mobile firing a wall of special particles to block off the flying glass shards like an invisible shield.

The heavy object that was thrown had been half a brick, originally aimed towards a small merchant on the side. The merchant held a bag and was running away, clearly being chased by someone covered in long robes. The robe was long enough to even cover the face of the individual, but the act of throwing the brick and anger had ripped the hood off the person’s face to reveal a horrifying face-- the person’s skin was rotten, the skin on their lips and chin were already gone, exposing the jaw bone inside while a drop of bloodied tears fell from the corner of their eyes.

He….or she, screamed out of the top of their lungs with a deeply injured and husky voice: “You gave me fake medicine!”

The merchant that was being chased was also stumped by the individual’s terrifying look, and fell down to the ground on his butt while his legs shook in fear. He then screeched in a loud voice: “The Rainbow Virus! This person is infected with the Rainbow Virus!”

The Rainbow Virus was the eternal nightmare of the Eighth Galaxy. The trauma it gave back in the day would perhaps need at least a few hundred years and two generations of people to heal.

The moment the merchant screeched, the entire city street exploded as if a plague god had just descended. Everyone’s expression changed immediately, screaming for their lives as they scrambled for escape. Lin Jingheng pulled Lu Bixing behind him, the personal device on his wrist releasing a gust of particle wind and blocking in front of Lu Bixing: “You leave first.”

“Don’t worry,” Lu Bixing pulled on Lin Jingheng’s arm, “I have immunity, it’s all good.”

Lin Jingheng was stumped: “What?”

When Lu Bixing was born, the Rainbow Virus had been eradicated from the Eight Galaxies for many years. He wasn’t a soldier that needed to face special circumstances in the frontline, how did he obtain immunity for the Rainbow Virus?

Lu Bixing pointed towards the skeleton man and spoke up before Lin could ponder further: “Lin, look at his shoulders!”

The robe that the person had pulled down exposed his neck and a side of his shoulder. The clothing underneath was too dirty to decipher its original color, but they could almost make out a shoulder emblem from it-- that was an emblem of the Eight Galaxy’s Executive Center, only given on uniforms for official staff members.

The skeleton man already cleaned up his own bag and turned to run just as Lu Bixing finished his line.

Lu Bixing was ready to chase after them: “Wait!”

“I swear upon your name,” Lu Bixing said, “I will never make you mine if I lie about this.”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

This all-talk little piece of shit that only knew how to run his mouth!

## Chapter 71 - People of The Eighth Galaxy’s Union Government

Yet it wasn’t time for bickering.

In terms of technological advancement, the Rainbow Virus had already been defeated. If this had been during a time of peace, the virus wouldn’t be much of a threat even in the slums like the Eighth Galaxy; however, society had already fallen to the point where people were using nutrient syringes as commodities in a basic economic system. If a wide-range virus epidemic happened, it would be impossible for just the Ninth Squadron to control the spread of the disease.

On top of that, the skeleton man was already causing panic among civilians on this busy city street. The scared merchants and shop owners all ran for their lives away from the individual, and the fear and cries of these people had already spread further than the actual virus. Various carts and robots all slammed into each other and blocked the narrow alleyways, making it almost impossible to get through.

Lin Jingheng pushed Lu Bixing towards the corner of the wall as he stepped up a slanted wall on the side and jumped up. He grabbed onto the balcony of the second floor and swiftly pulled himself up; the person peeking out from the window saw Commander Lin jump in and freaked out, then ran away in fear.

The old and rusted balcony already had small cracks and was in no shape to hold the weight of an adult man. A single step from Lin Jingheng already widened the cracks on the balcony; the tight dress shirt he wore didn’t impede his movements as he jumped towards a broken flagpole a few steps away from the balcony. The broken balcony he’d stepped on immediately collapsed the moment he jumped away, and the unfortunate souls that saw the heavy concrete fall to the ground had a dazed moment, thinking that the world was falling apart before yelling out the top of their lungs: “Earthquake!”

The wobbly flagpole also bent down under the force of the falling concrete. At the same time, Lin Jingheng utlized his unique sense of balance as a galactic soldier to climb up the leaning flagpole. As he reached near the top, the flagpole finally gave in and broke off at the bottom, falling towards the street. Like an extremely large pole vault, it launched Lin Jingheng out above the crowded streets and sent him towards the 6th floor inside a small building. Lin Jingheng quickly stabilized his landing with an arm on the ground and sped right towards the staircase to chase down the skeleton man towards the top of the building.

When the chaotic stampede of the crowd rushed in, Lu Bixing swiftly picked up a young boy who hadn’t had time to run and raised him above his head. Children and the elderly were the most likely victims during these times of unorganized crowd rushing; if someone were to fall in a narrow alleyway like this, a dangerous domino effect would be inevitable. Even two-legged humans that couldn’t run as fast were not any more safe than a stampede of horses when they were rushing in a crowd.

“Shh--” Lu Bixing smiled at the scared little boy as he placed him on high ground. He then pulled out his personal device that was connected to the internal network of the Milky Way City and hacked directly into the announcement system of the shopping district. Then, he turned a voice recording application into a microphone as he pulled out a small gun from his pocket, turned it into blasting mode and turned off the noise-cancellation function. He reached up towards the sky and fired three rounds into the air while he announced into the microphone: “Stay where you are and don’t move! We have the vaccine for the Rainbow Virus!”

The crowd was stunned by the sudden loud noise and quieted down for a few moments.

Lu Bixing took a deep breath as his voice came out of the speakers surrounding the shopping district: “Good evening everyone, the Silver Ten’s Ninth Squadron of the Silver Fortress from the Interstellar Union just retrieved the Eighth Galaxy and took over the headquarters of the AUS 300 kilometers away. We will very soon be restoring order within the Eighth Galaxy, so please do not panic. The vaccine for the Rainbow Virus is a standard medication in military stores; if you feel ill, please seek medical attention and treatment immediately from the base and make sure to self-quarantine.”

His words were stern and clear but not forceful, which slowly calmed the panicking crowd.

“This is a narrow alleyway that can easily become a ground for accidents. I will emphasize again, please do not panic and evacuate in an orderly manner.” Lu Bixing said, “The Rainbow Virus is no longer a terminal illness today. Please believe us when we say that the Union will never give up on any of its citizens...Excuse me, please let me pass through.”

The people of the Eighth Galaxy had always been immune to the pep talks of the Union until they saw Lu Bixing walk straight through the crowd and quickly towards the opposite direction to the skeleton man, clearly not giving any second thought for the Rainbow Virus.

This carefree attitude was more convincing than words.

“What ‘citizen’ bullshit;, I’ve never heard of that. I’m a man, not a citizen.”

“What did he just say? That base got taken over by what? Did we get a new government again?”

“This son of a bitch government changes faster than clothing.”

“Who are you? What do you even do in the Union, are you reliable?”

Lu Bixing smiled at the wave of insults without responding or getting upset--if the crowd had the energy to point and complain at him, that meant they’d at least regained some senses and wouldn’t trample over children.

The judging crowd made way for Lu Bixing to pass only for Lu Bixing to see Lin Jingheng waving at him not too far ahead, but the target skeleton man had already disappeared.

Lu Bixing was stumped: “What happened, an energy field?”

Lin Jingheng contacted the Ninth Squadron at the base and said something as he nodded towards Lu Bixing--the skeleton man had seen Lin Jingheng chase after him earlier and panicked, then opened up an energy field to escape.

Terrestrial energy fields functioned similarly to space warping, but the fundamentals were quite different. Energy field transfers could be compared to a torture to anyone that’d experienced it before; even the most fit and physically capable would feel their skin peeking off, let alone the skeleton man that was already carrying a half-dead body of flesh.

“Is he crazy?” Lu Bixing held up his hand and quickly gathered up the remaining radiation from the energy field. “If he walked through in that state he’d be completely destroyed before he reaches his destination--what time was the transfer?”

Lin Jingheng: “Standard time, 13 hours 52 minutes and 28 seconds.”

“Okay, wait a second.” Lu Bixing rolled up his sleeves and quickly simulated an energy decay model on his personal device. It was as if time had stopped in his hands; he followed through the model and traced a vague line towards the skeleton man, and promptly recreated the energy field that he’d created. It also gave a detailed description of the energy field--a terrestrial energy field would usually have a coordinate parameter of between 11 to 36 - 17 parameters popped up from Lu Bixing’s personal device.

“I found the destination.” Lu Bixing sent the coordinates to Lin Jingheng, “I’ll send it to Captain Turan as well.”

Back when Lin Jingheng snuck out of the Black Orchid Academy to send Zhanlu over to help Lu Xin escape, the method he’d used was through the energy field. Energy fields were hard to track and posed a safety concern in the Union, so a lot of places had installed anti-field signals to prevent its usage. And yet, he’s never seen such bold and flamboyant use of energy fields.

“It’s nothing really,” Lu Bixing shrugged. “This trick only works within three minutes after the energy field opens. Once it’s past the three minute mark, the decaying radiation would be almost completely gone and the climate around the area would change. At that point there wouldn’t be any point to tracking them since the deviation of the positioning system would be over 50 kilometers.”

Lin Jingheng remote-controlled the armed mobile over to the closest crossroad and entered in the coordinates Lu Bixing gave him: “Did you register a patent for this technology yet?”

“No,” Lu Bixing answered. “This was something I made when I was young to be able to run away from home.”

“Good, I’m buying this. I’ll pay the rate of a Class A military technology patent fee to use it.”

“Wow,” Lu Bixing followed him into the armed mobile. “Hey Commander, can I take this as you taking responsibility for me?”

The armed mobile accelerated violently as Lu Bixing finished his sentence as if it had also been shocked by the comment. The two fell back onto their seats as the mobile zoomed out.

Lin Jingheng had been left speechless too many times already and remained silent for a while. Then, although unclear whether it was from anger or defeat, he actually smiled.

He then pulled out an energy field mediation syringe from a small compartment on the ceiling of the mobile and poked it right into Lu Bixing.

Lu Bixing was just finishing up his excitable lines when he was on the receiving end of a needle and yelped: “Mister Lin, if you were to be in medical school with these skills you’d be held back for another eight years!”

“There are no medical schools in the First Galaxy, there’s only medical research.” Lin Jingheng answered, “Sit tight, I’m opening up the energy field.”

The surroundings began to twist and warp into a mess of a massive energy blackhole. The equipment on the armed mobile started making strange sounds while Lu Bixing felt all the organs in his body get turned inside-out. Thankfully, the mediation syringe began to take effect and blocked off all the uncomfortable feelings as Lu Bixing felt like his entire body turned into rubber.

A few seconds later, the armed mobile passed through the energy field and landed on the destination coordinates. The overheating alert rang immediately as it landed and displayed a completely empty battery sign.

Lin Jingheng had already experienced jumping around in an incomplete energy field and wasn’t affected by the discomfort of warping. He only staggered a little the moment he got off the mobile and quickly regained his balance before Lu Bixing could lend him a hand.

From the maps, the operational base was southwest of Milky Way City, and the place they had just arrived was a little further north of the city.

This seemed to be an abandoned old factory. There was an artificial river stream filled with trash right before them, with the door to the factory wide open. To the side, there was a clock tower of about six or seven meters tall filled with crows atop the clock.

The clock on the tower was still ticking dutifully, but it did not follow the standard time that Lin Jingheng used, instead using an independant calendar on Qiming. Due to the different orbits of planets, each planet actually had their own system of calculating time; the ‘standard time’ was really only used by arrogant interstellar travelers.

Lu Bixing himself enjoyed messing around with strange technologies himself and would always assume others had their own secret tricks up their sleeves. Despite complaining about the skeleton man being crazy, Lu Bixing still thought with optimism that perhaps he had been able to pass through an energy field by himself because he had some unknown technology--for example, a better mediation system...until he found the corpse of said person under the clock tower.

Numerous crows surrounded the dead flesh on the ground as if eyeing their next meal, but their animal instinct held them back from actually coming down to take a bite.

Lin Jingheng put on his gloves and ripped the jacket off the corpse. The skeleton man’s spine was already broken into multiple pieces as his entire body twisted in a strange position. His left arm was already rotten, the impact of landing having snapped the joints of the arm while his lower arm had completely detached and landed a few meters away from the main body--which he only managed to find with the help of the crows.

“Why?” Lu Bixing asked in confusion. “Is it because...because he didn’t get to hear what I said and ran off into the energy field?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t respond.

When Lu Bixing had been making the announcement, they’d both actually heard it. The skeleton man had opened the energy field right after the speech.

The strong proclamation had been simply too much wishful thinking all in one line that glorified both the Union and its citizens, which incidentally made everyone uncomfortable.

According to the charter of the Union, the Union would never leave any citizen behind.

Yet the residents of the Eighth Galaxy did not count as citizens.

Just like how the Union categorized every foreign force as ‘pirates’, the Eighth Galaxy was the desert border between the ‘civilized world’ and ‘pirates’ realm’. While not everyone in the Eighth Galaxy were pirates, they were still barbarians with very close ties to the pirates--to the Union, they were like primitive cannibalistic tribes that they would not accept as their own kind.

In the center of the Union, everyone knew that the government in the Eighth Galaxy only existed in a symbolic sense; their main job was to show their faces and count in for the numbers. Even the anti-missile system on the capital planet Cayley had been installed a hundred years ago when Lu Xin just recovered the Eighth Galaxy. Then almost 140 years later, the poor system still had never received an upgrade.

Because of the Eighth Galaxy’s half-sovereign status, it was difficult for the central government to collect taxes and fees. The financial aid from the Union was also even more fickle, forcing the government to constantly be in a state of having no funds to pay their employees. Lin Jingheng found an employee ID on the corpse that said “Secretary General of the Eighth Galaxy’s Central Government”, which was almost like a fake ID that could be purchased at any local toy store.

Lin Jingheng took off his gloves, pulled out a disinfecting gun inside the armed mobile’s first aid kit, and cleaned up the poisonous corpse: “He risked his life jumping into an energy field at his state, that means he might have comrades. I’ll go check inside, you wait here.”

Lu Bixing didn’t listen and followed him in.

The talkative Lu Bixing suddenly quieted down for a while as he stepped on the dry ground, and then suddenly asked: “Lin, if a large fleet of pirate were to invade while you were still in the Silver Fortress, would you sacrifice the Eighth Galaxy under extreme circumstances?”

“If I were still in the Silver Fortress, those pirates would never enter the Union.” Lin Jingheng paused, and then answered straightforwardly, “As for the Eighth Galaxy, it is still the Union’s territory. But if necessary, we won’t stubbornly stay. A strategic evacuation is quite understandable.”

“So if you must, you would give up this deserted land in the Eighth Galaxy, right? It’s not just you -- the Union would also make the same decision because the entire society’s ideology agrees.”

Lin Jingheng silently agreed.

“Because we’re just wild creatures in the wilderness with unknown political stances. People from the Union are citizens of the Union, and pirates are just pirates. We’re just soulless and unintelligent creatures; talking to us about the Union Charter and the Pledge of Freedom would just be talking to a rock.” Lu Bixing nodded as he took a deep breath. He looked far beyond the seemingly endless horizon and night sky...Lin Jingheng wasn’t a smooth talking politician and wouldn’t bother putting on a dramatic show. He was also so used to being an asshole that he didn’t even want to bother pretending to maintain a politically correct set of morals; as long as he accepted you as one of his own men, he’d usually just focus on the objective reality and say whatever was necessary.

Lu Bixing: “So...if the Rainbow Virus really does break out on Qiming, the Ninth Squadron will immediately retreat without wasting its medical resources...no it’s fine, you don’t need to say it, I understand this is just how it is.”

Just like extreme animal rights activists, no one would fight for animals to have equal rights as humans--cats don’t have the right of portrait, dogs don’t have the rights of privacy, and lab rats don’t have the freedom of speech. It was natural that the most elite fleet of the Union would not stick around because of a plague.

“The Ninth Squadron has the least members of all Squadrons in the Silver Ten, they’re the vanguard. They aren’t trained to contain a mass epidemic, nor do they have the public coordination skill and resources to carry it out,” Lin Jingheng said calmly, “If it really does turn into an epidemic outbreak, retreating will be the only option.”

*And that’s why it better not happen*, he thought. He then connected to the armed mobile with his personal device and opened up the virus monitor on the shield.

But strangely, while the virus monitor had no dramatic reaction, the armed alert flashed.

Lin Jingheng grabbed Lu Bixing’s shoulder suddenly and pulled him to the side; just then, a laser gun shot through the place Lu Bixing had just been standing on, cutting through Lin Jingheng’s sleeves. He pulled out his own gun and shot back, a loud cry of pain came out from behind the old factory’s window. Lu Bixing and Lin Jingheng exchanged a quick glance at each other and both ran towards inside the factory along the side in opposite directions.

Lu Bixing kicked down the broken door to see a person dripping blood run towards the corner of the factory, revealing a piece of rotten skin on his neck that clearly indicated he was infected with the Rainbow Virus.

“Hey wait, we’re not pirates from the AUS,” Lu Bixing called out, “We don’t intend to harm you!”

The individual didn’t listen.

Lu Bixing: “You’re from the Union Government of the Eighth Galaxy, right?”

The person stopped his footsteps and turned his head around in alarm, pointing a gun towards Lu Bixing with his shivering hands.

## Chapter 72 - We Shall Meet In The Place Where There Is No Darkness

This person was too weak and couldn’t even hold a mini laser gun still.

Lu Bixing’s kind gaze fell onto the person’s mottled face as he spread his hands in front of him to indicate that he meant no harm.

He waited until the other seemed to calm down a bit and asked carefully: “You look like you need some help; pardon me, but are you infected with the Rainbow Virus? Where did you get infected?”

Lu Bixing thought his voice was already considerably gentle, but instead of calming the other down, it ended up triggering a violent response from the man before him. The laser gun that he’d slowly been lowering was quickly pulled back up as the man heard this line, and remained at a state of high alert: “How did you know this is the Rainbow Virus?”

Lu Bixing immediately realized that he was too caught up with finding the source of the virus that his mouth slipped: “Wait, calm down, I can explain, this is….”

The other was already a panicking animal that wouldn’t listen to anything Lu Bixing said. His expression grew increasingly grim as he frantically interrupted, as if hot metal was rolling out from his mouth: “You know this is the Rainbow Virus, then why are you here? You’re not afraid of the virus, how are you not afraid?! You must be one of them!”

This logic was complete nonsense.

Lu Bixing: “I….hey!”

“Shut up, shut up!” the man yelled as he shot towards Lu Bixing.

Under normal circumstances, it would be difficult to dodge a laser gun from this distance. Thankfully the attacker’s hands were shaking too violently that his shot completely missed its target and flew right above Lu Bixing’s head, leaving a burnt mark on the pale white wall behind him.

Lu Bixing thought, what kind of civil servant is this? No official procedures and won’t even give you a chance to appeal, you’re just given a death sentence the minute you step up.

Fortunately Headmaster Lu was still a firm believer in reasoning without violence and had no plans to fight against a laser gun head-on. He quickly ducked down to the ground and picked up the factory door he’d just kicked down earlier as a shield and dodged around the lasers.

The gunner’s eyes were filled with bloodshot like a demon as he held up the laser gun with both hands, shooting aimlessly as he chased Lu Bixing around. The broken door was soon in shambles; just then, the window behind the gunner shattered from impact. Lin Jingheng broke through the window and rolled into the factory.

Unfortunately, Commander Lin wasn’t a kind soul that would hold back against an ill opponent. As the gunner raised his arm subconsciously to protect his head from the rain of glass shards, he was kneed violently to the chest before he could even bring his arm above his head.

A normal person would suffer from gastric bleeding from this blow, let alone a patient of the Rainbow Virus. The gunner flew out from the attack and hit right onto the wall behind him. His rotting skin was like a moldy fruit skin that split open on contact with the wall, a trail of blood smeared down on the white wall. The arm that was holding the gun broke at the collision, the gun itself flying out of his hand towards Lu Bixing, who then caught it on the ground with his foot.

Lin Jingheng grabbed the gunner’s neck with his jacket between his hand and the rotten flesh, forcing the gunner down on the ground. The gunner’s eyes stared wide open as he struggled like a dead fish on the ground; a dry retching kept coming out of his throat, his eyes rolling from the strangling.

Lu Bixing: “Lin!”

Lin Jingheng turned his head expresionlessly before he loosened his grip slightly to search the gunner’s belongings. The metal detector on his personal device flashed positive, and Lin Jingheng swiftly pulled out a pair of magnetic handcuffs, two laser guns and a small knife. He tossed the weapons aside away from the individual’s reach.

Lu Bixing hastily tossed the broken door aside and ran over only to see the horrible state of this man, gasping in a cold breath that he could even feel blowing through his teeth.

His impression of Lin Jingheng was that while the latter always looked like he was in a bad mood, he was actually quite capable of staying within his lane and keeping it cool around harassment. Even when Lu Bixing was bothering him endlessly with flirtations, he’d never seen Lin Jingheng actually get mad. And because Lin Jingheng was constantly roasting people, sometimes it gave off the false impression that he was actually just a double-dealing man of all-talk only. Lu Bixing didn’t believe it until he personally witnessed this scene earlier--the deadly weapon raised by the Military Counsel of the Union had the ability to single-handedly kill a person within 30 seconds, and the only reason why he had never actually lifted a finger at Lu Bixing was perhaps out of...a strange sense of consideration.

Lin Jingheng pulled out a disinfecting spray from the first aid kit as his foot stepped on top of the person, and sprayed around the area thoroughly. He then picked up the ID he snatched from the gunner earlier with the jacket he took off earlier: “William Yu...Eighth Galaxy Police Department Superintendent? Pretty impressive rank, this ID looks like it was bought too.”

The superintendent puked out a mouthful of fluids from his empty stomach.

“The Eighth Galaxy’s Police Department is located on the capital planet Cayley, and as far as I know they don’t usually need to make intergalactic business trips, so may I ask why you’re here?” Lu Bixing asked, “Were you in the middle of some special security escort mission when Prince Cayley invaded the Eighth Galaxy?”

“There’s usually not a lot of escort missions for Police Departments. The guests are usually foreign diplomats or high-ranking officials, and a run-down place like the Eighth Galaxy normally wouldn’t have foreign guests...so did the Chief Executive happen to go out on a patrol during that time?” Lin Jingheng paused dramatically, “Oh, what a coincidence.”

This one line hinted that he suspected a spy within the higher-ups of the Eighth Galaxy’s government. Even though Superintendent Yu remained at a completely defeated position on the ground, he still raised his head up to glare at Lin Jingheng angrily.

Lu Bixing quickly followed up: “What about the Chief Executive, where is he?”

Superintendent Yu held his neck up defiantly and didn't respond.

“This is Commander Lin from the Union,” Lu Bixing explained patiently. “We’ve already taken over the planet and are currently cleaning up the rest of the pirates within the Eighth Galaxy. Mister Yu, what I was trying to explain earlier when you refused to listen was that I’m aware of the Rainbow Virus and can come in contact with you -I’ve been infected once when I was a child, so I have antibodies. We’re really not space pirates.”

The Superintendent was finally able to listen calmly after a harsh beating.

By the later stages of the Rainbow Virus, the patient would experience symptoms of high fever and episodes of mania. His whole body felt like it was on fire as he carefully studied Lu Bixing through his hazy vision.

Lu Bixing’s cheerful expression was a natural reflection of his personality, developing an air of kindness and decency around him. Rumors had it that because ancient people aged too quickly, it was easy to determine an individual’s age through their physical attributes; of course, this no longer applied in today’s world, because anyone under the age of 200 looked about the same age. The Eighth Galaxy returned under Union rule 140 years ago, and if Lu Bixing was born 136 years ago, “getting infected by the Rainbow Virus” was quite believable.

Superintendent Yu was still only half convinced.

Lu Bixing pointed at himself: “Do I look like those murderers that blew up those planets?”

William Yu’s stiff shoulders finally relaxed a little.

“Sorry for using violence, please believe that we’re just acting out of self-defense.” Lu Bixing turned to glance at Lin Jingheng, only to see the latter staring deeply at him intimidatingly after hearing the line about being infected with the Rainbow Virus once.

Lu Bixing: “Commander, please lift your foot.”

Lin Jingheng finally stepped away and stood on the side with his hands in his pocket.

Lu Bixing continued to ask: “Do you have other comrades? How many of you are there, how did you guys get infected with the virus? Superintendent, you should know that it’s a very unique time right now, are you aware of the consequences and how many people will die if an epidemic were to occur?”

William struggled to get up, his lips moved slowly: “When we escaped, we chose this place to hide. This old factory is too contaminated for people to come near it, so everyone else is locked in the underground level.

Lin Jingheng responded apathetically: “Look like you do know that the Rainbow Virus is a highly infectious disease, did you send someone out to the shopping district in the city on purpose to take vengeance against society?”

“He had been injected with the 'stopper’, which blocks him from spreading the disease to others 48 hours after injection...we only had one syringe, and the Prime Minister was on his last breath so we sent him out to seek help.” William spoke in a weak whisper, “We’re too scared to go into hospitals and epidemic prevention, and the medical system we have is barely functional. Plus...we didn’t know that the pirates on Qiming were already gone and were scared to expose our whereabouts...that’s why we tried our luck in the black market…”

And yet, little did he know that their hopeless situation could get worse.

These government officials were not familiar with the underground market and inevitably became victims of scammers. It wouldn’t have been a big deal if it was scamming for something else, but by the time they realized it was a scam, it was almost past the 48 hour limit and essentially destroyed any last hope they had to seek help outside.

Lin Jingheng: “Let’s go.”

Just then, his personal device vibrated; the Ninth Squadron had arrived.

Lin Jingheng turned slightly to the side and ordered: “Those that haven’t been injected with comprehensive antibodies stay back, block off this entire area and send a few medical capsules to the underground chamber of the factory. Also, I’ll need some emergency vaccines for the Rainbow Virus, quickly.”

Normally only frontline soldiers would need to be injected with comprehensive antibodies periodically. Superintendent Yu heard the order and studied Lin Jingheng curiously, then asked a slightly tough tone: “The Union’s line of defense is closing in tightly, how could they possibly have a fleet in the Eighth Galaxy - just which fleet are you from?”

This was a line that was offensive even for the Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy to say.

Yet Lin Jingheng was someone that wouldn’t yield to force. Everything else aside, his talent in arrogance was infamously well-known and accepted throughout the entire Union. At the question, he thought to himself: “Who do you think you are?”

So he didn’t even bother batting an eye and said: “Don’t ask questions you’re not supposed to be asking, stop talking nonsense!”

Due to the effects of the virus, the superintendent's character turned into an irritable wild animal and was immediately offended by this arrogant attitude. He glared at Lin Jingheng and raised his voice: “You think you’re so powerful? Where were you guys when Cayley blew up? Where were you guys when three planets got destroyed and pirates roamed the galaxy?”

Lu Bixing’s heart jumped at these words and almost kneeled down before this rabid patient out of instinct. He carefully glanced towards Lin Jingheng, only to see the latter’s face hardening as expected.

“We...we starved for months because we couldn’t afford to pay salaries,” the superintendent rubbed his face and pulled a piece of his skin off. The blood dripped down his face as it blended with his flesh, yet it was almost as if he couldn’t feel pain and simply let the blood run into his mouth. “The Prime Minister wanted to report the situation to the Military Council and personally visited Wolto multiple times, but the government’s funds couldn’t even afford the travel expenses...everytime the Union called for an intergalactic conference, he would need to desperately gather funds and fly off to attend the conference...we were only asking for the Military Council to upgrade the anti-missile systems in the Eighth Galaxy because we’re the first line of defense against foreign space pirates. The other galaxies are fighting for military autonomy but we don’t mingle with them, we wouldn’t even dare to join in those political fights with you higher-ups. We just want to protect ourselves, we just want to protect ourselves! Does anyone care? Commander, are we not human in your eyes!?”

“Commander,” Lu Bixing rushed in between the two before Lin Jingheng could respond in an attempt to draw Lin’s attention away and said, “The Rainbow Virus is a purely artificial virus. It was completely eradicated back when the ‘mass disinfection’ happened, it supposedly shouldn’t resurface now without warning, this is really scary---Mister Yu, why aren’t you leading us down already, any delays will put your friends in danger. If the symptoms become too serious, even antibodies won’t be able to save them! Do you plan on letting the Prime Minister die?”

The superintendent regained his senses, then gave another ferocious glare at Lin Jingheng before he dragged his broken limbs and walked forward without a second word.

Turan brought a squad of armed mobiles and swiftly locked down the area for quarantine.

A giant disinfecting gun blew clouds of white mist into the air at the border of the lockdown area; and then with a unique form of technology, the mist merged with a mass of water vapour to form a large rain cloud. The armed mobiles outside formed a screen of light that scared the murder of crows as they flew off in panic, adding some lively sounds into the deserted area.

Inside the factory, Lin Jingheng suddenly opened his harsh mouth and gestured towards Lu Bixing: “Don’t avoid conflict, you should probably fix your habit of mediating everything you run into. William Yu, right? You better listen to what I say now. First, his introduction of me is slightly inaccurate. I am actually an ‘ex-commander’ of the Union; I left the Union five years ago and my fleet designation was cancelled. According to the Union’s Security Regulations, our fleet’s legality is no more legit than the Cayley pirates’ fleet, so stop using those bullshit regulations and rules from the Union to question me - you won’t get an answer. Second, if I remember correctly, that half-assed report has been passed back and forth for decades already and the Prime Minister has been replaced 860 times. The Union’s been ignoring you, and even though you were all well aware of this, you all still continued to cling onto this unrealistic expectation towards the Union, how ridiculous can you be? The government’s authority is limited, the Prime Minister’s words are less effective than the mafia, the government can’t even properly collect taxes, law enforcement is a complete joke; the entire Eighth Galaxy is a giant mess, who’s fault is it? You all blame the Union for not helping out, but why don’t you try to be autonomous, why don’t you declare independence, why don’t you find other ways out? The entire Union is restricted by strict air traffic control, nowhere else can obtain mechs as easily as in the Eighth Galaxy. If you have the power, you could’ve built your own armed forces. If you want something, why don’t you act on it and obtain it yourself instead of wagging your tails at people who clearly look down on you all?”

This man was usually careful with his words, but when poking at someone’s weak spot, it’s as if he suddenly got equipped with a speech accelerator. Superintendent Yu trembled at the words, unclear whether it was from anger or shame.

“Then don’t blame others for looking down on you all even more,” Lin Jingheng turned around and waved towards the robots that delivered the medical capsules. “You’re right, people in the Eighth Galaxy are not considered people in the eyes of the Union, or what else did you think? I see that you’re also not young, have you ever seen the census come to the Eighth Galaxy?”

The smile on Lu Bixing face disappeared in this rare moment as he interrupted strongly: “Lin!”

Lin Jingheng looked at him deeply and closed his mouth. For a split second, he realized he was purposely saying these words in front of Lu Bixing, purposely exposing the most garbage, merciless, and most heinous side of him as if he was afraid that Lu Bixing had completely misunderstood that he had any sort of redeeming personality qualities. And as he said these words, a strange and unexplainable feeling of satisfaction grew from the bottom of his heart like a twisted secret.

Turan personally led her men inside. The soldiers of the Ninth Squadron all stood before Lin Jingheng in their isolation clothing: “Commander!”

Lin Jingheng grabbed the isolation suit they handed him and threw one over to Lu Bixing. His gaze swiped through the staircase leading down to the underground chamber and nodded slightly. Turan waved her hand and ordered the robots to send the medical capsules down the staircase in an orderly fashion.

At this time, Willian Yu suddenly said: “It’s because we believe in the Union!”

Lin Jingheng sneered as he swiftly put on the isolation suit and pulled down the mask to cover his face.

“Back in 100..year 136 when Lu Xin reclaimed the Eighth Galaxy and fought off the space pirates, he taught us the Pledge of Freedom and had countless people willingly follow him. Our resources, weapons, secret terminals, family and lives...we all volunteered to give them to the Union because we looked up to him and the Union he described. We look up to the freedom, equality and glory he gave us...he told us, ‘we shall meet in the place where there is no darkness’[[2]](#footnote-2)...”

Lin Jingheng’s back stiffened.

“Where is he?” William Yu asked quietly. “Where is the place where there is no darkness?”

“The place where there is no darkness,” Lin Jingheng said, “are you trying to mock something?”

Then, it was as if his soul was released at these words. His back slouched even more as he held onto the wall and slowly dragged his foot down to the underground chamber.

The underground chamber was like a freshly dug up ancient tomb.

As the door opened, even the isolation suit couldn’t fully block out that stench of rotten flesh. In ther corner were arround seven to eight bodies that were hard to distinguish ages and gender - they all looked as if they were horrifying corpses that were already rotting inside the ground. Lin Jingheng finally understood why they sent that skeleton man out--his condition could be considered much better than the others.

Even with Turan’s guts, she still shivered in shock: “Are they...are they still alive?”

Just as she finished, a ‘rotten corpse’ from the corner suddenly struggled to get up.

Turan yelped: “Oh shit!”

William Yu ran over frantically: “Prime Minister!”

There were a total of eight people inside the chamber, and six were still alive. The medical capsules quickly gathered as they scanned around for infrared and brainwave signals, injecting antibodies into the patients and clearing up the corpses.

Lu Bixing accidentally stepped on something and picked it up to see that it was a wallet. The bloodstained wallet carried a name tag for the Eighth Galaxy’s Executive Prime Minister that had been used during the Union conference. The middle-aged man in the photo was smiling kindly with a strong and stern look in his eyes. Lu Bixing lifted his head to see the skeleton that was sent inside the medical capsule and let out a sigh.

Just then, a few medical capsules began flashing red lights.

Turan: “Huh, what’s going on?”

“Antibody ineffective,” the robotic voice inside the medical capsule spoke. “Identified virus to be a mutated version of the Rainbow Virus, existing antibodies cannot take effect--”

Turan: “What!?”

A chill ran up Lin Jingheng’s spine like a violently rushing stream, stabbing from his spine up to his brain like a sharp needle.

## Chapter 73 - Death Never Forgets Its Prey

The chaotic underground chamber in the old factory went silent.

From the busy soldiers of the Ninth Squadron to the crying patients, it was as if everyone was paralyzed at the same moment. Only the alarming red light on the medical capsule continued to flash in the dark chamber.

The Rainbow Virus--a virus that should’ve already been eradicated in theory has a mutation? Is this purely an accident or an intentional creation? What kind of conspiracy is behind this? Who--

Lin Jingheng had no time to ponder these situational questions, and before he could process what he should logically be doing next, he instinctively grabbed onto Lu Bixing standing beside him. Due to the slippery surface of the isolation suit, he didn’t manage to get a secure grip; the helplessness that came with his hand slipping was like a gunshot right into his head that froze his bloodstream.

How did the new virus spread?

What about the pathogenicity and mortality rate?

If the old antibody is ineffective now, what would happen to Lu Bixing?

A sea of questions and thoughts swallowed his mind and exploded inside his head, yet none of these jumbled up thoughts were anything positive.

Lu Bixing’s mind was still floating elsewhere when he finally noticed that he was pinned down beside a medical capsule.

“Check…” Lin Jingheng almost felt his voice crack the moment he opened his mouth, and continued on blankly without a second thought. “Check if he’s already been infected.”

The medical capsule calmly responded: “Invalid instruction.”

Lin Jingheng could feel his vein popping: “I said to check if he got infected with the mutant Rainbow Virus!”

Unfortunately the medical capsule didn’t understand human emotions and only continued to respond blankly: “Invalid instruction.”

The medical capsules were equipped with very limited artificial intelligence. In this situation, the correct procedure would be to request the medical capsule to collect and record information regarding the new Rainbow Virus and then analyze the characteristics of the virus with a more powerful computer. In some cases, it might even require human medical experts to join in the analysis process. When the computer fully understood the nature of the virus and the way to break it, the medical capsule could then create a set of viral testing based on this information and carry out the order when it saved the information to its database.

Yet nobody was sure how long this will take, and just how long was the incubation period of the mutated virus?

Would it be too late?

Lin Jingheng could feel his ears buzzing; Turan’s voice was clearly coming from the headphones inside the isolation suit but felt like it was coming from the outside: “...Commander, Commander…..”

Lu Bixing grabbed his shoulders: “Lin!”

Lin Jingheng held up a hand to quiet down the crowd. He only stood in silence for a moment before he opened his mouth again, with no signs of panic and unreasonable requests like before: “Elizabeth.”

Turan: “Here.”

“First, inform the people outside the factory to set up a quarantine zone according to the Union’s highest standard for disease-infected areas and order anyone coming near the place to wear isolation suits. Set up a double layer for disinfection at entrances and exits. Capture and kill all animals in the area--birds, insects, especially ones that eat rotten flesh. I’d rather kill the wrong ones than let any one go; disinfect all the corpses and dispose of them when you’re done. Second, there’s a river nearby the area; send two teams up and downstream to find the source and end point of the river. Keep a strict eye on all plants, living animals, quality of soil and water around the river, and quarantine the area for 72 hours. Anyone that comes in contact with the water and soil must be isolated and thoroughly checked. If the stream enters an underground water system, I need the entire Milky Way City locked down, cut down the water supply for three hours and fully sterilize the area. Third, a patient had left the factory twice within 48 hours and entered the busy packing district within the Milky Way City. Even though he had been injected with a stopper, we can’t be sure that the old stopper will be effective on the new mutant virus; try and isolate everyone he’s come in contact with to the best of your abilities.”

Turan responded truthfully: “Commander, this will be difficult to do.”

Lu Bixing interrupted: “This person’s corpse is just outside the factory, you guys can just give me the energy field he carries around. The field should have records of his positional coordinates with times and locations; I can hack into the internal network of the city and search up the personal devices of people that were around the same area as the patient at the same time.”

Lin Jingheng: “What do you need?”

Lu Bixing: “If the amount of information is too much for me to process on my own, I will need a supercomputer.”

“Okay,” Lin Jingheng nodded imemdiately. “Call Zhanlu over.”

Turan: “Commander, I don’t think we have enough people to carry this out.”

“Go find Saturday,” Lu Bixing said. “If we’re still short on people then call the base and summon the rest of the self-defense squad.”

“Also,” Lin Jingheng added, “Mobilize all medical resources of the Eighth Galaxy and prepare for a viral outbreak. Superintendent, are you still awake? If not, I can let the medical capsule wake you up.”

William was still living in this nightmare throughout this time and subconsciously sat up straight when he got appointed.

“I need you to tell me everything about how you all got infected with the virus, including all the details.” Lin Jingheng said to him, then turned to Turan. “Leave the capsules here, let everyone else leave. Keep in contact and make sure the factory has sufficient energy supplies. Use AIs to deliver resources and avoid letting people in and out of the area...if the Hawk yells at me, let him vent however he wants, but make sure he doesn’t come in.”

Turan nodded, then as if she suddenly remembered something, asked one last question: “Commander, should we consider contacting the ‘central’ under extreme circumstances?”

Lin Jingheng paused for two seconds before making a clear decision: “No. Go out and tell Zhanlu to hurry up.”

Under the face mask, Turan’s eyebrows lifted slightly in confusion; yet despite having concerns, she didn’t voice any of them out and left promptly after giving Lin Jingheng a salute. The Captain raised her hand and took all the soldiers of the Ninth Squadron out.

Lu Bixing was completely awed by this exchange: “She...just left like that and won’t even stop to cry a little? At least have a few words to console people, are the Silver Ten all cold and stoic like you?”

Lin Jingheng let out a long and cold sigh under the heavy isolation clothing and mask. For a moment, he remembered Lu Bixing’s hands that had touched him, seemingly tirelessly. Perhaps because he was constantly playing around with mechs, his nails were cut cleanly; his fingers were long and shaped nicely, his palm dry but warm. The warmth in his hand was also due to temperature, a kind of heat that was young and powerful, a kind that burned Lin Jingheng into a corner.

But right now at this moment, Lin Jingheng only wanted to hold that hand again.

To check the warmth of that hand once again.

These thoughts were like an overflowing stream running down a river inside Lin Jingheng’s mind, rushing down faraway to an invisible horizon.

If he hadn’t agreed to come out with Lu Bixing, if he hadn’t chosen to land on Qiming, if he hadn’t called Lu Bixing out from the space station, and if Lin Jingheng hadn’t even come to the Eighth Galaxy in the first place...if he had been more decisive instead of choosing to hide underground, and revolted more sternly by attacking Wolto while he took the Silver Fortress Hostage…

If only...everything could be turned back to where nothing happened, he wouldn’t even mind if it meant that he would be destroyed along the way, to leave his corpse to rot and float in the endless sea of space.

Yet these were all just his own wishful thinking and delusions.

“Are you scared?” Lin Jingheng asked softly. Perhaps he’d never spoken this softly all his life, he almost felt his tone tremble.

“What kind of dumb question is this?” Lu Bixing glanced at him and smiled. The slight awkwardness between them was completely wiped away by his normal tone of voice. “If I said I wasn’t scared, I’d either be a dumbass or have emotional disorder. But if I said I was scared...isn’t that kind of embarrassing? A man’s pride can’t just be thrown down the ground like that before his crush, Commander, are you teasing me? I haven’t even asked you, are you scared?”

Lin Jingheng thought: “*Scared out of my wits*.”

Yet he didn’t say anything and returned to his normal business tone of voice and asked: “How are you with biochemistry?”

“Nope, sorry.” Despite being all talk about pride earlier, Lu Bixing wasn’t ashamed to admit to his shortcomings. “If it’s a biochip, I can probably help analyze it, but my knowledge of viruses is only average. I don’t have the skills and knowledge to run independent research, let alone something as complex as the Rainbow Virus.”

Lin Jingheng nodded cordially as he hadn’t really expected too much. Lu Bixing was clearly more interested in artificial intelligence than humans; you could depend on him for computer viruses but maybe not human viruses.

“Then record for me.” Lin Jingheng made a small order without looking at him and walked right towards the superintendent.

The Prime Minister was clearly unable to speak; he was lying inside the medical capsule half-unconscious, unclear whether he had heard this bad news or not.

William sat down hopelessly by a dirty bed as if his soul had been sucked out of his body and stared dumbly at Lin Jingheng. After a short moment, he desperately covered his face with his hands.

“Mutation,” he repeated mechanically, “how...if...if the stopper really didn’t work, then what did Webster die for....he even….”

“Who’s Webster?” Lu Bixing asked softly. “Is he the one that died inside the energy field?”

A small whimper came out of William’s mouth.

“He didn’t die in vain.” Lu Bixing walked over and sat beside him. “If it wasn’t for him, we wouldn’t have come nor found you all here. The worst case scenario would be if the mutated virus had spread without anyone knowing.”

The isolation suit made for a virus such as the Rainbow Virus was extremely heavy and affected mobility quite substantially. Lu Bixing struggled multiple times and couldn’t even bend his knees, until he finally had to just sit with his legs straight like a zombie. He almost had the thought of taking off that heavy isolation suit but was scared that he would get infected due to this whim, which would be almost ironic if he hadn’t already been infected before putting the suit on.

‘If’ he didn’t get infected…

Lu Bixing thought about his own choice of words and almost felt like his legs were becoming numb, so he gave up and found a comfortable position to lean beside the wall. He looked towards Lin Jingheng, only to see the latter was completely covered in the heavy layers of the isolation suit and didn’t even reveal a face through it all. He greedily kept his eyes on Lin Jingheng like a puppy, but could only peek under the face mask, unable to make out Lin’s expression.

Lin Jingheng walked in front of William and said without any sentiment: “Do you plan on creating more corpses in memory of the dead?”

William Yu trembled in fear and looked up helplessly at the cold grey eyes behind the isolation mask. Surprisingly, this aggressive man under the influence of the virus forcefully calmed himself down at the provocation.

He sat wordlessly for a while before he spoke up with his voice still trembling: “We all know we’ve been infected, so we’ve been very careful. We don’t have a lot of stoppers, and aside from Webster, I don’t think any of us had made contact with the outside.”

“When the Cayley fleet invaded, I was on an escort mission for the Prime Minister.” William paused, and started from the beginning. “It was right at the time when the Union council summoned an intergalactic conference at Wolto. We didn’t make it for a few reasons: first, the conference notice came in too late and we weren’t given enough time to prepare travel funds. Second, everyone knew that the purpose of this conference was probably military autonomy again and had nothing to do with us.The Prime Minister didn’t want to watch the livestream of the conference, so he organized a galactic inspection last minute to check up on the malfunctioning climate control systems on numerous planets. If we left it alone, it might cost lives, so we wanted to fix this problem before it was too late...and just as we left planet Cayley, we ran into the pirate fleet. We were using business spaceships and only had five escort mechs; after a desperate chase by the pirates we were only left with one mech, which was mine. The Prime Minister abandoned the spaceship and had everyone go onto the mech, and we made an emergency warp to land on satellite planet 3 Ema.”

“Prior to the war, the three satellite planets on Qiming were all business satellites with very few workers on there,” Lu Bixing said. “Satellite 3 Ema must be a spacecraft supply station, right?”

William Yu laughed in distress: “Before we landed, we thought we were pretty lucky. But before the mech could land safely, we were blocked by another fleet, probably the AUS. I don’t think they were targeting the Prime Minister...you should know that the Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy probably has less authority than an arms dealer on Cayley. At that time, the pirate fleet was roaming lawlessly around the galaxy, so many spaceships, merchant ships and travel spacecraft that landed around Ema were all captured. There were about 20 or so other colleagues that were with us at the time, and we were all separated by the AUS and locked inside a lab. The labs were fairly big, I’d say there were about 100 people in one. I’m guessing the labs were separated by age and sex because all the female colleagues and an elderly official that were with us were all taken in to a different lab. Our lab was only filled with adult men under the age of 220; food and water supplies were regularly delivered through a wall. At first, some people were thinking there was a chance for us to escape, but the chief engineer with us said this place was called a ‘vacuum terminal’ and was impossible to escape from.”

Lu Bixing explained kindly: “The ‘vacuum terminal’ is the work of Reinberg--which was the name of the infamous human experiment lab that the late king of Cayley had.”

Lin Jingheng questioned: “You said the AUS rebuilt a Reinberg lab, but are you sure this is the AUS and not something by Ares Von?”

How could an anti-technology nature-obsessed cult that would rather live in ancient society be doing human viral experiments?

Why? What’s the purpose?

“The symbols inside and outside the building were all from the AUS, there was nothing from the Cayley pirates. When those people that captured us greeted each other, they would also say all the things the AUS would say; stuff like ‘for nature’ and things.” William paused, “Right, there was also a mini symbol beside the AUS logo, it was a woman with the body of a snake.”

Lin Jingheng turned his gaze up suddenly---human head and snake body, Nuwa!

“Someone got taken away on the first day and returned after three hours. He came back unconscious, and the doctor that followed the Prime Minister did a quick checkup and said he didn’t find anything abnormal, so he concluded that the person might have just been injected with sedative. He woke up in about an hour and returned back to normal. He told us that he was shot with anesthetics the moment he’d been taken out so he didn’t know what happened, and didn’t feel anything strange with his body. However, just in case, the doctor suggested that we leave a small space and let him remain isolated for a while. He also suggested that we keep our alcoholic beverages from dinner every night and extracted the alcohol to make a temporary sterilizer around the person.” William took in a deep breath and continued, “But about...about a day later, he started developing a fever and extreme fatigue. He...he began developing symptoms of the Rainbow Virus.”

Lin Jingheng and Lu Bixing exchanged a quick glance--the mutated virus’ incubation period is still 24 hours, and if the Prime Minister’s personal doctor couldn’t even notice, meant that the symptoms of the mutated virus are almost the same as the original; close enough to at least fool the eyes of a professional.

Lin Jingheng: “How does it spread?”

“Probably air.” William said. “With the doctor, we’ve always been careful and never touched anything from the patient.”

Lin Jingheng’s heart sank.

“Starting the second day, the virus began to spread among us. The people that evacuated to Ema were all intergalactic travelers, and only a few were able to afford traveling on a comfortable spaceship. Most of them came from merchant ships or even mechs and were healthy and strong young men. At first, while feeling despair, everyone still felt confident that they could survive with their immune system as long as they were careful.”

But Death never forgets its prey.

## Chapter 74 - That Scared the Daylight Out of Me

The Rainbow Virus was a result of human intelligence.

Fighting the virus with just the human immune system would be nearly impossible even for top military elites like Lin Jingheng and the Silver Ten, let alone the average joe like William and the travellers. Without the help of antibodies, even the toughest of galactic soldiers would be unable to fight off the original Rainbow Virus--and a mutation was completely out of the question.

William said: “Nobody in the lab was safe.”

Lu Bixing opened up the voice recorder on his personal device through the heavy layers of the isolation suit. For a while, the only sounds in the dungeon were the movements of the medical capsules and the pained breathing of the patients.

After making a quick profile of the mutated Rainbow Virus, Lu Bixing asked: “About how long did it take from the first time it began to spread to infecting everyone in the lab?”

“Starting the second day, a few travelers began to show the same symptoms of high fever. A lot of people grew anxious--then another 24 hours passed and the virus finally broke out into a pandemic on the night of the third day. People were falling down like grassroots in a storm. In a place that small, having one or two people infected isn’t too much of an issue since we could still quarantine them accordingly by sterilizing their living spaces, but as more people got infected, the whole lab started to feel like a closed room that smelled of deadly viruses.”

Lu Bixing nodded and asked: “Did anything happen within the lab at that time? Did anyone die? How did they deal with people that died?”

“The lab would spray anesthesia at us every day at a fixed time, and we’d be in a coma for about half an hour. Nobody knows what those people were doing to us during that time.” William paused. “As for people that died….I’m not too sure. The first people that were infected were in the worst physical shape and were quickly brought down by the virus. They were taken away while the rest of us were unconscious, and were probably still alive when they were taken out.”

Lin Jingheng: “How did you guys escape, and what route did you take? Where did the stopper come from?”

“By the fifth day we were in the lab, we were once again put to sleep by the regularly scheduled anesthesia.” William said, “But before I became superintendent, I enlisted in the military, so I had a stronger resistance to drugs than most people and didn’t fall asleep as fast as the others.”

Lu Bixing was shocked: “You were enlisted?”

The armed forces and law enforcement forces of the Eighth Galaxy were normally all illegal organizations - he couldn’t think of any places that would use an official term like ‘enlistment’ off the top of his head.

William still believed that lie about being infected with the Rainbow Virus when he was a kid, and explained after giving Lu Bixing a look: “You were still young and probably don’t remember back in Year 136.”

Lu Bixing only nodded vaguely.

“Commander Lu Xin had just made his way into the Eighth Galaxy, and at the same time we were all tired of the tyrannical rule from the Cayley family so we organized a ‘Freedom Alliance Navy’. Back then, we wouldall rather die on the battlefield against the Cayley pirates than to rot in this corrupted regime for the rest of our lives. Even though….maybe the Union had its own reasons, but our navy wasn't recognized as a proper military organization. However, we all followed Commander Lu Xin on the battlefield and trained under the same standard as the Union Military under his command and management.” William let out a small sigh. The falling skin and flesh on his face made his features drop down in a way that seemed to make him age a few centuries as he mumbled, “at that time, Lu Xin was the single rallying call in the entire Eighth Galaxy. Everyone that followed him gave their lives, but we all felt like we could finally live proudly as people and stand with our heads up...”

And yet who could know that good fortune in a person’s life could be so fleeting. The days of living in pride lasted only as long as a shooting star, burning brightly only for a brief moment before returning to a burnt rock in a pile of dirty mud. Reminiscing now, the heroes of the story have already vanished quietly from existence, the young and hot-headed selves almost like a delusion that never happened. The details of the glorious time have all faded into darkness when the story finally gets told.

William turned towards Lin Jingheng: “I’ve spent my days in the Eighth Galaxy’s central government these past few years, and I’ve always stepped onto Wolto anxiously with requests for others. I was too scared to even speak anymore of our place; now that we’ve fallen to this point, I have no more fear. So I just want to ask, why did he have to die? I don’t believe he would betray the Union, why did you guys have to frame him?”

Lin Jingheng was inside the isolation suit; in certain angles, the suit would look like a strange cover that made it impossible to see who’s inside. He ignored the weak question and continued asking without a change in tone: “You didn’t completely fall asleep, and then?”

William laughed mockingly at himself and turned his gaze away before answering: “I heard some hasty footsteps and talking outside; I couldn’t make out the content of the conversations, but they mentioned something about ‘transferring’ and ‘unsafe’. And then a group of these really large grasshopper-like robots rolled in, those ones.”

He pointed towards the inside of the underground chamber. Lu Bixing turned to look and saw an extremely large robot in the corner of the chamber; it wasn’t very aesthetically pleasing to look at, like a giant grasshopper with a big stomach. The symbol of the AUS was engraved on the top of the robot along with an eerie-looking snake body goddess. The stomach area was a giant medical capsule that could fit a few people inside.

William continued: “They started spraying some strange mist at us the moment they stepped in the lab--I’m assuming it’s some sort of sterilizer and anti-viral medicine--I wasn’t fully conscious at the time, and actually woke up after the spray. Then the robot stuck out a shovel the size of a human adult and dug me and a few people beside me up into its medical capsule like a dumpster cleaning trash. I’d organized a few of my colleagues that caught the virus later around the Prime Minister to better care for him, so our robot had a total of nine people, six being my colleagues.”

Lu Bixing pulled himself down to examine the medical capsule inside the robot and interrupted: “Did you all stay inside this thing after leaving the lab? Have you guys left the capsule at all?”

William shook his head: “No, we only opened the door when we arrived here.”

Lu Bixing nodded and raised his hand towards Lin Jingheng optimistically: “This is a specialized medical quarantine capsule, the risk of viral spreading out from it is very slim. Maybe things aren’t as bad as we thought, a false alarm. That sure scared the daylight out of me.”

Lin Jingheng: “False alarm?”

“As long as we can control the virus and don’t let it spread, we should be able to deal with it. The people that created the virus must have an antibody; Commander, surely 24 hours is enough for you to find their homebase, right?” Lu Bixing leaned in beside the robot as his tone grew cheerier. “I’m not trying to start some hero-worshipping or anything but I feel like 24 hours is enough for you to clean out the entire AUS branch within the Eighth Galaxy.”

The corner of Lin Jingheng’s eyes relaxed a bit and showed a hint of humor.

Lu Bixing turned back to William: “And then? You guys were all stuck inside this thing, so I’d imagine it would be hard to save yourselves, did someone help you guys out?”

“The nine of us were stuck inside and I was the only one that was awake. There was only a really small ventilation device inside the capsule while the rest of the capsule was completely shut off from the outside. Except it wasn’t completely sound-proof; I could hear people’s footsteps, the sound of the robot moving and conversations from the outside. After a while, the robot carrying us started moving and stopping at various intervals, then I heard people talking outside so I tried to listen in through the door. I had to move past everyone that was unconscious inside the capsule before I could even make out the conversation outside. Just then, the person speaking paused for a bit before a man’s voice became clearer, it sounded as if he walked closer to the robot. He asked ‘are you sure it’s all equipment inside? There aren’t any live bodies right?’ Then the other person said ‘of course not, that would be a crime against our teachings.’ I still had a fever at the time and slammed the capsule door as hard as I could without thinking who might be outside when I heard this. The first person that spoke then said ‘your equipment might not be put in properly. We’re going up into space later, these goods aren’t cheap, I suggest you open them up and secure them before they fall out during travel.’ The other person got defensive immediately and said ‘our access is granted specifically by the higher-ups, a lowly follower like you can’t just order us around to look at top-secret cargo. You can’t even take responsibility if you end up delaying shipment, now leave.”

“The AUS has a ‘Nine Principles’, which is something like a foundational doctrine of their cult that specifically states that it is against animal experiments.” Lin Jingheng added carefully, “which means that the lab on Satellite Ema was also a secret within the organization--what happened after?”

“The robot then walked off a bit further and then stopped. I think it finally made it to its destination because there were sounds of railways on the side, I suspect that we were carried onto mechs like normal cargo. Then I’m not sure how long had passed, I was still a little dazed, but the surroundings started to shake and I could feel gravity beginning to lose control around us. Alarms started ringing outside the robot, and I wasn’t sure what was happening until someone knocked on the capsule door. It was the person that had first spoken earlier - he knocked on the capsule and asked if there was anyone inside. I got so excited I almost started crying, but I couldn’t leave the capsule so I told him that we were all infected with the Rainbow Virus. The person was extremely shocked and then told me that this cargo ship was currently under attack by an unknown fleet of mechs, that we needed to leave immediately…”

Lin Jingheng’s calm heart sank to the ground the moment he heard this, and quickly interrupted: “When was this? Where did it happen?”

“About a week ago I think.” William said, “I’m not exactly sure where, but from Ema to Qiming...it should be somewhere around here I guess? What’s wrong?”

The last bit of color on Lin Jingheng’s face faded into pale whiteness under the mask---one week ago when he was hiding from Lu Bixing, he took the Ninth Squadron out to clean up the rest of the AUS forces around the area and cleaned up a wave of AUS armed fleet outside Qiming as well. He only managed to find the headquarters on Qiming thanks to this fleet of mechs he chased down…

Lin Jingheng always thought the Union’s ethical and humanitarian ideals were bullshit; when he picks up his weapon, his only goal is total elimination of his enemies, no exceptions. His bad habit of killing off all prisoners had already earned an awful reputation for him back in the Union, so aside from a small mech he left from the AUS fleet he used as hostage to lead back to Qiming, the entire fleet was completely annihilated by him.

In other words, he might have personally destroyed every information they could’ve had about the new Rainbow Virus.

The first time, his arrogance and pride that gave him the false confidence that he was a player of the game led to the fall of the Union, and the Eight Galaxies all fell into the chaotic purgatory of pirates; fate showed him a yellow card.

The second time, he retrieved the Ninth Squadron and destroyed the entire Cayley pirate fleet. He ignored the warning from fate and continued to be arrogant; he didn’t give a care for the space pirates in the Eighth Galaxy...or perhaps, he didn’t even care for the entire Eighth Galaxy, and treated the place as a stepping stone for him to make a grand return to the Union.

Fate gave him the second yellow card.

This time, the two yellow turned into red.

Lin Jingheng never cared about his own life; even if he trudged through a world of unrest, he still had the Silver Ten as his ace and would never admit he couldn’t handle any situation.

Because he had the heart of stone, he could be strong and unbreakable.

So when this red card hit him right at his weak point and knocked him down, he didn’t have the strength to stand back up at the moment.

Lu Bixing quickly outlined what happened; but before he could really think about it, he raised a hand subconsciously and held onto Lin Jingheng’s shoulders in consolation through the isolation suit, and asked: “Who escaped, did the pirate fleet get completely annihilated?”

“I think so. The pirates were all gone and the situation was very urgent at the moment. The person only had time to push our robot and another one beside us onto a small mech before we were forced to escape. We didn’t even have time to leave the dock before we were forced to make an emergency warp and run like headless chickens. We then found out that we were the only ones that made it out alive because the other robot was filled with actual equipment to hide us. The person that saved us was also a pirate of the AUS. After we were forced to land on Qiming, he snuck us over here because there wasn’t anyone around. The little mech we fled from didn’t even have a complete first aid kit and only carried some normal vitamins that don’t do anything to the Rainbow Virus - the only thing that kind of worked was the stopper, which we also only had one syringe of. The person told us that he didn’t know what was going on within the organization and it wouldn’t be safe to bring our matter up. He said he needed to go back to the base, find a prayer time where he could sneak in and steal some antibodies for us--except nobody knew it was mutated at first....but it’s been days since the person that saved us left, with no sign of him returning. The Prime Minister was at his last breath, so Webster volunteered to go out and try his luck with the stopper.”

“Turan, I need you to look for someone among the prisoners,” Lin Jingheng ordered Turan through his personal device, then turned back to ask WIlliam, “what was the name of the person that saved you, what does he look like?”

“He called himself….Hope.”

## Chapter 75 - I’ll Stay with you ‘Til the End

The door to the underground prison on Qiming opened suddenly as an armed mobile entered the facility in a grand entrance. The sound of Turan’s military boots hitting the ground was like a gunshot; she glanced around the prison cell and quickly zeroed in on her target with the photo of Hope on her personal device. She turned to see that a group of prisoners were all gathered around Hope as they listened to him talk. Turan squinted slightly at the scene and suppressed the cold gaze in her eyes.

She then cordially gestured to her subordinates to turn off the light as she plastered a customer service smile on her face. She walked carefully towards the mini gathering with both hands in front of her like a well-mannered secretary, and asked softly: “Are you Mister Hope?”

The middle-aged man looked up at her and stood up sternly: “Yes.”

“I’m not here to hurt you, Mister Hope. The thing is, we found a group of people that you had saved before, but the situation is a little complicated. This place is currently at risk of a pandemic…” Turan saw the room full of prisoners who were listening in on the conversation, so could only make vague statements. Her voice was anxious like a helpless little girl’s when she asked softly, “the patient mentioned your name, can you help us out?”

Hope was taken aback for a second before he immediately realized what the ‘situation’ and ‘pandemic’ meant: “How could it be? Does your organization not carry standard antibodies?”

Turan bit her lips as her expression hinted a sense of helplessness. She lowered her head lightly and said: “Please help us, the civilians are innocent.”

Hope was completely lost but still waved towards the crowd to dismiss the meeting. He politely adjusted his clothing and said: “Sure, no problem. I don’t know much, but you’re free to give me orders since I was the one that brought them over.”

At the same time, Saturday swiftly walked into the Self-Defense Squad camp within the operational base and woke everyone up with his loud voice.

“Hustle up!” He took a quick breath of air, “Wake up and put on your isolation suits, follow me!”

While night had just rolled into the Milky Way City, the small space station by the edge of the Eighth Galaxy was just entering dusk. By the executive building of the Self-Defense Squad, Weasel had just returned from his patrol only to hear all the broadcast systems in the residential area begin picking up signals. He looked up in confusion to see the lotus-shaped multimedia screen flash a few times, and Foucault’s face appeared on screen.

“My brothers and sisters,” her strong voice lit up a number of households on the streets as people peeked out their windows to watch the woman on the 3D screen. “My fellow comrades, we are the Eighth Galaxy Self-Defense Squad, and the Eighth Galaxy is our home. We stayed here even at the worst of times; and now, it is time that I ask you all to stand up for the Eighth Galaxy once again.”

Zhanlu got off from the Model 3 and returned to his human form. He took a giant supercomputer processor and entered an energy field, landing right at the entrance to the underground chamber. Surprisingly, he didn’t waste time chit-chatting while a row of virtual screens appeared behind him: “Sir, Headmaster Lu, I’ve already connected to the internal network of the Milky Way City and registered all personal device databases. Please give your next command.”

“Preventing the spread of the virus is the most important task right now,” Lu Bixing promptly contacted the Self-Defense Squad and the Ninth Squadron. “What we’re doing right now could just end up being a waste of time at the end, but if we make one little mistake, it could be fatal. Don’t try and test the virus’ ability to spread at any given opportunity.”

Countless red dots indicating various personal devices flashed across the screen behind Zhanlu. The area that virus patient Webster had visited within the last 48 hours was quickly mapped out with the red dots showing people that had come in contact with him; the dots then quickly became complex strands of red lines on the screen. Scenes of the city and streets flashed across the screens like a slideshow across time. With Zhanlu’s powerful processing ability, the coordinates of all target devices were sent to the Self-Defense Squad and Ninth Squadron real-time. Teams of soldiers dressed in isolation suits immediately made their ways into the small alleyways that armed mobiles could not enter and dutifully searched for all potential persons of contact while the invisible enemy loomed over their heads.

On the other side of the underground chamber, the patients were already fast asleep. Even William couldn’t stay awake and fell into slumber inside the medical capsule. Despite having no real method to treat the Rainbow Virus, the capsules remained loyal in fulfilling their duty of caring for their patients until the very end.

A screeching crow fell from the sky and was immediately taken away by the epidemic prevention robot that was summoned from the Milky Way City’s local hospital. A row of sterilizing trucks drove off from the old factory and began spraying the surroundings with disinfecting mists.

Turan was busy dragging Hope out of the prison cell so the temporary head of the sterilization team was put in charge of contacting her through her personal device: “Captain, the sterilizing process is due to be completed within an hour, but we can’t confirm whether traditional disinfecting sprays can kill the mutated Rainbow Virus, please give us your orders--”

Hope was shocked: “What did he say? The Rainbow Virus has a mutation?”

Turan took a deep breath. The night wind on Qiming was as cold as ice water, the chilly air painfully ran through her lungs filled with distress.

“Oh my commander,” she thought, “when has the Ninth Squadron done backend work like this before, it’s beyond our profession! Mobilize all medical supplies--aside from Milky Way City and a few run-down hospitals around the area, where am I supposed to find more supplies?”

She’s completely unfamiliar with the Eighth Galaxy and felt her eyes completely blinded. In a time where medical capsules can take care of most illnesses, in order to reserve capital the Silver Ninth Squadron had no designated medical professional in the team. Even if they were to bring in 1000 medical capsules, nobody could possibly analyze this mutated Rainbow Virus; and aside from flashing red alarms and injecting IVs, medical capsules were completely useless.

Just then, a young girl’s voice exclaimed loudly not too far ahead from a commotion: “Captain!”

Turan looked up to see Mint frantically run towards her: “Captain….old man Hawk...we...we can’t hold him back….”

The next instant, a sound of a gunshot rang from ahead. Mint jolted in fear as all the soldiers brought out their guns and pointed at the fierce Monoeyed Hawk.

Mint exclaimed: “Don’t shoot!”

Ever since the Ninth Squadron landed, Monoeyed Hawk hadn’t shown his face around a lot. Aside from being a mother goose that tirelessly chased Lu Bixing down to stop him from following Lin Jingheng around, he was like a retired old cat with a temper that unhappily sat in a corner. He isolated himself from the outside world and wouldn’t bother reaching his claws out to attack anyone outside his reach even if he was furious.

It was only now that Turan realized that this person before her had grown up under the tyrannical regime of the Cayley family and was someone that survived countless battles with fresh blood at the tip of his blade.

Monoeyed Hawk walked forward towards the prison sternly and carelessly as the Ninth Squadron’s guns all trained on him.

Turan ordered powerfully: “What are you guys doing, put down your guns!”

The soldiers all stood up straight and put down their guns at the command, letting Monoeyed Hawk stand before Turan.

Monoeyed Hawk’s heterochromic eyes carried a hint of bloodthirst as he pulled his gun out before Turan and asked her: “where’s that bastard Lin Jingheng?”

Turan peeked at his expression and thought she might end up taking a beating for her boss if she didn’t handle this well enough.

“Commander and Headmaster Lu are inside the quarantine zone,” Turan answered timidly, “I can explain this situation…”

A clicking sound rang as Monoeyed Hawk undid the security lock on his laser gun.

Turan shut her mouth in hopes that Monoeyed Hawk would not slap her in the face as she was still a young and pretty girl.

To her surprise, Monoeyed Hawk didn’t make any physical contact and only put the gun back behind his waist and asked her: “What do you guys need?”

Turan: “....”

She thought she was hearing things for a second.

“I’m asking you a question, what do you need?” Monoeyed Hawk raised his voice in annoyance, “does Lin Jingheng seriously think he knows all the connections and backdoors of the Eighth Galaxy just by hanging around here for five years? Can you guys really find medical equipment, supplies and professionals just by yourselves?”

Turan almost found herself kneeling down in admiration: “Please! We need them! As much as we can get!”

Monoeyed Hawk humphed heavily and said: “I need some men!”

Turan gladly said: “Everyone in Team Three and the first line of Team Four follow him. From now on, everyone takes orders from Mister Lu, do whatever he tells you, no need to get permission from me!”

Monoeyed Hawk turned to walk away.

Turan quickly added: “Wait, you don’t need to worry about Professor Lu….”

Monoeyed Hawk stopped for a second and turned his gaze towards her, speaking clearly and sternly: “If anything were to happen to him, Lin Jingheng won’t be able to repay. Your commander knows this very well, I’m not worried about that.”

The Ninth Squadron worked efficiently and quickly assembled two teams of small mechs to follow the infamous thug of the Eighth Galaxy into the dead sea of space.

Aside from the blown-up planets Cayley, Beijing-β and Egret, there were a number of less-populated planets with less developed societies. The people that lived there survived like living corpses in between the gap of civilization and barbarism; when they smelled a change in the weather, they would run away and count the days they have left. But Monoeyed Hawk knew that this place was not always this hopeless.

Many people once dreamed of becoming a hero, but they’d watched heroes fail too many times and finally became weapon smugglers that lived in their own sphere while others became public servants of the galaxy. They eventually became the carefree mafia of the Eighth Galaxy as they lived in their superficial sources of happiness.

In the 140 years between Year 136 to 276 of the New Sidereal Calendar, revolutionary changes redefined the universe; stardust born from planets in the galaxy lived and then vanished like fireworks in the sky.

The people and the galaxy are growing old.

Monoeyed Hawk spread his field of vision through the mental network and thought: *Can I ask you all to help me once again?*

“The original specimen and experimental data of the mutated Rainbow Virus might have been destroyed by us by accident. Traditional antibodies are ineffective, and the effectiveness of regular sterilization, destruction of the virus, and stoppers are still unknown,” Turan gave Hope a quick rundown. “It’s too late to say sorry now, but we really don’t have the resources to analyze and develop a vaccine, so our only hope is to rely on a backup copy of the culprit. If we can’t find the original files of the new Rainbow Virus and it spreads before we understand its background, the 18 billion lives on Qiming are doomed!”

Hope’s expression grew heavy: “Sorry, this was my fault for not considering the problem thoroughly. I didn’t think the Rainbow Virus was actually a mutant, these people are completely mad….please let me think about it.”

Turan was very good at keeping her temper in and thought: “*once this thing passes, I swear I’ll break your back*” while she bowed sincerely at the pirate. “Sir, we’re depending on you,” she said.

“Captain, please lift your head,” Hope quickly pulled her up. “Our predecessors wandered unrestricted areas in their shaggy clothes and limited supplies for the sake of saving humanity. Thousands of years of tradition taught us reverence and respect for life, to not hurt our own kind even in expanding our influence.”

This cult follower of the AUS was surprisingly cultured and didn’t express a bad temper nor curse out loud. He walked around in circles for a while as he frowned in thought, and then as if he finally made a decision, he bit down his lips and said: “Captain, this is an extremely difficult decision for me. Please listen carefully as I fear I may not have the courage to say such heretical words against the organization for a second time.”

Turan’s eyes lit up as she held her breath.

Lu Bixing sat down and caught a breath as he let Zhanlu continue to operate automatically.

“What do you think?”

Lin Jingheng shook his head; his gaze still locked on his personal device as Turan was reporting something to him from the other end.

Lu Bixing let out a breath of air out of his facemask. The mask on the isolation suit had a built-in water vapor filter that quickly dissolved the vapors inside the mask; if William’s description was correct, the incubation period of the mutated Rainbow Virus passed through contact and air should be around one to two days. One night had passed and he hadn't felt anything, but the virus could already be inside his blood right now.

Ever since Lu Bixing learned of the news, his brain had been working around the clock. He spent his time analyzing how to carry out Lin Jingheng’s orders, recalling William’s words to the point where he wished he could pull everything out and reorganize even down to every punctuation mark; immediately afterwards, he spent his time finding potential first contact personnel alongside Zhanlu’s complicated screens.

He closed his eyes to see endless strands of red lines and relaxed his mind for a bit. He felt as if the swarm of emotions that he had purposely suppressed surged up in revenge against his will, swallowing him up.

At first, he hadn’t thought too much about the Rainbow Virus because it was like an old friend to him. It was like when ancient people that survived smallpox saw a new case of breakout; they knew that it was a serious disease, but weren’t scared for their lives.

But eventually things started going downhill. First was the mutation, then it was the news that Lin Jingheng might’ve accidentally shot down the viral lab while on patrol.

In all honesty, this wasn’t a complete reason to despair in Lu Bixing’s eyes; however, the chain of events hinted at a malicious and bad fate that made even an atheist like himself worry.

Lin Jingheng cut off the communication with Turan and lifted his head, abruptly meeting Lu Bixing’s gaze.

Lu Bixing stared at him dumbly for a few moments before he randomly blurted out: “Commander, we’ll always be together right? If we can take off our isolation suits, can I kiss you? There are only two scenarios we’d take this off: if we don’t get infected and manage to escape this situation, a little celebration isn’t too bad, right? The other case is if we all get infected, and at the end of the day, this is my only wish before I die.”

“I won’t let you die,” Lin Jingheng held out his hand. “Zhanlu, I need a completely empty mech fully equipped with sterilizers and disinfecting equipment. Hope just informed us that the order he received to transfer the lab came directly from the core management of the AUS. He just sent the coordinates and route to the main base.”

Lu Bixing was forcefully pulled out of his sea of emotions by Lin Jingheng and asked in shock: “You believe him? Aren’t you afraid this might be a trap?”

“He voluntarily took Turan’s polygraph test,” Lin Jingheng paused, “as the vanguard of the Silver Ten, the Ninth Squadron’s lie detection technology should be the top of the Union, but in case of another mishap happening, I’ll be going by myself this time…”

Lu Bixing was about to voice his opposition when Lin Jingheng held up his hand to stop him from speaking: “Investigation and stealing doesn’t require a lot of people, bringing Zhanlu along will be enough for me---have you heard of the famous Leon Fortress Siege?”

The Leon Fortress Siege was a battle initiated by the Union before Lu Xin recaptured the Eighth Galaxy in order to test the military power of the Eighth Galaxy. The Union sent out a fleet to siege the Leon Fortress located in between the borders of the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy in order to pin down a hard needle at the feet of the Cayley forces, attempting to use the fortress as a jumping board to launch a full invasion into the Eighth Galaxy. However, it eventually ended in failure. When the Cayley fleet attacked the Fortress, they used automated mechs filled with commoners of the Eighth Galaxy as the vanguard. The Union forces couldn’t launch their missiles at the crying civilians and could only resort to hacking into the enemy mechs in an attempt to capture it….however, they ended up capturing a fleet of ‘human bioweapons’ injected with deadly diseases.

The Union troops that had been caught off guard suffered a great loss, and were then forced outside of the Leon Fortress as the main pirate fleet followed behind with their main forces. After the failed attempt of this battle, the Union pushed for the research and development of the comprehensive vaccine for military personnels.

“I’ll return this favor personally with my life.” Lin Jingheng said, “Zhanlu, leave the supercomputer to continue searching, let’s go.”

Lu Bixing grabbed onto him: “The search can be automated to continue, I’m going with you.”

Lin Jingheng: “No….”

“If I were to be stuck here without you, then I might need to force myself to smile while I write my will; if you were stuck here and I wasn’t around, I would probably be crying outside the quarantine zone right now.” Lu Bixing said, “but if we’re together, I feel like no matter what happens, we can face it together. Even if we ran out of options and had to face certain death, my biggest fortune would be to stay with you until the very end...of course, I know you wouldn’t think of it that way. Sorry, this is the first time in my life where I’ve ever said something so selfish and against others’ will.”

Lin Jingheng almost found himself stunned by this almost reckless straightforwardness from the man before him, and couldn’t find the right words to respond.

Lu Bixing laughed mockingly at himself: “I still haven’t fully experienced the possessiveness, jealousy and desire brought about by the jumbled hormonal activity from love, and I’m already turning into someone spiteful. Sorry again...if you can hate me a little more, would it take the pressure off of you, at least a bit?”

Lin Jingheng was completely someone that wouldn’t flinch even at his deathbed; Lu Bixing still clearly remembered pulling him from a sea of exploding mechs, and the first thing this man had done was scold him when he woke up.

What does death even mean to him?

Their relationship wasn’t at the point of mutual affection; Lu Bixing hadn’t had the time to fully explore and could only imagine through the surface, but he already felt the painful burden of his biggest fear.

But with Lin Jingheng’s careful and deep-mind, he would never let Lu Bixing read through his worry and panic.

The secret feeling of being overwhelmed by this sweet gesture and clear emotions crossed blades in his heart, almost stoppin Lu Bixing’s breath with complicated excitement.

Lu Bixing looked into Lin Jingheng’s eyes and repeated carefully: “I’m going with you.”

Fifthteen minutes later, a small mech disguised as a mini spaceship flew out of Qiming onto a journey that would last for over 20 hours.

At the same time, a small sparrow flew to the Milky Way City and landed on the balcony of a family as it cleaned its feathers. Just 48 hours ago, it had been eating trash outside an old factory.

The window opened and a sickly little girl came out to feed the birds some bread crumbs.

The sparrows all crowded around the bread crumbs, and one of them pecked the finger of the little girl that couldn’t pull her hand out in time.

## Chapter 76 - I was Born in Debt to this Place[[3]](#footnote-3)

The mech rounded the wasteland of death and left the last large planet of the Eighth Galaxy far behind it; suddenly, the universe became completely isolated. The map of their route grew more and more deserted; the celestial objects they would occasionally pass were no longer named until even the identifiers gradually turned into short numbers or were marked as ‘unknown territory’. Long and wordy descriptions of planets and stars began to disappear, slowly being replaced by lines of cold, hard alphabet soup that made the navigational map almost seem like a complicated algebra textbook.

This was the realm of the extraterritorial--the real wilderness, a place of darkness where the light of civilization had not yet reached.

Lin Jingheng connected through the long-distance lines and quietly listened to Turan's report on the situation on Qiming.

“The sterilizers are already used up.” Turan’s face showed a hint of fatigue after working for a whole night. “We haven’t heard from Monoeyed Hawk yet, and we’ve already quarantined everyone that we could. Right now we’re just waiting, and if anything wrong were to happen, then we’re really out of luck---Commander, do you think it’ll work if I just pray to a random god right now?”

“You better just stay in the mortal world and not anger a god to bring some divine punishment onto yourself,” Lin Jingheng didn’t give her a chance to continue with nonsense. “According to that Hope person, the AUS is enjoying their time within the seven galaxies right now and their homebase outside is empty, do you think this is a reasonable statement? You’ve received information regarding the AUS from other galaxies right, can you give an estimate on what the current status of the organization is?”

Turan answered: “The AUS is quite active within the seven galaxies. From what I can see, their military power within the Union territory is already much higher than what I expected. If there’s still a large fleet in the outskirts, just how big is their navy? I think…”

Lu Bixing paid little attention to the conversation about war and politics going on at his side. At this point, whether it was the two of them currently on the way to the pirates’ homebase or Turan waiting on Qiming, they’ve already passed the stage of anxiety in face of despair and had no choice but to embark on this journey of unknowns they couldn’t afford to fail.

He closed his eyes and gave himself a minute to recollect his emotionally disastrous heart before he asked: “Zhanlu, can you play some music?”

“Yes, headmaster Lu,” Zhanlu answered. “What kind of music do you prefer? I have a database of licensed music purchased by the Military Council’s Outer Space department, or you can choose to listen to my own creations.”

Lu Bixing didn’t expect that even mechs could be filled with this many surprises: “You have your own creations? Give me a song list.”

Lin Jingheng was focusing his attention on the route map that Hope had given them and analyzed the military might of the pirate forces in the outskirts with Turan, giving no spare moment for the other two.

Zhanlu then generously showed off his ‘great creation’ and asked Lu Bixing: “I heard your heartfelt confession on Qiming, are you pursuing my master? Why don’t you try and talk to him a little more?”

“Does it look like he has time to talk to me? I’m very inexperienced, my dear Zhanlu, sometimes I can’t think of that many tricks.” Lu Bixing held his arm out and sighed at the AI. “Also, I said some really embarrassing things earlier just to come out with him; it gets more embarrassing the more I think about it. If I continue on, I wouldn’t be able to measure the fine line between flirting and harassment. Hey, open up your database and tell me if there are any other things humans normally do when they court their love besides singing and gifting flowers?”

Zhanlu answered proudly: “I can give you some advice, Headmaster Lu. For example, I don’t think my master likes flowers; compared to plants, he seems to take an appreciation for fungi more. A few days ago, he asked me to clean up the greenbelt on the Model 3 and replace it with a farm of mushrooms…”

Lin Jingheng’s cold gaze slid over: “Zhanlu, pay attention to the abnormal energy waves around the area. You should know this is the extraterritorial area and we’re using a very easily trackable system to contact Qiming, right? Stop wasting time on unrelated tasks.”

“Understood, sir.” Zhanlu said as he extended the radius of the energy scan, “I’ll also lock the data of your aesthetic preferences and interests, received.”

Lu Bixing was stumped for a long while after he heard the word “mushroom”, suddenly realizing something as he turned to look at Lin Jingheng.

It was as if Lin Jingheng had thrown all his attention onto the analysis of the AUS’s armed forces, his field of vision and sense within the mental network was completely blind to anything else around him.

Lu Bixing lowered his head and wanted to remain calm like a normal adult; but he couldn’t help feeling a piece of his soul being hooked on by a strand of mycelium that grew out from the faraway Model 3, zapping through his heart to jumble up his emotions. He had to use all his body’s strength to desperately stop himself from letting out a delightful grin in front of Zhanlu. Lu Bixing aimlessly found something to do in order to distract his thoughts and casually said, “what were we talking about again? You just had to interrupt...Oh right, you wanted to let me hear your song.”

Zhanlu gladly showed off his talent. Though to be perfectly honest, his ‘talent’ was quite lackluster; no matter how close he was to a real human, he was still an AI. Rather than saying it’s a music creation, it was more like a rearrangement of existing music data that didn’t have a very lasting impression to the listener.

Lu Bixing gave a few compliments out of good conscience and casually opened up the last folder.

The last folder was labeled “nursery rhyme”.

“Mister mech, you sure have a child’s heart.” Lu Bixing randomly selected a track as he commented.

An upbeat background music suddenly rang out within the mech, and Zhanlu sang along to the beat with his considerably decent voice: “Little bunny, white and round, surf’s up in the hotpot…”

Lin Jingheng: “....”

Lu Bixing didn’t realize that he didn’t just open a random file folder and was actually free spirit with running wild behind its master’s back. He almost fell over and frantically closed it up: “Where did you get this unique inspiration from?”

Zhanlu answered, “drunk words from my master.”

Lu Bixing turned to look at Lin Jingheng in shock.

“Not Master Lin, it was my former master.”

“It was Commander Lu Xin?” Lu Bixing was stumped. “What kind of person was he?”

Zhanlu went silent for two seconds: “I’m sorry, Headmaster Lu, but this part of the data is protected and I cannot discuss this with you.”

“Okay,” Lu Bixing’s spirits lowered strangely but he waved that away as he continued to ask Zhanlu with great curiosity, “but your current master isn’t protected right? Let’s talk about him instead.”

Zhanlu’s standard AI personality was a cold-faced chatter-box, but this nature was always under suppression in Lin Jingheng’s hands like an AI with no rights. He finally met someone that was also just as chatty and was finally able to show off himself; the two talked endlessly under Lin Jingheng’s mental network to the point where they were only just missing some snacks in between them.

“Data on Master is very well-rounded,” Zhanlu said. “I have all information on him since he registered as a citizen of the Union, including gaming records.”

“Why is it all control and management type games?” Lu Bixing went through the records with great interest “Does he not play casual games?”

“To be fair, he never plays any gambling games or games with randomness.” Zhanlu said, “because he will almost 100% lose--ah, the thing you are looking at right now is a photo album, there isn’t much but they are very valuable. There are also photos of the master when he was young…”

Lin Jingheng: “Zhan-lu!”

Zhanlu zipped up his mouth on the spot and turned himself back into the robot arm. He hung himself back on the wall innocently without another word.

Lu Bixing slid over beside Lin Jingheng and stared inside the mask to find a little vein popping on Lin Jingheng’s forehead.

Lin Jingheng purposely ignored him while Lu Bixing made rounds beside the commander annoyingly. Lin Jingheng found himself unable to concentrate with this desperate cry for attention beside him, and finally took his eyes from the map to look at Lu Bixing. The latter took the opportunity and responded with a bright grin.

The grin was a little too bright, Lin Jingheng felt his heart skip a beat and was thankful there was an isolation mask that separated them.

“Hey Commander,” Lu Bixing leaned in, their masks almost hitting each other, “would you agree to let me kiss you now?”

Lin Jingheng gave him a cold face: “Do you not have anything else to do? Why did I agree to take you out?”

“It’s not that I’m bored, you’re the one that’s always busy. I bet you’re going to use checking the armory as an excuse later just so you can avoid staying around me. Why? Are you scared? I’m gonna guess that you also like me.” Lu Bixing wagged his invisible tail, “and you’re even growing fungi for me on the Model 3.”

Lin Jingheng: “Does it concern you what I plant?”

Lu Bixing: “You don’t like me?”

“I don’t, go away.”

Lu Bixing let out a dramatic sigh: “We only have a few days left to live, and death’s already calling its horses behind me. You still don’t like me, my heart’s shattering into pieces--let me ask you again, do you really not like me?”

Lin Jingheng: “....”

Perhaps he got inspiration from Zhanlu’s creations, Lu Bixing turned the story about growing mushrooms into a rap song and started singing around Lin Jingheng proudly.

“Sit down,” Lin Jingheng mentally removed the disturbance and remained calm. “I have some things to ask you.”

Lu Bixing: “Hm?”

“You said you contracted the Rainbow Virus when you were little,” Lin Jingheng said, “what’s going on with that?”

Lu Bixing’s little one-man concert was successfully stopped by one line. He remained silent and responded without answering the question: “the Eighth Galaxy is the home of the Rainbow Virus, if you don’t get infected once or twice in your life you wouldn’t be a real resident. I just randomly got contracted, no big deal. As long as we have the vaccine, it’ll be gone after a good night’s rest.”

Lin Jingheng asked patiently again: “I’m asking how you contracted it.”

“How I contracted it? Traditional Rainbow Virus only spreads in those few ways.” Lu Bixing continued to play dumb. “Dust, physical contact, and eating rotten food that carries the virus…”

Lin Jingheng interrupted him: “Does it hurt?”

Lu Bixing turned his head up in bewilderment to meet Lin Jingheng’s deep stare. The mask seemed to add a soft filter over his gaze; it was as if the deep mists inside those grey pupils were blown away, the glance becoming clear and narrow. The abyss was cleared, and the only thing left in those eyes was his own little reflection.

Lu Bixing looked directly into those eyes and felt his throat drying out as if he were enchanted by some unexplainable magic. For the first time in his life he experienced the chemical reaction caused by a look into someone’s eyes, and said absently as he shook his head: “towards the later stage of the Rainbow Virus, the nervous system would slowly deteriorate and instead feels like a painkiller.”

Lin Jingheng: “....”

He hadn’t even started his manipulative provocation.

Lu Bixing suddenly realized what he’d just said. Even he was shocked that a talented young scientist of the New Sidereal Era like himself would step right into the ancient beauty trap. His one line was more than enough to evoke suspicion--what does he mean by “the later stage of the Rainbow Virus?” The vaccine of the virus works like a charm, it’s almost immediately effective after a shot and could be completely metabolized within a day or two, how would it possible that Monoeyed Hawk would let him taste the feeling of a late-stage Rainbow Virus infection?

Also, what was “instead feels like a painkiller?”

Where did this “instead” come from?

Lu Bixing surprisingly stuttered for once: “Uh...well….”

Lin Jingheng’s eyebrow lifted slightly: “Hm?”

Lu Bixing’s silence lasted even longer before he spoke up and responded slyly, “if two people want to develop a closer relationship, there needs to be some sort of open communication mutually, right? Commander, this is a question of personal privacy, but since you asked, I shouldn’t only share unhappy things with you.”

Despite always acting honest, Lu Bixing was still very much willing to pull out the cunning card whenever necessary. This time, he was purposely leading Lin Jingheng to object to his statement and stray away from this topic; unfortunately, the commander wouldn’t fall into his trap: “Like what?”

Lu Bixing looked passionately at him and leaned in. “Are you giving your consent? Consenting to develop a closer relationship with me?”

Lin Jingheng kept his collected posture and ignored the line as if he hadn’t heard it, then knocked on the table beside him: “Why do you know how it feels to be in the late stage of the Rainbow Virus?”

Acting spoiled and playing dumb wouldn’t work before Lin Jingheng, and Lu Bixing finally reluctantly gave up and shrugged his shoulders helplessly: “I read it in a book.”

Lin Jingheng said calmly: “The Rainbow Virus was first leaked out by accident from the Reinberg lab of the Cayley family. When the late King of Cayley invested a large sum of money into the research, he pretty much squeezed the entire Eighth Galaxy’s economy dry. I don’t think his goal was to develop a plague virus; if he was just a crazy murderer, the cost of production was too high, even missiles would have been more effective.”

Lu Bixing remained silent.

“When the Rainbow Virus enters the human body, it begins by breaking down all organs. The immune system would be destroyed, the nervous system nullified,, and the patient’s senses all stripped away while the body continues to rot. In contrast, if organs were to be removed and reattached at this stage, the rejection reaction would also be minimized---from what I know, aside from destroying the human body, the virus can also degenerate existing human body cells into stem cells; however, they would almost die immediately and cannot be used.”

Lu Bixing bit down his mouth into a straight line.

Lin Jingheng: “At the Primal Alien’s place, I met a young boy merged with a bird. He paradoxically retained both characteristics of the two species naturally, and unlike other mutated human pets, he didn’t need to live inside breeding tanks and could live up to 30 years...they told me that he was the only successful case from the ‘Nuwa Project’---you know about the Nuwa Project, right?”

All hints of cunning and bright expression on Lu Bixing’s face vanished; his gaze towards Lin Jingheng was almost deathly cold. After a while, he finally lowered his head and let out an ambiguous laugh: “You know quite a lot already, so why are you asking me? Lin, you know that probing at something someone else isn’t willing to talk about will make people dislike you.”

Lin Jingheng was unfazed: “I’d say I’m quite experienced in the department of being hated.”

“Then you’re scared of people liking you, scared of others getting close to you, and scared of having others find out that you’re secretly being good to them, why is that?” Lu Bixing asked. “Tell me, and I’ll answer you.”

Lin Jingheng had the tables turned on him, and both men remained silent for a while. Just as Lu Bixing thought Lin was about to back down , he heard the latter’s voice speak through the isolation mask before him: “....I don’t have the energy.”

Lu Bixing’s eyes widened as he looked up at Lin Jingheng in shock.

“I don’t have the energy to maintain personal relationships.” Lin Jingheng paused. “I’m a person that’s constantly walking on wires and has a lot of enemies, more than you’d imagine: space pirates, the Union, the committee, and even within the Military Council. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have left the Union five years ago and come to the Eighth Galaxy. Friends and family...they would all become my weak spot. I can’t protect them, and don’t have spare emotions to give to them.”

Maintaining his hatred and anger already took all of his mental energy.

Lin Jingheng: “I’m done, it’s your turn now.”

The two were two meters apart, both locked inside their own isolation suits and unable to make out each other’s expression. Their voices rang through the speakers inside the clothes, the sound muffled with echoes within the headset. Yet, this felt like the closest the two had ever been, closer even than all the times they’d made physical contact--

“...The Rainbow Virus was only partially completed. The purpose of Cayley’s Reinberg lab back then was to find a way to genetically turn people into superhumans.” Lu Bixing paused a little before opening his mouth. “The human body is very complicated; genetically manipulating it would not only cause great pain, it would also bring about many unexpected side-effects and problems later. How could one completely rebuild an entire iron statue? The only way is to melt it, and the Rainbow Virus is the stove to melt the iron.”

Lin Jingheng said: “If I remember correctly, Reinberg ended up going to the grave with the Cayley family.”

“Yes,” Lu Bixing nodded. “The Reinberg lab is gone, but the great ambition of defying nature didn’t disappear with it.”

Lin Jingheng: “You meant the ‘Nuwa Project’ afterwards. In other words, the project was the ghost of Reinberg.”

“When the Eighth Galaxy officially returned to the Union, Reinberg was also burnt down. The remaining survivors of Reinberg disappeared for many years, perhaps they ended up in the outskirts....I’m not too sure,” Lu Bixing said quietly. “Until one day, old man--my dad received news that they were disguised as human pet smugglers and were continuing to perform human experiments on residents of the Eighth Galaxy. This enraged almost everyone; all the survivors had suffered losses of their loved ones from the Rainbow Virus, how could they not be upset? So they all teamed up to investigate this matter. My old man had a vast network from selling arms and received some clues from his connections…but he didn’t say anything about it.”

Lin Jingheng softened his voice in fear of startling him: “Why?”

“Because of me.” Lu Bixing said. “I heard that when my mother was close to term, the spaceship she was on got caught in an accident. When my dad made it over, she was already...and the child inside her that hadn’t been born yet suffered from a fatal radiation exposure, so when they managed to take me out I was essentially a stillborn. When my dad was driven into a corner, he remembered that Nuwa Project…he heard that there was a successful case from the experiment, but they hadn’t managed to create a superhuman, only a few genetically engineered pets. My body was broken to the point that it was completely non-functional aside from my brain, so the first five years after I was born, I was essentially just a brain in a box. Everything was sent to me through electric communication directly into my brain. My old man kept an original virus strain from the project in secret, and used the research of the Nuwa Project to rebuild my body...that took a whole 15 years. There was an underground chamber back then that was filled with genetically engineered pets that he collected over the years...they were experiment results.”

“You can say I’m a homunculus, the ship of Theseus. The Rainbow Virus killed 3.6 billion people in the Eighth Galaxy, and saved my one life.” Lu Bixing lifted his head slowly, “I was born in debt to this place.”

## Chapter 77 - Body Temperature Currently 37.9 ℃

Lin Jingheng already had his suspicions from Monoeyed Hawk’s reaction and Lu Bixing’s strange genes, but the cruel reality was still beyond his imagination. He thought Lu Bixing had been well-cared for all these years in the Eighth Galaxy; he was like a child with endless energy, carefree of the world. He thought whatever had happened in the past was already in the past, regardless if they were good or bad memories.

He thought…

For a split second, he suddenly remembered the time when he took Penny out to deliver a mech to Lu Bixing back on Beijing-β. When he’d passed by the window of the classroom and overheard the lecture Lu Bixing was giving on genetically engineered pets--

“Have you ever seen a snake with a human head?”

“Someone gifted one to my father. I snuck into the underground chamber and found her, a little girl…”

“Then I shot her dead with a gun.”

Fifteen years meant it hadn’t been a smooth treatment process that happened over night; it would have had to go through countless failures, countless trials, and countless breakdowns.

And just how tough and fragile should human life be?

A little boy’s biggest dream was for it to snow on Cayley so that he could finally get the permission to go outside and play. When he dragged his disabled body down and found Monoeyed Hawk’s underground chamber on accident, only to see a scene similar to Primal Alien’s human laboratory, what had he thought?

Monoeyed Hawk wouldn’t personally get involved with experiments of genetically engineered pets, but if he was willing to dish out the money that also means another madman would willingly pick up the job.

Was the act of purchasing not another form of covering up?

Those monsters with human heads looked out from their breeding tanks to look at the little boy lifelessly. They were the same as him, but were also here because of him.

And when he first discovered them, when the little boy first raised his gun in panic and shot down that young girl...who did he really want to shoot down?

Lu Bixing was always good at living his life and finding all the fun it had to offer, and could even turn even the simplest act of eating and drinking into an aesthetic value. Sometimes he went overboard and acted like a spoiled rich boy that didn’t follow the common ways of society.

Was it possible that someone like him would once think that living itself was a burden?

And yet as unbearable and harsh as it was to shoulder, his life was like an arrow shot from the bow that could not return. He had to continue to fly out, otherwise how would a coward be able to face a Monoeyed Hawk that kept the virus strain hidden at all costs, how would he face those three billion lives that were lost into the stardust...and how would he face those human-shaped monsters inside the dark and cold underground chamber that were stripped of everything from their lives?

Lin Jingheng didn’t know what to say.

“See,” Lu Bixing forcefully broke the silence and put a hand on Lin Jingheng’s stiff shoulders covered by the isolation suit. “These little things aren’t fun and can’t help the situation right now, so why do you have to ask? Let me put this out there too; now that you’ve heard about it you can just ignore it from now on, you don’t need to console or pity me or I’ll get mad. I’m really vicious when I’m mad.”

Lin Jingheng suddenly felt it was hard to breathe, as if a heavy rock weighing as much as his life was resting on his chest. It also felt like a fishbone was stuck in his throat and he couldn’t speak; he wanted to vomit, perhaps from all the unspeakable words that were stuck inside him. Maybe the heavy isolation suit was pressing against him; he felt like his back was stuck in place, making cracking sounds when he moved.

The next instant, Lin Jingheng realized this wasn’t just a normal muscle stiffness.

He softly pressed on his wrist silently and waited for the headphone to make a mechanical announcement to him: “current body temperature is 37.9℃.”

Low fever.

Lin Jingheng slowly let out a deep breath; the invisible butcher knife above his head had finally sliced down on him. It wasn’t a sharp pain to the bone, but a deep and dull pain that struck deep down into his body along with Lu Bixing’s 30 years of memories.

He didn’t say anything and only stopped Zhanlu from speaking inside the mental network. He then stood up and used the excuse of checking the map to stay away from Lu Bixing, quietly calculating how long they had before they reached the destination that Hope had given them.

When Lu Xin brought the vaccine of the Rainbow Virus to the Eighth Galaxy, he could never have guessed that his own son would be fighting with it for the rest of his life. Just like how Lin Jingheng couldn’t have guessed he wouldn’t die under the hands of the committee or the pirate ambush in the Heart of the Rose, only to live until now without any issues just to find out that he might end up dying from the mutated Rainbow Virus. This twist and turn of events could almost be rewritten into a comedy.

It was a new day in Wolto time.

The Milky Way City on Qiming was just entering dawn as members of the Self-Defense Squad lined up wearing their isolation suits. They had been running around for a whole day without time to rest for food and drinks, and because of how exhausted they were they quickly walked through the streets wordlessly like a group of assassins.

The residents of the city peeked out from their windows in various attempts to figure out what these people were here for. They’d already been living in different extremes and were tired of having to survive; they didn’t want anyone else to disturb their lives regardless if it was the Union or pirates.

Saturday’s footsteps began to feel heavy as he raised his head to look towards the sunrise. The sky was clear blue with soft clouds spreading its wings in the air; it was dry but good weather on the planet. Qiming’s climate was on the better side with a decent average temperature; Milky Way City had a dry and wet season respectively with spring at the end of the year, making it an ideal location for various plants to grow...just not people.

Just as he was jumbling up thoughts within his mind, a sudden scream cried out from the crowded residential area.

It was a woman screaming from the bottom of her heart for a full half minute; the spectators around her all held their breaths until she paused for a few seconds before changing into a loud cry as she attempted to say something.

A bad feeling rose inside Saturday’s heart and gestured for his team to follow him. Just as he was about to walk inside the building of the resident, a man ran down from the stairs before he could even get to the first flight, running headfirst into Saturday. He fell back onto the ground, and without any apology or complaint, the man frantically ran off with all fours on the ground as if he had just seen a ghost before him.

The person was wearing a navy blue dress shirt with some pharmacy name embroidered on his collar. Saturday quickly took notice--he knew that some poor people on the Eighth Galaxy were like this; they wouldn’t go to the hospital when they got sick, nor would they be able to afford a medical capsule,only able to rely on friends in local pharmacies they knew. The pharmacy employees usually had some basic medical knowledge and could diagnose common illnesses before they bring out expired medicine to sell to those poor people.

Saturday wrenched him up by the collar: “What are you running for!?”

The person’s legs were like noodles and couldn’t even keep him upright. He trembled and blurted out: “R-rainbow…”

Saturday’s eyes widened as he felt his sweat inside the isolation suit turn cold. He pulled out a medical scanner and ran up the stairs to see a woman with a perm kneeling on the floor of the hallway. She was carrying an unconscious little girl in her arms; the little girl’s face was completely red from high fever, a strange cut on her hand already rotting her flesh.

The alert from the scan indicated that this was an infected patient.

Yet this little girl wasn’t on their search list.

January 15th, year NSC 276, a 6-year-old girl named Angela was confirmed to contract the mutated Rainbow Virus without ever stepping out of her house nor coming close to the main area of infection. As the captain of the Self-Defense Squad and supervisor of the patrol, Saturday immediately quarantined the entire residential area and, in desperation, asked someone to bring a vaccine of the Rainbow Virus.

The old vaccine didn’t work, as expected, so he could only contact Turan as he watched the virus destroy the little girl’s immune system. She was too young and fragile, so her symptoms began showing up much faster than in a grown adult. The rotting of her skin was almost visible to the human eye as it engulfed her whole hand; before the virus could even begin spreading throughout the rest of her body, she died of organ failure.

A security camera three blocks down recorded the course of events that occurred 48 hours before the girl contracted the virus.

After a quick investigation, it was determined that the only other living creatures the little girl came in contact with aside from her own family were a few sparrows. One of the sparrows pecked her finger.

From previous known methods of spread for the traditional Rainbow Virus, aside from animals that had eaten rotten flesh and corpses, no other animals were able to carry the virus. And animals that have contracted the virus would be affected much faster than humans, so they wouldn’t be able to travel while carrying the virus.

In other words, the mutated Rainbow Virus could now be carried on any living creatures and be spread without anyone noticing.

And yet this was only just the start.

Within the next two hours, Turan received five suspected cases of the mutated Rainbow Virus and stiffened up in alarm---the virus may already be spreading.

And spreading faster than the virus were people’s fears.

Since encountering the infected patient in the night market, rumors started spreading throughout Milky Way City. Lu Bixing managed to settle the situation at the time and calmed the crowd, but little did they know that other contractors of the virus began to show up one by one within the following two days. Under immense panic and horror, the air within the city began to thin out; the sole public hospital of the city was completely blocked off at the entrance. People were all wearing gloves and masks in desperation to cover themselves up as they demanded the hospital to explain the source of the virus and give out vaccines.

Under the barricade of the angry civilians, the hospital had to forcefully close its door. Foucault personally led a group of Self-Defense Squad members in an attempt to maintain order, which ended up becoming a futile effort when they were blocked inside the hospital by the crowd.

“Captain, we can’t go on like this,” Weasel rushed to ask Turan. “Do you plan on giving them an explanation or put down the riot by force? We have to make a decision soon. Either way, we can’t let them crowd around like this; if anyone in the crowd is infected, we can’t control the virus if it ends up spreading.”

White was checking the inventory of the remaining medical supplies for Turan: “Why don’t we just tell them the truth? Just say this is a mutated virus and we don’t have the vaccine on hand.”

Turan and Weasel both responded at the same time.

Turan: “No.”

Weasel: “Don’t be stupid.”

Turan: “The trauma of the Rainbow Virus in the Eighth Galaxy is still too fresh in their memories; we don’t even know what’s going on with the mutated virus, so announcing the truth will only create more panic within the crowd. We don’t have credibility with our words here and no authority to control the city, so if anything were to happen we’ll end up becoming the passive observers.”

“Not even just passive. You see, these people in the Eighth Galaxy might look like they don’t give a shit about life most of the time, but when it comes to times where their lives are put on the line, they’ll do anything to make sure they stay alive. There were people that had thrown patients and suspected cases who had been close to those patients into the fire while they were still alive back then; countless lives were lost because of that paranoia, do you really think it’s an act by those pirates?” Weasel let out a sigh, “as for the people that were already infected, those that hid their symptoms were considered decent, but some people would purposely barge into residential areas and throw their blood into crowds. You kids don’t understand, I lived through the Rainbow Virus pandemic back then; over half the people didn’t die from the virus, and were instead killed by other people. One pandemic can really turn unrelated people into two camps that fight to the death against each other.”

White couldn’t comment on that.

“If I were to say,” Weasel held out his rough and yellowish hand for a cigarette from the soldier beside him. He lit the cigarette up and walked up towards Turan after a deep inhale of the smoke. “Captain, when you have to manipulate and play the underhand, don’t hold too tightly on your morals. Listen to me and put all those people that contracted the virus into the hospital and quarantine them. Then find some carrot, glucose, salt water, or whatever and give it out to console the people outside. This might sound morally wrong, but buying an extra minute is still an extra minute for us. We’ll just have to wait and see if Monoeyed Hawk and Professor Lu can help out.”

Turan had no other choice and could only nod in agreement as she swiftly reported to Lin Jingheng the situation on Qiming.

The rising body temperature caused sweat to roll down Lin Jingheng’s face and his blood ran cold even at its current state; he quickly responded in a lower tone: “‘Mobilize the armed mobiles and lock down Milky Way City. Remember to release energy field disruptional signals in case civilians...Zhanlu, what happened?”

Before he could finish, Turan’s signal disappeared.

“Sir, there’s an extreme energy reaction half a sailing day away. We’re about to enter the active zone of unknown armed forces, if we don’t cut off the connection here there’s a 75% chance that the long-distance signal will be exposed.”

Just as Zhanlu finished, the silhouette of the enemy could be seen on the giant navigation screen--it was an armed fleet made up of about a few hundred small mechs patrolling around the ‘AUS Homebase’ that Hope had told them about. They were waiting grandly around their base as if they were ready to welcome prey into their nest.

Both Lin Jingheng and Lu Bixing’s hearts sank at this sight.

Hope didn’t have good intentions to help out.

Turan stood dumbfounded for two seconds after the connection got cut off and immediately realized what happened. She turned and howled in anger: “Where’s Hope? I’m going to fucking rip him apart!”

And yet whether Hope got roasted or burned, Lin Jingheng had no escape anymore.

“Back when the Rainbow Virus of Reinberg took over the Eighth Galaxy, within a span of a month it spread even into the Union. The Rainbow Virus from the lab on Ema spread within 72 hours with no survivors. Now that we look at it, if every animal that came in contact with a patient can potentially carry the virus, sparrows, rats...insects flying around, then the worst case scenario is that it would be too late to lock down Milky Way City.” Lin Jingheng’s throat began to grow inflamed as if a rusty knife was cutting his flesh inside. He cleared his throat quietly and tasted blood in his mouth.

Lu Bixing felt something off out of instinct; Zhanln had been strangely quiet as if his chatterbox function had been completely turned off and completely transformed into a navigational AI that only responds when prompted. Yet he wasn’t sure because it was pretty normal for Zhanlu to be silenced by his bossy master for no reason.

“Lin, are you okay?”

“For now, yes.” Lin Jingheng answered without a change of expression, “Zhanlu, retract your mental network and make sure to keep a camouflage.”

Lu Bixing: “If they can’t control the spread of the virus when Turan can’t reach you, what would they do?

Lin Jingheng didn’t answer--if the pandemic couldn’t be contained, Turan would recollect her fleet and retreat outside Milky Way City as fast as she could. At the same time, in order to block off the spread of the virus, she might consider a missile.

And yet after hearing Lu Bixing’s “I was born in debt to this place”, Lin Jingheng couldn’t bring himself to say this out loud anymore.

“I remember back when we were in the factory, Captain Turan had asked if you would consider contacting the ‘central’ under extreme circumstance,” Lu Bixing continued to ask, “what is the central? What’s considered an extreme circumstance?”

At this point, it was pointless to keep it a secret before anyone. Lin Jingheng broke open the last of his can of worms without any care of what impression he might give Lu Bixing and spilled the beans on the big conspiracy game he left in the Union: “Before I left the Union, I arranged various places to relocate the Silver Ten. Among them, besides the Ninth Squadron that I left on standby for immediate orders, everyone else was placed throughout the seven galaxies by Lu Xin’s old subordinates--these subordinates were personally appointed by me into the central militia of their designated galaxies. In the original plan, when the time came after these central militias had gained significant control of their territories, the Silver Ten’s job would be to light the last torch and supply arms for the central militia in order to join in a siege to force the Eden Committee to their knees. During this time, in order to maintain a smooth communication between myself and the Silver Ten, I set up a ‘three factor’ communication network for us.”

Lu Bixing was a well-read scholar and immediately realized what the ‘three factor’ meant---the long distance code, central, and backup central.

The long distance code is the communication network created through the known transfer portals throughout the seven galaxies; as long as the Union isn’t completely destroyed and the Silver Ten didn’t get forced out of their positions, even if Lin Jingheng went out to the extraterritorial area, he could still maintain a hand on the situation within the Union in real-time.

And in the rare case that the communication network broke down, they could resort to the second option--to use the ‘central’ that they previously decided on as the main signal transfer point to rebuild the communication. In the case that the first ‘central’ point also lost contact, there was also a ‘backup central’ that could be used as double security.

“The Union faced a sudden pirate invasion, Eden is completely destroyed, and my long-distance communication with the Silver Ten is completely cut off.” Lin Jingheng said, “our central transfer point was on Wolto--but Wolto is completely out of control now.”

Lu Bixing had no idea what to say; he just suddenly feel like Lin Jingheng should probably avoid gambling for the rest of his life, otherwise even gambling with all the worst luck in the universe probably can’t negate his awful luck: “What’s your backup central then?”

“Someone I trust greatly,” Lin Jingheng said. “The Third Squadron is the technology division and would have quit the Silver Fortress when I left. I left them a letter of recommendation to let them stay beside that person....the head commander in chief of the Union’s Military Council, Chief Woolf.”

Lu Bixing’s eyes lit up: “Isn’t Commander Woolf in charge of the City of Angels right now?”

If they really end up walking into a dead end, could they use this connection to request help from the Union?

Lin Jingheng’s gaze shot past the isolation mask as he slowly shook his head.

“Ever since I saw the Model 3,” he said quietly, “I can’t bring myself to trust anyone in the City of Angels anymore.”

## Chapter 78 - Thankfully We’re On the Same Boat

Lu Bixing was a rural child born on the border of the galaxy who had always dreamed of paying a visit to the Union; yet due to various reasons, the Union collapsed before he had any chances to realize his dream. Yet in his memories, even if the Union had countless problems while always bluffing and faking peace within their borders, at the end of the day it was still a place that could be a safe shelter for many people for the rest of their lives.

He didn’t think that the Union was so unpredictable and unstable under the beautiful facade of Eden, to the point where it was already rotten to its core.

No wonder it popped like a bubble.

“Before the Model 3 retired, it used to be a heavily supervised and controlled piece of weapon under the Military Council, so how did it get smuggled out of the Union? I have no idea because the last batch of Model 3s produced by the Council was created over a century ago.”

“So…” Lu Bixing hesitated a little. “The Union got taken over by pirates not because the military was weak nor because the government was useless? No wait...say, you Union people, why can’t you all just live peacefully together and instead need to start so much mess? What’s so bad out there that Eden can’t satisfy?”

Lin Jingheng said, “from what I know, most people in the Military Council and even a portion of the members in the Eden Committee block out most of the functions of Eden normally. Only the main ideology remains untouched - while they pretend to love Eden, they just simply don’t announce their decision to block out publicly.”

Lu Bixing frowned and thought about it: “But I heard that Commander Woolf was still managing the work of the committee. If the pirates still haven’t completely taken over the world yet, wouldn’t that prove…”

“Prove that he’s innocent?” Lin Jingheng looked at him calmly. “Not necessarily, because it could mean that he might be just as dirty as the pirates or that his allies are not the Glory Troops that took over Wolto.”

Lin Jingheng’s sharp tongue normally was like second nature to him, and anyone that knew him had been a victim of his insults at least once. But this time, Lu Bixing felt that none of his brutal insults from the past could add up to match the cruelty of these few “in all fairness” opinions he’d just given and couldn’t help but ask: “have you really trusted him before?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t answer.

He wasn’t god, he didn’t know.

Commander Woolf was one of the founding members of the Union, the first headmaster of Black Orchid Academy, and was still an honorary board member of the academy today. Before Lin Jingheng was adopted by Lu Xin, he had been under Woolf’s care; even when he grew up, Woolf had helped him up the political ladder more than once.

The Commander in Chief had given his entire life to the Union and left many students across the seven galaxies.

If someone like him can’t even be trusted, what does the Union’s Pledge of Freedom even stand for?

A mass hallucination that the whole world is full of love?

Lin Jingheng knew that he didn’t have much time left, so he tried to be succinct with his words: “A few months ago, I caught the Rainbow Virus from Primal Alien’s place. The comprehensive antibodies were effective against it, which meant that the Cayley pirates don’t have the mutated virus in their hand because they wouldn’t wait until the next day to serve their ‘guests’. I’m guessing Ares Von doesn’t even know about the Nuwa Project on the Ema satellite.”

The AUS had always publicized their anti-human experiment and anti-unnatural transplant agenda and thus created the monster that was Ares Von as their mascot. If he were to find out that the two-faced liars of the AUS were actually involved in this project behind the scenes, this madman would’ve already blown up their labs.

Lu Bixing nodded hesitantly and felt something was off--it wasn’t because what Lin Jingheng had said was wrong, it was the speaker himself that was giving off strange vibes. The Commander was always the uncaring “I don’t care if you don’t understand, just do as I say” kind of asshole; since when did he gain the patience to talk about his own thoughts?

“The people that developed the Rainbow Virus in the Eighth Galaxy used mutant pets as their facade, and the biggest market for them were actually in the other seven galaxies...from this, it seems like the sponsor for the Nuwa Project is more than likely to be from the Union. There are many factions within the space pirates and each have their own strongpoints; the traitors of the Union may not also just be a single faction - clearly the latter is the more dangerous of the two.”

The worry within Lu Bixing’s heart grew by the minute as he thought: “*why is he telling me all this*?”

Lin Jingheng looked deeply at Lu Bixing and asked Zhanlu directly through the mental network: “how is his heart rate and body temperature right now?”

“Heart rate is increasing a little, perhaps due to emotional effects,” Zhanlu answered, “body temperature is normal.”

Lin Jingheng let out a mental sigh of relief.

As an ex-soldier, his physical condition was much stronger than a normal person’s. When they had escaped the fuel station after the Cayley fleet blew up Beijing-β, Lin Jingheng underwent a suture operation without the use of anesthetics and antibiotics; aside from a light fever and some uncomfortableness in the following two or so days, he pretty much had no other visible reaction from the surgery. He may not give a lot of care to himself, but his body was raised by the most intense training and strictest health management system of the Union. He had been injected with countless strange antibiotics and syringes, turning his immune system into almost a literal fortress that nearly made him forget what the flu felt like for decades of his life.

The incubation period of a virus is usually determined by the method of spreading, the amount of viral particles, and the contractor’s physical condition. Given this, it was unlikely that symptoms wouldn’t have shown up at this point if Lu Bixing had also contracted the Rainbow Virus.

It’s possible that when his body was rebuilt using the Rainbow Virus, it somehow engraved a special kind of immunity into his genes.

Or perhaps it was just luck…but none of these were important.

The most important part was that he was safe.

There were rows of armed mechs up ahead and no helping hand behind them; they were helpless insects in a web--Lin Jingheng felt like it was about time fate should at least give him some pity. It couldn’t possibly just deliver a bit of luck to everyone in the universe and skip him specifically, right?

If he had known this would be the case, he regretted not knocking Lu Bixing unconscious and leaving him back on Qiming.

“Zhanlu,” Lin Jingheng said, “give Lu Bixing your full backup administrative access.”

Zhanlu asked: “Sir, didn’t you say you won’t give him administrative access like how Commander Lu Xin did to you?”

“Uh,” Lin Jingheng paused for a moment, “right, I accidentally ate my own words.”

Zhanlu then asked: “What about the highest level code-locked data?”

“Don’t show it to him for now,” Lin Jingheng said, “if you determine that his life is threatened, decline all self-harming orders from him and send the genetic comparison data to all of Lu Xin’s ex-subordinates--those central militia, send it to anyone you can get in contact with.”

“Understood,” Zhanlu answered, “when his life is being threatened-- just like you right now.”

Lin Jingheng: “Shut up.”

Lu Xin left Zhanlu with him because he wanted the young man to become a sword of the Union; he was leaving Zhanlu with Lu Bixing simply because he wanted the latter to live on without worries.

Lin Jingheng: “I also need a nutrient syringe filled with strong hypnotics.”

His conversation with Zhanlu was all within the mental network; the communication through the mind was much more efficient than speech, so their conversation was completed in less than a second’s worth of time.

Lin Jingheng seemed as if he had simply stopped talking only for a quick moment before he continued speaking to Lu Bixing without any changes in expression: “That Hope may not be lying - this fleet of mechs is only made of small mechs. You can tell even from afar that their models are not uniform and are different from the typical AUS formation of a central heavy mech and surrounding mid-sized mechs, so I suspect that this was all just a coincidence.”

Zhanlu’s robot arm followed the wall into the medical chamber and pulled out two nutrient syringes. Lin Jingheng held his hand out without hesitation as Zhanlu placed one of them on his hand.

There was a self-disinfecting needle hole on the isolation suit designed for people that needed to wear them in extreme situations for extended periods of time. Lin Jinheng casually shoved one inside as he spoke to Lu Bixing: “It’s going to be a rough battle later. We haven’t eaten in a while, so store up some stamina.”

There was nothing wrong with this line and Lu Bixing was indeed a bit hungry; yet the moment he received the syringe, a cloud of unease swept his mind.

Lin Jingheng wasn’t a kind and caring person; not only was he bad at taking care of himself, he was also horrible at taking care of others. Lu Bixing thought he was getting a little too sensitive, but he couldn’t help but think this harmless reminder was a little too extra---with Lin’s personality, wouldn’t the most he’d say be “take whatever you need if you’re hungry”?

Lu Bixing lowered his head and soundlessly controlled his isolation suit--the isolation suit was like a simpler, travel-sized medical capsule that had a lot of small features like checking body temperature and blood pressure. Lu Bixing pretended to shove the syringe into the needle hole but didn’t inject it into himself, instead selecting the “analyze content” function in the suit.

The nutrient syringe didn’t contain anything strange so the analysis was completed very quickly. Before Lu Bixing could pretend to finish injecting it into himself, the result appeared before him - among countless lines of standard nutrients, a small line of red text appeared with a comment after it: take in by mouth or injection, will control the central nervous system, a strong dosage can also have anesthetic effects.

Lu Bixing: “...”

Lin Jingheng continued as if nothing had happened: “There must be an internal communication network within the fleet. Are you able to hack into their network without alerting them if we move in a little closer?”

Lu Bixing took a deep breath as he felt a swarm of burning rage ignite from his feet up to his head to fill his entire body. He was someone that was naturally kind and calm with a very stable emotional state; when he occasionally got angry, it was usually always something that would die down very quickly. In his entire life, he'd never before experienced this kind of fury to the point where he could almost feel ringing in his ears.

Lin Jingheng turned his head sharply: “What, are there technical difficulties?”

Lu Bixing almost wanted to laugh from rage and thought, *Commander Lin sure is an unpolished gem that was hidden by the Black Orchid Academy; if he hadnt become a commander at the broken Silver Fortress, he’d probably already win a few Oscars!*

He bit down his lips and ground his teeth, his voice almost muffled even more by this action: “I’ll try my best.”

This was inside a mech; whoever controlled the mental network meant that person was the rule-maker of this little world inside the mech, and guests abroad cannot resist. Lu Bixing gathered up his anger and shoved it all below his tongue as he quietly covered up the empty syringe inside a sterilizing case--bending the needle by accident in the process.

Soon after, he let the isolation suit cool down his outside body temperature and used the small depressors that came inside the clothing to keep his heart rate and blood pressure down--he knew that Zhanlu could always scan his physical condition, so he’d need to make a convincing act of faking sleep.

And then, while he imagined how he could blow out his rage into actual flames to roast that Commander Lin fresh out of the oven, he started hacking into the internal network of the mech fleet ahead obediently while his personal device made various sounds of work.

Do all these asshole liars think that having good manners equates to being helpless pushovers?

The protection of the pirates’ network wasn't heavily guarded.

Twenty minutes later, Lu Bixing caught some weak signals.

Through the built-in headphones, the isolation suit reported the artificially decreased heart rate and blood pressure into his ears. He gave a realistic yawn as his personal device made a small sound indicating that he had successfully hacked into the pirates’ internal network.

The program started automatically recording and analyzing the model number and position of each mech.

“Okay,” Lu Bixing purposely dragged his voice to make it seem like he was getting tired, “I just...wait, this isn’t the symbol of the AUS right?”

“It’s the Freedom Corps, the place that your students crashed the first time they got on a mech.” Lin Jingheng pressed his hand on the back of his seat. “Didn’t they say they weren’t involved in warfare and were selling that ‘biochip drug’ in the extraterritorial areas?”

Just then, the entire pirate fleet moved as a line of command appeared within the internal network: “Scanning complete, the enemy’s core fleet at the headquarters has been successfully distracted.”

“Received; mark all known transfer portals within 10 sailing days around the area and block out all long-distance signals.”

A short buzz rang from the channel as Lin Jingheng lifted his head, knowing that the long-distance connection port on his mech also walked right through the termination zone.

The pirates from the Freedom Corps immediately sent out an order into the channel: “Prepare for battle!”

They’d jumped right into an internal fight among the pirates!

The Freedom Corps were spreading their ‘biochip project’ outside the Union’s territories by raising human weapons, which was strangely similar to the Nuwa Project of the AUS; was it possible that the Freedom Corps were also eyeing this project?

Just then, Lu Bixing slid out of his seat a little.

Half of Lin Jingheng’s attention was on the pirates while the other half was on him. Lu Bixing blinked in an attempt to keep himself awake as if he was ready to fall asleep.

Lin Jingheng asked on purpose: “is something wrong?”

Lu Bixing gave a vague response and suddenly turned around to grab onto Lin Jingheng’s waist; it was almost impossible to feel the body through the heavy isolation suit, but Lu Bixing sat there and shoved his face into Lin Jingheng’s lap thinking: “You asshole, just wait for it.”

And then he let himself rest on Lin Jingheng’s body motionlessly.

Lin Jingheng’s temperature rose steadily while his sore muscles began to lose strength. He stepped backwards half a step before breaking Lu Bixing’s fall and laid him down as he called a medical capsule over, then carefully pulled the ‘sleeping’ man into the capsule. Even just these simple steps were already exhausting him to the point where he was short of breath and trembling.

Through the cover of the capsule and the mask of the isolation suit, he looked at Lu Bixing’s calm expression and could still feel the force of the arm that had wrapped around his waist. Lin Jingheng watched him and felt an unexplainable sense of coldness; it was as if he had been thrown out naked to the cold in Beijing during its 3-year-long winter, and while he could still feel the hint of warmth on his skin it was immediately blown away by the brutal winter storm.

For the first time ever, he wanted to actively get close to someone else.

However, he may no longer have the chance to do so.

Lin Jingheng spent half a minute packing up all those gazes that followed him, the words that surrounded him and all the attempts at physical contact...even those smiles, all into a small package inside his heart, locking it up deep inside. He reached his hand out and pushed the medical capsule away as it rolled quietly into the medical chamber.

Lin Jingheng: “Prepare an ecopod with a fake symbol of the AUS’ Nuwa Project on it and create a false viral experiment report.”

Zhanlu surprisingly didn’t bother with needless commentary and quickly rolled out a realistic-looking experimental ecopod.

Just then, the fleet of Freedom Corps pirates that had been sailing towards the headquarters of the AUS began to change their formation rapidly as they sent out electromagnetic disturbances. The vanguard team’s particle cannons swept through the anti-missile system of the headquarters.

The anti-missile system responded immediately while the invaders gathered up like a large shield made of ants to defend against its cannon. Leagues out of the central battle zone, Lin Jingheng heard countless siren alerts from the mechs. Within moments, the Freedom Corps’ fleet of small mechs collectively changed their firing port while a few dozen missiles locked in on the AUS’ headquarters.

The first wave of missiles poured down while the particle waves exploded throughout the battlefield. The anti-missile system of the AUS almost instantly lost a leg; ten mechs from the headquarters attempted to fly out but were locked on by the forces of the Freedom Corps that had already discovered the mech station. Three missiles shot out simultaneously and blew the station up into pieces.

Within three minutes, the entire anti-missile system broke down.

“You’re all surrounded,” the Freedom Corps’ small fleet of mechs announced towards the AUS as they closed in, “surrender immediately!”

Lin Jingheng took off his isolation suit and slid inside the ecopod. His cheeks were red from the now-high fever, but still ordered Zhanlu as he closed the cover of the ecopod: “Send me over to the coordinates I gave you and sterilize the entire mech, then retreat immediately.”

The ecopod slowly entered the launch rail. One side of the mech’s cover opened up to face the dark universe outside.

Zhanlu’s voice rang from the mental network: “Preparing for launch; sir, are you sure you want to cut off your mental network connection with me?”

“...Yes.”

The next moment, Lin Jingheng’s field of vision that expanded out the universe shrunk into a tiny dot. His consciousness successfully disconnected from the mental network; Zhanlu’s backup access now fell to Lu Bixing - when he woke up he would be in complete control of the mech and Zhanlu.

Lin Jingheng closed his dried eyes painfully. He didnt want to say goodbye to anyone even just within his mind, so he forcefully cut off all his regrets and lingering memories and turned himself back into the deadly human-shaped weapon that could wipe out an entire intergalactic fleet even on his last breath.

Just then, the launching process got cut off.

Lin Jingheng was taken aback for a moment but then heard Zhanlu’s voice ring out inside the empty mech: “Sorry sir, as an artificial intelligence, I retain the power to refuse orders if my master’s life is in danger. My top priority is to constantly monitor your safety, and is also the last permission setting left to me by my former master---Headmaster Lu, you can’t hide the little trick inside your isolation suit from my scanning, but thankfully we’re both on the same boat.”

## Chapter 79 - It was so Soft, so Scorchingly Hot.

“Closing the launching door---”

“Begin air pressure adjustment.”

The functions inside the mech began following their procedures meticulously. Lin Jingheng already thought he couldn’t trust people, but little did he know that AIs were just as untrustworthy!

He was baffled but also understood Zhanlu’s unspoken words; this was the first time he clearly touched on the will that Lu Xin had left him 30 years ago and was filled with complicated emotions. Before he had the chance to dwell on these feelings, he heard footsteps closing in; that’s when it finally clicked his mind that Lu Bixing had been acting this whole time, and the sly little Zhanlu didn’t even report that to him.

All the complicated emotions burned to ash from anger as Lin Jingheng subconsciously pushed on the cover of the ecopod, ready to beat Zhanlu up into a bunch of useless metal. Thankfully he still had some sense left and immediately remembered that he’d already taken off his isolation suit and pulled his arm back as he frantically turned on all the digital locks inside the ecopod.

Lu Bixing’s footsteps stopped right outside his ecopod.

He heard Lu Bixing say with a very calm voice: “It is a bit dizzying, I’m not too used to this...Zhanlu, the range of your mental network is too big; I’ve never seen such a complicated network even in those heavy mechs, is this the contracted version?”

“Yes, it is a pleasure to serve you,” Zhanlu said, “Headmaster Lu, I don’t advise you to do this.”

What does he want to do?

The fake experimental ecopod did not have a transparent cover so it was impossible to see what was happening outside; Lin Jingheng’s heart raced as he listened in to the conversation.

He then heard Lu Bixing respond very reasonably: “I don’t have a choice right now unless you have a better suggestion, otherwise I won’t be able to control this insane asshole. By the way, he locked the ecopod, how do I open it up?”

Lin Jingheng: “Lu Bixing, you…”

“Oh, I got it, thanks.” Lu Bixing’s talent and skill in mechs were unparalleled. It took him only a few moments to figure out how to use Zhanlu’s mental network to dig deep into every corner of the mech. Then, he utilized his hacking skills in picking locks all over the galaxy to break open all the digital locks inside the ecopod with the masterkey called Zhanlu.

A round of clicking sounds rang out, and without any other option, Lin Jingheng resorted to holding the door down with his own two hands.

Lu Bixing tried to pull the cover up only to see that last ‘human lock’ wasn’t that easy to break through.

Lu Bixing: “Hey, let go.”

Lin Jingheng: “You go away!”

Lu Bixing sighed: “Don’t you think we look a little silly right now? Like a zombie and a grave robber fighting over a coffin cover.”

Lin Jingheng wished he could summon a glass cover that could separate itself from the rest of the world and shove Lu Bixing behind it like a rose that would never wither from fairytale stories. His hands trembled from the high fever, the veins on his arms popping in desperate exertion while the gross feeling of illness rendered him speechless for a few moments.

“Not letting go? Okay.” Lu Bixing wasn’t a fan of playing arm wrestling with others and gave up very quickly.

Soon after, Lin Jingheng felt the entire ecopod moving as it was pushed by Lu Bixing somewhere. Buzzing noises rang outside, immediately followed by a strong light that shot right into Lin Jingheng’s eyes. His pupils shrunk as he stared straight into a robot with headlights on its head--as a respectable technology personnel, young scientist mister Lu Bixing never resorted to violence and instead commanded a bunch of tiny robots to disassemble the ecopod.

A hand reached over and covered the strong light on the robot’s head. Lu Bixing shooed away the robot after it finished it’s job: “Don’t flash the right into his eyes.”

A…hand…

This shithead Lu Bixing took off his isolation suit!

The usual smile on Lu Bixing’s face was gone, the naturally curled up corner of his mouth bit down tightly. His dark pupils were lightless like a black hole; Lin Jingheng instinctively shrunk back as Lu Bixing leaned down into the ecopod, but the small space within the pod didn’t give him very much space for movement.

Lu Bixing grabbed his wrist; the skin on the wrist was eerily hot but still intact, not yet to the point where skin would rip off with a gentle touch.

Lin Jingheng squeezed out a line without moving his lips; his voice stuck deep in his throat as if he was afraid any movement would give way for the virus to spread: “Are you crazy?”

Lu Bixing stared at him and thought, *he really is very good-looking*. Even on Wolto where everyone could get easy access to cosmetic surgeries, he was still considerably among the outstanding ones. His features might not be completely perfect, but they all matched into a unique aesthetic that could earn him more than a few glances from other people. Just from the outside, Lin Jingheng was extremely well-packaged.

But was the fine packaging really keeping something like this inside? A heart so cruel and so unreasonable.

History books said that in the lesser-developed eras back in ancient times, people must live together in order to survive and obtain basic necessities. Which was why organization and law were always more important than humanity; dictators that stood above others were also often lacking empathy and ruled their territories by their own standards. They treated everyone around them as if they were animals that had no decision-making power on their own, who only needed to breathe, living creatures without free will.

Commander Lin’s personality fits this characteristic quite well.

Lu Bixing: “You’re the crazy one.”

He suddenly pulled Lin Jingheng out of the half-dismembered ecopod---this was normally impossible for him to do, but the Rainbow Virus and cramped space of the ecopod helped him out. Lin Jingheng’s legs got stuck within the half-opened ecopod, and his upper body was pretty much exposed outside of the pod as Lu Bixing dragged him out. His arms were still trembling uncontrollably from soreness. Lu Bixing held onto his wrist and pressed him down against the half-opened ecopod as he captured the Union’s harshest lips.

“*He might beat me up.*” The scene of Lin Jingheng kicking William Yu’s guts out flashed across Lu Bixing’s mind, which then disappeared as an unknown force swept through his head while his consciousness left his body.

The lips were one of the most sensitive and thin-skinned parts of the human body; Lu Bixing had known this fact before, but didn’t understand what it meant.

It was like the first time a colorblind person saw the world in full color, like someone who was used to talking out loud speaking directly to an AI on a mental network for the first time--sparks of flames ran all through his nervous system, exploding to his vision to the point the world seemed to flip over. The physical contact he was so used to suddenly gained a new meaning as he felt all the nonsense he’d thrown at Turan before shattering into pieces.

This man’s lips weren’t cold like ceramic as he had imagined.

He didn’t realize they were so soft, so scorchingly hot.

Lin Jingheng’s entire body was stuck by the unfortunate cover of the ecopod, his head about to hit the inner walls of the ecopod. Unable to dodge, he lifted his arm that Lu Bixing was still grabbing onto in an attempt to break out and hit right on the cover of the ecopod. As Lu Bixing’s grip loosened, Lin Jingheng pushed him away in shock and horror. The emotions exploded like two missiles in his mind, the hyperenergetic particle waves of the missiles expanding in his head like a tsunami that swallowed up his senses.

The two separated and fell into an awkward silence simultaneously.

Zhanlu’s voice came from the cockpit: “Sorry, my mental network only keeps a video recording of everything within the last ten days before they get replaced and deleted, should I keep that last scene in the permanent file?”

This line summoned both of their wandering souls back.

Lu Bixing’s face turned bright red as he cleared his throat and said with a slight stutter: “N-no, thanks...uh...Zhanlu, I need to have some words with him in private.”

“Okay Headmaster Lu,” Zhanlu’s robotic arm swam off obediently and left an extra comment before he disappeared, “you really are much more well-mannered than my master.”

Lu Bixing: “....”

It isn’t really something to be proud of to win against Lin Jingheng in this aspect.

He sat on the ground with one hand still holding gently onto Lin Jingheng’s wrist as he relaxed his legs: “Hey Commander, if I was lucky to not get infected before, then I’m sure I eliminated all possibilities of not contracting the virus just now, right? And if I didn’t contract the virus for reasons other than luck, it’s probably because my body changed back when they were piecing parts together for me and now I can’t contract it, so I wouldn’t need to be quarantined anyway---but either way, you shouldn’t have any more reason to send me off again, right?”

Lin Jingheng was already having trouble breathing; still hot with anger he couldn’t even talk, and let out a violent cough as he choked on his own words.

Lu Bixing sighed and crawled over to lift the cover of the ecopod to let Lin Jingheng be able to at least sit down properly.

And just before Lin Jingheng had a chance to start scolding him, he suddenly raised his arms and gave the man in the ecopod a hug.

Lu Bixing bent down slightly as his arms wrapped around Lin Jingheng’s shoulders. He buried his face into the commander’s shoulders and took in a deep breath as his grip tightened like a snake grabbing onto its prey: “Commander, do you have anything you care about deeply in your life? Anything that you want to protect at all costs? You said that the Eighth Galaxy was a desert land that you could give up whenever necessary, but I don’t think that’s quite right. To you, the Seventh Galaxy, Sixth Galaxy...even the capital planet Wolto, everything is disposable at ‘necessary’ times, right?”

Lin Jingheng was speechless.

“Is there a planet or place in this world that you are deeply connected to, so deep to the point where you can smell the soil of the land in your dreams, somewhere that makes you think that you must return no matter where you wandered to to spend the rest of your life at? Is there anyone...family, friends...even anyone that you crush on or love--I really don’t mind--that still lingers in your heart? Anyone that you will worry about if they are doing okay after you leave, so no matter what you do you will drag yourself back to their side just so you can look at them again?” Lu Bixing slowly shook his head, “There isn’t, is there? Lin, sometimes I just think you got too used to being the commander of the Union; any time you run into problems, you would just casually fulfill your duties and die if you die without any regrets, right? Even someone like my dad placed part of his hope for the end of this restless time onto your shoulders, but he doesn’t know that you actually don’t want to take on this responsibility.”

Lin Jingheng: “I…”

“I’m not done yet,” Lu Bixing cut him off coldly. “Ask questions at the end of the lecture--hey Mister Hero, have you thought about how I would feel if you knocked me out and sent me onto an autopilot mech back? Or am I just a stone-hearted idiot that would find all means to live on in your eyes?”

The corner of Lin Jingheng’s mouth twitched a little.

“Do you think that I was just joking around and finding some pastime when I said that I liked you? That even if I was serious that I’d forget about it in a few days?” Lu Bixing paused and lifted the back of his hand as he placed it against Lin Jingheng’s fevered face. As if he was repeatedly bringing up and swallowing back down his next words multiple times, he stopped for a few moments before slowly saying, “You’re the first person that I’ve known and maintained a relationship with for six years, the person that I’ve gone through life and death situations with, and the first person that I’ve liked this much. Can you get it through your head and look at me...Lin Jingheng, did you know that you’re a heartless piece of garbage?”

The weak are scared of the brave, and the brave are scared of the fearless.

For someone like Lin Jingheng, showing any hints of his likes and preferences was already a rare sight; to be open about his emotions was an even more difficult challenge. For someone like Lu Bixing to be able to bring his heart out without any shame was the ultimate act of fearlessness to Lin Jingheng.

That’s why he couldn’t return a blow and found his armor and weapons completely shattered.

The first time Lu Bixing kissed him, it was just a very quick gloss over his lips. For one, the position had been a bit awkward, but the main reason was because Lu Bixing wasn’t an expert in this field, like a newbie chef who had completely forgotten the menu as he hastily tossed the ingredients into the pan.

He wasn’t sure how the second time happened. It was perhaps due to Lu Bixing’s anger that caused him a shortness of breath for a moment, or perhaps it was a natural response from the intertwining breaths of air and gazes. This time, he was like a clueless cub drawn in by a scent; he circled around the prey he’d never seen before and explored around carefully until he tasted a bit of sweetness, then followed his instinct into a whole new world.

Maybe it was because the ecopod numbed his limbs, maybe it was due to the effects of the mutated Rainbow Virus; Lin Jingheng found it difficult to resist. For the first time since he enlisted in the military, Commander Lin experienced total defeat first-hand.

There was a hard shell inside his chest where he kept all his suppressed emotions and thoughts he was too scared to face locked up, thinking he wouldn’t be affected as long as he pretends it’s not there. After a while, he even forgot he had this locked box inside of him. Yet little did he expect for someone to pull it out so suddenly and spill the contents everywhere; the empty hole in his heart was immediately filled by the person who barged in. The icy door to the castle was like it finally reached its limit and began melting after years of isolation.

“*How can this happen*?” Commander Lin, who had never before had a route of return nor a person to fight for, was completely stumped as he thought in his head, “*this isn’t right*.”

Back on Qiming, Weasel had managed to bring back some normal saline with his knowledge of the place and sent a few members of the Self-Defense Squad to deliver the ‘vaccines’ to every family. At the same time, he continued to bluff with the explanation of ‘the original vaccine takes effect too quickly and can cause damage to the human body, so the ones that are being passed around right now were brought back from other galaxies. They are much tamer and less harsh on the body, but for people that have already been infected they may not take effect until at least a week or so later.’

The most effective cure to an uncontrollable society is “hope”; one dosage and the riots outside the hospital all disappeared back to their homes. The residents carefully listened to the viral prevention instructions given to them. The sterilizers that could be incorporated into artificial rain already ran out, so the Silver Ninth Squadron had to resort last minute to a strong oxidant with a powerful stench. They let the self-defense squad, in their isolation clothing, spray the streets from the armed mobiles. For a while, the empty streets began to seem as if order returned.

Saturday disinfected himself inside the sterilization room and took off the isolation suit. He had never been this exhausted in his life, and didn’t even have time to spare to eat as he picked up a nutrient bar to shove in his mouth while leaving the facility.

“Where’s Captain Turan?”

“Down in the prison.”

Saturday nodded a bit and walked quickly down towards the prison cells with a heavy heart.

The situations of quarantine rooms inside the hospital were not looking too optimistic. Residents of Milky Way City were already physically unfit, and the number of deaths within the first 24 hour after the pandemic had already become uncontrollable. If this continued and the news spread, Weasel’s lie would be completely exposed.

A man’s voice rose from not too far away the minute the elevator door opened.

The man sounded a little weak but maintained a peaceful voice: “I’m not lying, Captain. My faith asks me to always maintain honesty no matter whom I face. The organization is doubtful of teaming up with the Glory Troops so I was stationed under Prince Cayley before the war as what you may call a ‘wise man’--not even as a ‘prophet’, because I was virtually sent into exile by them. I have no idea what their military holding is like within the Union nor do I know what happened outside the borders; this is a serious situation that affects lives, all I wanted to do was help.”

Turan revealed her true form; tired of putting on a good-girl facade, she sneered back: “And what do you crazy men of this evil cult know of any serious matter that affects lives? Stop giving me bullshit, if you don’t tell me the truth, I’ll let you taste first-hand the great ten tortures you pirates invented among yourselves!”

Hope let out a small sigh: “The organization had been living outside of the Union’s borders for too long, their faith slowly became tainted as their actions grew more extreme. I’m very upset, but our original doctrine was not like this, Captain; we just want to pave the way for mankind in the future.”

Turan laughed out loud sarcastically.

“A place like Milky Way City where flowers bloom and crops are ripe year-round, where any living being can thrive in its natural environment, only mankind is forced to starve and struggle to survive.” Hope said softly, “Captain, don’t you think this is wrong? I was born to save them from poverty and this hardship, I will not take any human lives lightly---if you have time to interrogate me here, I would suggest you find alternative methods to solve this disaster.”

Saturday’s hasty footsteps stopped.

Hope’s last line was something he’d thought about when he was searching for contractors in the city earlier; the accidentally-connected thoughts resonated against each other, almost urging him to defend Hope in the spur of the moment.

Just then, more sounds of footsteps came up behind him and pulled his attention back to reality. Saturday turned to see Foucault walk up towards him with messy hair reeking of the smell of disinfecting spray, clearly indicating that she just stepped out of the isolation suit. She didn’t even bother with a greeting and asked immediately: “Saturday, did Captain Turan give any orders?”

Saturday quickly responded: “What happened?”

“There’s a man who disguised himselfas a pharmacy nurse to see his child inside the quarantine room--I can’t fucking believe this, there are still human nurses in this damn Milky Way City! The worst part is that child’s already dead. We don’t have the vaccine and the people who were left in quarantine can only wait until they die, and he found out!”

A lie will forever be a lie.

Saturday shivered in fear.

Outside Union territory, the AUS and Freedom Corps were still in the midst of battle. Lu Bixing snuck onto the broadcasting system the Freedom Corps used to threaten the AUS through the hacked internal network.

“This broadcasting system is on the homebase and requires a passcode and identity check to use,” Lu Bixing said, “there sure are quite a few traitors within the AUS, so the Freedom Crops must have a spy in there. They must’ve sent in a bait first to connect with the spy and sent the majority of the AUS fleet off, then brought in their own fleet to take over the headquarters….Okay, I’m going in.”

A technician hiding in the dark is an extremely dangerous enemy; while the two pirate fleets fought desperately in the mess, Lu Bixing had already invited himself right into both sides’ communication systems.

## Chapter 80 - The Eighth Independent Galaxy

There was a large transformable ice pack inside the medical chamber. The ice pack turned into the shape of a giant bean bag as it wrapped around Lin Jingheng’s entire body to physically cool down his fever and keep him awake: “Most communication channels will have a section with damage report data on their fleet’s mech shields - it should be a dynamic list, can you find it?”

Lu Bixing lifted his head to look at him. Perhaps it was due to the fever, but Lin Jingheng’s eyes were only half open and seemed much more disheveled than normal. Though strangely, he didn’t seem weakened, instead giving off the aura of those ancient undead creatures with his pale face, hiding immeasurable power within his coffin.

Whether it was the lingering emotional distress of the fight or something else after that, it certainly made Lu Bixing felt much more awkward facing the target of his anger. He felt his heart skip a beat the moment he sensed that gaze sweep over towards him. Lu Bixing quickly lowered his head and downloaded the shield damage reports of the pirate fleet, then tossed it onto a projection against the wall without a second thought.

Lin Jingheng went silent for a second as he saw the projection: “....can you flip it upside down?”

Lu Bixing: “...”

The young scientist felt like if this continued his brain might decide to malfunction; he didn’t know how to deal with the situation, so instead he decided to force himself to think about Lin Jingheng’s despicable qualities in order to calm his rampaging emotions by dwelling on those flaws. Yet little did he know that the more he thought about it, the harder it got to pick out only a few; Lin Jingheng’s despicable qualities could almost be a grand collection that belonged in a museum, it was impossible to make selections.

Lu Bixing’s anger that had been interrupted by the sudden kisses reignited back into a flame, and the more he thought, the bigger the fire grew within him.

Very quickly, his mushy brain juice got forcefully burned clear by his fury and felt his work speed increase exponentially.

Lu Bixing swiftly opened up a backdoor within the broken communication network of the Freedom Corps and installed a long-distance signal onto it. The signal boldly accessed the network platform, passed through numerous transfer portals and shot towards Qiming to deliver the SOS message.

Unfortunately -- perhaps he’d been infected by Lin Jingheng’s shit luck -- the AUS headquarters sent out a special disruption signal before the two-way connection could be successfully made.

Even though the AUS was lacking in physical defense, their technological abilities let them single-handedly destroy the entire Freedom Corps--the latter’s internal network was completely destroyed, also cutting off Lu Bixing’s weak signal that he’d implemented on their network.

Zhanlu: “Connection cannot be completed, sorry.”

Lu Bixing sighed: “It’s okay, I’ll try again.”

“Okay, Headmaster Lu.” Zhanlu wasn’t used to this response and paused for a second until he finally added, “compared to my master who would be using vulgar languages even when he loses in a video game, you are very kind and well-mannered.”

Even though Zhanlu was an AI, he was still a mech core before that. While he would fulfill his duty and obey his master on land, once he was on the mech, the orders of the pilot would be prioritized over the orders of his own master--in other words, Lin Jingheng couldn’t make him shut up right now.

And that’s why Commander Lin could only pretend to be deaf again and focus on the dynamic list in his hand.

The rate of shields deteriorating or percentage of damage were all just numbers to normal people, at most only able to be used to determine where to hide when their shield’s about to break.

Yet to veteran frontline soldiers, even the most trivial detail could reveal critical information about their enemy.

Even without the help of a computer, Lin Jingheng could determine both side’s firepower distribution and combat efficiency based on the dynamic damage report. If he ran into a newbie commander, he could even determine the enemy’s thought process.

Just then, he found something strange within the Freedom Corps.

The Freedom Corps weren’t weak; rather, they could be considered well-trained. Even though they were all piloting small mechs, the soldiers seemed to be properly trained with very fast reactions, appropriate defensive and offensive streaks with impeccable cooperation. They destroyed the anti-missile defense of the AUS very efficiently to the point it was almost scary to watch--it was hard to say if the Ninth Squadron could do any better even if they were here.

However, this was all right before the connection cut off.

In an environment like space where everyone’s on a mech, it was impossible to call each other across the battlefield; therefore, in modern warfare, communication interception was a specialized department. It was normal to receive disruptions during a real battle; yet this pirate fleet with combat abilities infinitely close to the Ninth Squadron immediately turned into lost lambs the moment their communication was cut off.

The once-organized fleet completely fell apart like a bunch of ants which had lost their pheromones. Some mechs even began sailing around in Brownian motion, but even stranger was the fact that they still continued to fire at their enemy.

There were no changes to the energy waves that Zhanlu captured, but the amount of damage that the AUS headquarters received dropped significantly--in other words, the Freedom Corps was currently firing aimlessly around the area...it was highly possible that some of them were caught in friendly fire.

Lin Jingheng frowned and turned to Lu Bixing: “Give me the mental network.”

Lu Bixing glared at him coldly and defensively.

Lin Jingheng gave up almost immediately: “Fine---let Zhanlu expand the network a bit and attempt to hack into the closest Freedom Corps mech.”

“Oh,” Lu Bixing responded with an unimpressed expression, “Zhanlu, expand the mental network.”

Lin Jingheng couldn’t help but worry: “Can you handle Zhanlu’s network? He…”

Even though Lu Bixing didn’t respond or look at him, his expression darkened.

Even though Lin Jingheng didn’t like talking to people, to be able to become a Commander at such a young age meant that he knew how to read the room. He held up his hand to indicate that he would keep quiet as he saw Lu Bixing’s expression.

However, he wasn’t used to not being in charge of the mental network while he was on a mech. Lin Jingheng felt like he was completely blinded, like he’d just handed his wild steed running along the edges of the cliff to someone else...and the new rider of this “dressage” clearly wasn’t a professional athlete.

Lin Jingheng held it in for a while until he finally couldn’t help himself and said: “You...okay, you can pilot if you want, but remember to keep yourself hidden. If they catch you, don’t waste time dealing with them and make an emergency warp immediately to the closest transfer portal, the coordinates are…”

Lu Bixing responded sarcastically as he spread out Zhanlu’s mental network: “I didn’t know you were such a careful person, Commander. Who was the one who was about to shove himself into an ecopod and fly out into the battlefield just earlier?”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

Lu Bixing locked onto a floating Freedom Corps mech and continued to mock him: “Maybe someone hacked into your brainwave channel and turned you into an idiot.”

Lin Jingheng had only ever been the audience to stories about how relationships always involve some sort of couple’s quarrel; now being put on the spot to experience it himself, he only just found out that the process also involved ‘a fight for a kiss’. This wasn’t what he signed up for, and now Lu Bixing wasn’t even holding back on the scolding!

The fever also gave Lin Jingheng the delusion that he had been the one who had acted inappropriately earlier.

Just then, Lu Bixing’s expression changed: “Hold on, the human-mech sync rate is too high.”

During the process of hacking into others’ mechs, if the hacker were to take action against a high sync rate enemy, they would be killed immediately.

Lin Jingheng slowly pulled his body up in shock: “Come back, give me access to the network!”

“Wait, there’s no reaction from the other side...I can’t find the gap within the port that connects the pilot and mech.” As a qualified scientist, Lu Bixing’s curiosity was strong enough to wipe out the entire feline population. With this sudden game-changing discovery, he wasn’t shaken instead drawn by it as he said quietly: “Zhanlu, remind me if I’m wrong; the maximum human-mech sync rate is 90% and is an unshakable law of modern science...is my vision just that bad that I can’t find the sync port?”

“No,” Zhanlu answered, “You’re not mistaken, Headmaster Lu, the enemy’s human-mech sync rate is 100%.”

Lin Jingheng was shocked: “What?”

Even Lu Bixing couldn’t help but be surprised: “You’re not kidding!”

“Looks like the pilots of the Freedom Corps aren’t normal people,” Lin Jingheng quickly commented, “back on the Corps’ space station, that ‘001’ person mentioned this son of a gun…artificial god project, which uses biochips to forcefully transform people into superhumans. These superhumans will experience a drastic physical change within a short amount of time and can turn half of their body into a machine. According to 001, once these superhumans connect to the mechs, their bodies will become a part of the mech itself and have a reaction time 16 times faster than humans...no wonder you couldn’t find a gap within the port.”

Lu Bixing couldn’t understand the logic behind it: “No way, the Silver Fortress isn’t completely dead yet, why are these fools still looking into fully autopilot mechs?”

Zhanlu interrupted: “The Freedom Corps’ ultimate goal is likely not autopilot mechs, and instead superhumans that can evolve both as man and machine. However, they have not reached their goal and can only create these half-completed monsters.”

“No wonder they’re interested in the Nuwa Project from the AUS.” Lin Jingheng’s gaze turned towards the chaotic Freedom Corps fleet. “These half-completed superhumans have fast reflexes and aren’t affected by signal interruptions, but it looks like they don’t have independent cognitive abilities. Their thoughts and actions might be limited under the biochip’s control, so when the AUS intercepted their communication signals, it also intercepted their biochips; the engineers of the Freedom Corps might be performing emergency repairs right now. Can you try…”

Lu Bixing’s eyes lit up: “Crack the signal code of the biochip while they’re repairing the system and hide among them!”

Back on Qiming, Huang Jingshu wore the heavy isolation suit and waited in the city plaza for the people to come pick up their ‘vaccines’. Even though the Self-Defense Squad had sent the vaccines to households personally, the homeless and wanderers with no permanent living spaces were left without any vaccines to pick up. So the ones that were left out gathered to protest, and large gatherings are the most dangerous parts during a pandemic, so Turan set up a few pickup stations in different areas, sent out armed mobiles to block roads, and forcefully disassembled crowds as people were sent to various locations.

Even then, the amount of people at the pickup stations was much greater than she expected. Huang Jingshu was stuck in the heavy isolation suit uncomfortably and moved her body around on the spot. Her other classmates were helping out at other pickup stations.

They needed to work in order to ease the anxiety of society.

They were the only survivors of Beijing-β wandering in the complex and vast Eighth Galaxy all by themselves. Huang Jingshu couldn’t imagine how they would go on without Headmaster Lu.

“Here you go,” Huang Jingshu handed out a fake vaccine filled with glucose to the Milky Way City residents waiting in line as she repeated the line she’d said countless times today mechanically, “please leave as soon as you receive the vaccine and don’t block the way. Don’t gather up in large crowds either, thank you. Next--”

Before she could finish, sounds of commotion came from afar as a few armed mobiles set off their alarms simultaneously and summoned a few soldiers. Immediately after, the microphone expanded the commotion exponentially as a man yelled loudly through the alarm broadcast from inside an armed mobile: “They’re liars! These aren’t vac-…”

A buzzing noise rang as the armed mobile sent out signal disruption and turned the voice in the broadcast into a high-pitched screech. Everyone covered their ears subconsciously as their hearts dropped into a boiling pool of anxiety.

“What did he say? What liar?”

“These aren’t vac...vaccines! I think I heard that!”

“What? Then what are they handing out?”

“Oh no”, Huang Jingshu thought as a drop of cold sweat rolled down her face.

A soldier from the Ninth Squadron quickly walked over and told her in a small voice: “We’re reporting this to the Captain right now, non-combat personnel should retreat first!”

Huang Jingshu nodded her head on instinct as she was about to follow them out.

Just then, a civilian that was waiting in line suddenly stood out and said loudly: “You guys are all holding the vaccines, just find a pharmacy or lab somewhere to test and you’ll see that this is filled with useless plac…”

A narcotic gun shot him down before he could finish his line; however, the civilians already drenched in fear thought he’d been shot dead and started running around as they cried in horror. Some people began cursing out loud, others attempted to pass through the barricade of the armed mobiles inside to point at Huang Jingshu, demanding her to give them an explanation…

Some fearless individuals even denounced harsly: “They won’t give us the real vaccines, I suggest you guys that are already infected find a place to hide now before they capture you guys into the quarantine rooms. You’ll die the moment you get caught, they’ll just toss you away like trash once you’re dead!”

Huang Jingshu’s heart rate rose up to 180 beats per minute as she watched the people that had been lined up in an orderly fashion just a few moments ago turn into a flood of unorganized mess before her. Rumors were like an uproar picked up by a heavy wind among the crowd. The Silver Ninth soldier beside her was dragging her away as he reported to Turan on his personal device. Huang Jingshu vaguely made out some of their conversation and heard the always smiling Captain Turan said with a cold tone: “....control the area at all costs.”

“*At all costs*,” Huang Jingshu thought blankly in her mind, “*are they going to silence the crowd? Professor Lu, what should we do?*”

Professor Lu was currently out in a faraway galaxy and couldn’t answer. She then heard someone else yell from the crowd: “Those people that are handing out the vaccines are all in isolation suits. If the vaccine works, why are those people so scared of the virus?”

“We want an explanation, give us an explanation!”

“They’re coming to kill us, run!”

Just then, a row of armed mobiles from afar passed through an energy field and landed right outside the crowd of people that were trying to escape and forced them back into their area. The sharp front of the armed mobiles were like a cold arrowhead pointing at the angry citizen cattles.

Huang Jingshu suddenly took a step back and struggled out the grip of the soldier grabbing onto her. She ran back to the reception desk she’d just been at earlier and picked up the megaphone meant for maintaining order: “Hey!”

The 16-17 year old young girl may have had a similar figure to an adult, but with the situation falling to an extreme her voice came out with a bit of a childish tone. She raised a vaccine up in the air and said to the crowd: “We have very limited supply of the vaccine, and everyone in isolation suits have not received any injections. If you guys really want to accuse us, that would make my job easier.”

Before the soldiers could stop her, she took off her isolation suit as she finished her sentence. Her hair was already drenched in sweat as it fell against her face; the people that came to support her were a group of the Ninth Squadron, who were all shocked by this sudden change of events and all came down from their mobiles.

Huang Jingshu’s hands trembled wildly as it took her multiple tries before she successfully clipped the syringe onto her arm. The syringe scanned her automatically to find the position of injection, disinfected the area and shot a vaccine that couldn’t cure any illness or save lives into her veins.

“Professor Lu will find a way,” she thought. “If vaccuocerebrals can pilot mechs up in space and control over two mental networks like a normal person, what else is impossible? Even if I get infected, they will bring back the real vaccine.”

No matter what time or age, there will always be thoughtless and fearless youths that will run forward without a second thought while others are busy trying to cheat their ways out.

The syringe fell off her arm as it completed its task while the crowd watched her in complete silence.

“Does this convince you guys now? The vaccine isn’t almighty, it’ll have different effects for different people. Some people will still face the risk of infection and death, others will be allergic; if you find yourself to be infected that just means the vaccine isn’t fit for you, so go to the hospital immediately. The hospital isn’t a butcher station!” Huang Jingshu took in a deep breath, “I’ll say it again, people that haven’t received their vaccines stay in line in an orderly fashion. People that have already received it please leave the area immediately and avoid highly crowded areas. Next in line--”

At this time, a large rumbling noise came from the sky. People raised their heads to see a line of spaceships and mechs were flying towards the operational base at a distance within the atmosphere as they all got ready to land.

In the clear sky, people were able to make out the large signs and symbols on the mechs and spaceships.

“There’s a symbol of the syringes on that spaceship!”

“That’s from planet London, I heard there was a big name on London that specialized in selling medicine.”

“That mech is from planet Valor.”

“And that one’s from Milas…”

Monoeyed Hawk virtually mobilized the entire Eighth Galaxy’s medical resources as the large spaceships landed like a giant rainbow boat inside the operational base. There was a fully equipped medical laboratory and a full team of medical researchers inside the ship. Most planets within the Eighth Galaxy contributed at least some medical equipment and supplies, and some even came by themselves.

Sitting by the gate of death, William Yu opened his eyes and saw an aged face through the transparent mask on the isolation suit. He didn’t recognize who it was; perhaps a century’s time had already changed both of their faces, or perhaps the Rainbow Virus had already burned the last of his cognitive abilities. Or perhaps they’d once fought together but never had the chance to meet each other--but he recognized the rusty bronze medal in the person’s hand.

The Eighth Galaxy, Independent Union Navy.

It wasn’t the laughable ‘Freedom’ Corps of the pirates, but a real fleet that once followed the Union over a century ago, a fleet that once believed in the Union’s Pledge of Freedom, and the fleet that once went through the bloodshed of war…

William’s vision suddenly blurred as this unknown...former comrade placed the medal beside him and said slowly: “My friend, we are the Eighth Independent Galaxy.”

Tears covered William Yu’s face.

Monoeyed Hawk barged in Turan’s temporary commanding office without a greeting: “I brought over the entire lab from that old rat’s place in London, they’re ready to analyze the new virus immediately. Where’s Lin Jingheng? Did they find that cult’s homebase?”

Lin Jingheng and Lu Bixing had already snuck into the Freedom Corps’ fleet of small mechs. The fleet was already made up of various mech models, and a customized code let the superhuman fleet completely ignore their existence. The communication channel was repaired, and the messy formation of the Freedom Corps regained their order as they swiftly closed in on the headquarters of the AUS.

## Chapter 81 - The Rainbow Virus Database

The fleet that regained their internal network opened up the route orderly towards the headquarters like an unstoppable wave.

Lin Jingheng just scanned the damage report on the AUS headquarters’ shield and quickly grasped the Freedom Corps’ offensive strategy. At the same time, there just happened to be an opening in the formation where a mech got shot down in friendly fire earlier. He pointed towards the coordinates and asked Lu Bixing to sneak in the opening, open fire when needed and pull up shields when necessary in an extremely precise manner to the point where it’s almost impossible to tell their mech apart from the real fleet.

Despite his trustworthy looks on the outside, the commander was clearly experienced in swindling and deceiving enemies on the battlefield.

Lin Jingheng was completely unreserved as he beat up a group of pirates disguised in another group of pirates, there was no mental pressure. Yet, on the other hand, Lu Bixing was clearly more worried and continued asking Zhanlu: “We just snuck in like that, what’s gonna happen if they find us?”

Zhanlu responded with friendly advice: “You can give the access of my network to my master, he will figure something out with the missiles.”

Lu Bixing clicked his tongue and complained: “Why do you all want to rely on violence so much? We’re here to steal things, can’t we just settle things peacefully? Like maybe I can introduce myself as a salesman for medical insurance, these superhumans are too unstable physically so they clearly need our products.”

Zhanlu sharply determined the joke within this line and responded confidently: “Hahaha.”

Lin Jingheng: “.....”

This was the first time Commander Lin saw a ‘soldier’ be able to carry out a whole stand-up talk show with a mech. He wasn’t sure if it was due to the fever or the noise from the chatter, he couldn’t withstand the headache and finally said: “You either give me access to the network or you report in the situation of the battle to me in real-time, how do you even have time for small talk?”

“Mister Lin sir, look at my face,” Lu Bixing pulled his expression down as he spoke to the commander, “this expression is called ‘anger is still lingering’, we haven’t settled our case yet, don’t even try and play your expired authority card with me.”

Even though that was the response he gave, Lu Bixing still reliably gave out a proper real-time report: “I can see the AUS headquarters through the mental network right now. I just captured a long-distance signal the headquarters sent out, it’s likely they’re calling for support...hm, wait, they just got intercepted by the Freedom Corps, so the signal didn’t get sent out. The headquarters is pulling back all their firepower, it seems like they might want to centralize their available forces to break out of the barricade.”

Lin Jingheng frowned: “Pulling in all their firepower, are you sure?”

Lu Bixing felt a breath of anger stuck in his throat; it seems like if he doesn’t give the network back today, this high and mighty Mister Lin would question everything he says.

He displayed an admirable scholarly mannerism and tried asking as calmly as he could: “Commander, have you ever trusted your comrades after so many years?”

Lin Jingheng thought about it and answered: “I don’t have comrades, only subordinates.”

“Does the Silver Fortress always act on solo missions? Do they not have times where they have to cooperate with other times to carry out a mission before?”

“Very rarely.” Lin Jingheng leaned back to preserve his energy and answered in a small voice, to the point where it almost sounds like he’s speaking very carefully.

The ‘kind’ Commander Lin said softly: “They can listen to my arrangements or they can leave.”

Lu Bixing: “......”

“It’s strange that the AUS decided to backtrack and centralize their firepower right now,” Lin Jingheng said, “their interception and signal disruption technology is actually very high, even the Union had a taste of it before, it wasn’t just that little trick earlier. If they really want to break through the barricade, the most reasonable thing to do is to send out a strong disruption signal to confuse the enemies, and then escape separately from the loopholes. Even though the Freedom Corps is filled with mostly neutral superhumans that have no control, there’s also a few ‘herders’, if…”

Lu Bixing heard him cough a bit and felt his heart sink. He suddenly forgot about the cold war between them and quickly followed up: “I got it, the AUS doesn’t have much firepower left right now, so even if they decide to break through by centralizing their arms and then intercept the enemy’s communication system, the Freedom Corps could also potentially give up their superhuman fleet and choose to pursue to the escapees. That’s a huge risk---so that means they’re planning on hiding something? Zhanlu, let’s find what they’re trying to hide, start from the transfer portals.”

He picked up the key point very quickly, which saved Lin Jingheng a lot of time.

Zhanlu reported: “There are no unknown transfer portals within the area.”

“There must be, it’s just locked.” Just then, the Freedom Corps’ barricade closed in more into the AUS headquarters. Lu Bixing’s words accelerated as if he secretly installed an accelerator in his mouth: “There are three ways to lock transfer portals: the drainage method, trajectory method, and one-way barrage method. Among them, the trajectory method will require the most space, and this location doesn’t fulfill this requirement, so if they want to lock a transfer portal, they will need to use the other two methods--the drainage method will require other surrounding transfer portals to provide the energy sources to lock and blockade, and if it’s the one-way barrage method there must be a signal receiver on land. Zhanlu, let’s split up the search; you’ll scan and inspect any abnormal energy waves in the surrounding areas, I’ll take care of their on-land internal network.”

Lin Jingheng stared blankly for a moment--Lu Bixing was connected to the mental network, he didn’t actually have to speak in order to communicate with Zhanlu. Plus, Zhanlu’s database is extremely powerful, as long as there are key terms like nouns and verbs grouped together, he can carry out any order and doesn’t need this long explanation.

Lu Bixing explained all of this on purpose for him, afraid that this needy commander would waste energy to question again.

Lin Jingheng felt something touch his dense heart gently as he experienced what felt like being taken care of by someone...it was a little strange, slightly awkward, but very heartwarming.

Just then, the centralized forces of the AUS began firing desperately into the fleet. At the same time, Lu Bixing received an order on the mech from the commanding ship of the Freedom Corps to counterattack with full firepower.

Lu Bixing was clearly disrupted by the change in the environment and was hesitant about following the fleet.

Lin Jingheng ordered clearly: “Ignore it, retreat from the fleet.”

“Huh?” Lu Bixing instinctively followed his orders but wondered in his mind: *Won’t we get shot down if we disobey the orders and leave our post right now?*

They snuck in during the times the Corps was affected by the signal disruption and were sailing around like headless chickens, so it wasn’t hard to join in the mess. Yet right now, as a small mech that flew out of line clearly disobeying orders, the rest of the fleet immediately caught the traitor in an alert.

Within a short amount of time, all the cannons were pointing at them; but before Lu Bixing could react, a much stronger and complex interception signal shot out from the headquarters of the AUS and immediately turned the Freedom Corps into a fleet of aimlessly flying insects. It was as if their antennas snapped and turned into headless flies, nobody was able to reorganize effectively.

Just then, Zhanlu immediately reported in: “Headmaster Lu, I’ve located a hidden transfer portal through drainage!”

Lin Jingheng: “Emergency warp.”

Lu Bixing grabbed the giant transformable ice pack and folded it like a sandwich around Lin Jingheng, then while holding the commander tightly inside the pack, and ordered the mech to make an emergency warp.

The protective airbag shot out twice its normal amount and flew right towards Lin Jingheng, who felt like he got shoved inside an amber, stuck solidly within time-space where he almost couldn’t feel the impact of gravitational changes brought by the emergency warp.

The next instant, the mech escaped out of the chaotic fleet of the Freedom Corps and headed straight into the hidden transfer portal. Just as they were about to leave, an alarm rang inside the mech.

Zhanlu: “An abnormal energy wave has been detected within one sailing day away…”

Lu Bixing lifted his head in shock---the AUS headquarters exploded!

It wasn’t the level of a mech armory explosion, the entire operational base turned into a ball of fire.

The station that held the AUS operational base was massive with close to over ten thousand square kilometers big, nothing that Old Fart’s tiny space station can compare to. It was essentially a floating fortress. Now, the entire base exploded from the center out until it physically transformed into an artificial sun. The massive ball of fire shot through the air and opened up its burning mouth to rip through the thin artificial atmosphere like paper, and expanded out towards the Freedom Corps fleet.

The disorganized and messy fleet was already too close to the point of eruption.

The centralization of firepower earlier was actually to dig up a big trap with their own lives; the entire AUS headquarters had no intention of escaping and planned on ending their lives with their enemies.

There were no responses from the superhuman fleet as they were annihilated almost instantly. The ‘herders’ of the fleet happened to stay in the outermost rim of the formation and immediately turned around to run for their lives the moment they regained their senses from shock.

Just then, a small merchant ship passed through the transfer portal that Lu Bixing just used and quickly made their escape---

Lu Bixing quickly took notice and realized that the suicide explosion in the AUS headquarters wasn’t a desperate attempt to bring down the enemy, it was to hide this tiny ‘merchant ship’. Everyone and all the mechs inside the base became part of the bait.

What is this, sacrificing for the special few?

They were so willing to become a bait--were they fooled into this or brainwashed into thinking that they were sacrificing for a great cause of humanity?

The base already exploded, there was no way to check now.

Lin Jingheng pushed the ice pack and protection airbag off his body and stood up abruptly. However, he got up too fast and couldn’t feel his leg and fell to his knees when his lower leg fell asleep. Lu Bixing ran to hold him up in shock: “Lin!”

Lin Jingheng: “The mental network.”

He forcefully entered Zhanlu’s mental network just as he finished; even though Lu Bixing would sometimes argue with him, he wouldn’t try to fight under these circumstances and immediately backed out of the network.

Lin Jingheng reached across him and grabbed a syringe from inside the ice pack. Before Lu Bixing could react, he clipped it onto his arm without hesitation. Lu Bixing turned suddenly as he heard the sound only to see an empty relaxant fall off Lin Jingheng’s arm.

Lin Jingheng hissed softly after injecting the relaxant; his muscles contracted too quickly to the point he could feel the tightening down to his bones. He took in a deep breath as he froze up in pain.

At the same time, Zhanlu’s vast mental network rolled out like a giant web; the small merchant ship that just escaped was clearly a mech in disguise and was caught immediately by the network like a fly that flew right into a trap.

The weaker Lin Jingheng’s physical state is the stronger his mental strength. The enemy pilot was knocked off the mental network immediately, and without giving them a chance to react, Lin Jingheng immediately turned off all internal gravity and balance systems after taking control of their mech. The mech spun at high speed right immediately passing through the transfer portal; the people inside the mech felt as if they jumped right into a washing machine, all the cells in their bodies about to be squeezed out. They spun around chaotically until they were almost knocked unconscious and lost their chance to regain control of their mental network.

Lin Jingheng just picked up a blade and cut down a mech on his own. His body was like a half-dead corpse that just got fished out of the water, and after powering through a whole minute of the relaxant’s impact, fell onto Lu Bixing lifelessly. For a second, Lu Bixing felt like he couldn’t see the commander’s chest rising and frantically went to check his pulse. When he finally caught a weak heartbeat from the commander’s neck, the line that was stuck in his throat finally dropped as he almost felt himself breaking down as well: “Do you want to die!?”

Lin Jingheng’s throat was too dry for him to speak; he only quietly took the two mechs together and passed through another transfer portal. The moment they escaped the Freedom Corps’ signal disruption range, he sent out a long-distance signal towards Qiming.

Through the internal network of the Freedom Corps, the main fleet of the AUS seems to only be lured out of the headquarters and was not completely annihilated. And the reason why the Freedom pirates were so quick to charge in was that they were afraid that the enemy’s main fleet would return at any time, so the area wasn’t safe.

And even as careful and meticulous as Lin Jingheng is, he had no control over luck. Just as they were about to leave, a small team of AUS mechs suddenly appeared around the transfer portal they were staying at. The time in between their transfer and when the fleet appeared was less than a minute, and if it wasn’t for the fact that the AUS headquarters was already blown up, it almost seemed as if this was a planned ambush.

Zhanlu: “Sir, the hostage mech’s location tracker has been activated.”

Lu Bixing was stunned: “How did they get to it so fast?”

Lin Jingheng immediately locked on all the trackers on the hostage mech and removed them, but it was already too late.

Zhanlu expanded his mental network fully and activated his long-distance scan. The area of inspection increased to include all surrounding transfer portals they can choose to use.

At this point, their coordinates have been fully exposed. The enemy didn’t follow up immediately as there was a hostage in their hands but have already spread their forces out to control all accessible transfer portals Lin Jingheng can use.

If this was drawn out like a map, they would be like a little bug surrounded by a bunch of predators.

Both sides temporarily entered a stalemate.

Lin Jingheng grabbed onto Lu Bixing’s shoulders and struggled to pull himself up. He was already used to all the bad turn of events on the battlefield and said: “Connect the hostages over.”

The ‘merchant ship’ being held hostage began sailing towards them slowly and connected to their own mech. After the gravity control fully adjusted the air pressure, a row of robotic soldiers rushed into the merchant ship and began carrying out all the tied-up hostages like corpses.

There were a total of seven people wearing the same long cotton robes. Their hairs were all cut short, and surprisingly there were no traces of any technological devices on them such as personal devices. On the backs of their robes, there was a symbol of the AUS---a circle of ivy surrounded a silhouette of a person that looked like what the old ‘Prophet’ looked like on AUS missionary booklets. It was clear that these people were core members of the AUS, but it’s hard to say if they’re scared of the mutated Rainbow Virus.

“They must have brought the main database information of the AUS when whey escaped,” Lin Jingheng spoke through the broadcast on the mech through the mental network to Lu Bixing, “try searching around, and once you find any information on the mutated Rainbow Virus, find a way to set up a long-distance channel and send it to Turan.”

“Oh.” Lu Bixing responded coldly and grabbed Lin Jingheng’s arms around his shoulders, half-dragging the latter out.

Lin Jingheng: “You...agh, what are you doing?”

“You’re trying to lure me over there and then disconnect both mechs, right? You’re using the same method as before, do you even have any sincerity here? You’re not allowed to leave my side.”

Lin Jingheng was just about to give himself an excuse when Lu Bixing interrupted him in a distrusting manner: “You don’t need to explain, your trust with me has completely gone bankrupt---if it wasn’t for the fact that Zhanlu can open up any digital locks, I’d lock you to my arms right now.”

Zhanlu--while his access now returned to Lin Jingheng, he still missed the kind Lu Bixing--laid his arms out and responded treacherously in front of his boss: “Sorry Headmaster Lu, I suggest you manually use your own hands to lock him up; that I won’t be able to intercept.”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

The leader of the AUS fleet was a heavy mech; it peaked its head slowly from the transfer portal not too far ahead of them and locked a row of cannons at their small mech the moment it entered their field of vision.

The enemy sent a communication request.

Lin Jingheng: “Zhanlu, receive the call for me.”

Zhanlu immediately accepted the request and stood before the camera as Lin Jingheng controlled his speech through the mental network. The group of hostages in the back was caught on camera along with Zhanlu as it clearly displayed on the screens of the AUS fleet.

The enemy perhaps mistook them for the Freedom Corps and immediately questioned them when the communication connected: “Our brothers are fighting with their lives in the Union to free all of humanity, and as a fellow extraterritorial group, how can you use this opportunity to backstab us like this?”

Zhanlu’s artificial face imitated an eerily realistic sneer: “You can say whatever you want, but your people are in my hands right now.”

The AUS member’s face showed an expression of repressed anger as he said: “I know what you guys want, I can share the data on the Nuwa Project, but you must release the hostages and return the ‘ark’ to us!”

Lu Bixing commented quietly: “So this small mech that disguised as a merchant ship is called the ark.”

Lin Jingheng’s expression was a bit grave. He spoke through Zhanlu’s mouth: “Don’t try and fool me, the data of the Nuwa Project is on the ark, right? It’s also in my hands right now, what makes you think you can bet with my chips? Do you still want the lives of these prophets? If you do, make way immediately, or else I’ll kill one every minute. Who do you think should die first?”

The member of the AUS bit down his lips and said: “We are fighting for all of humanity, and when necessary, we can sacrifice anyone and anything. Don’t think you can threaten us with this!”

Lin Jingheng responded uncaringly and casually: “Sure, you guys can open fire then.”

Lu Bixing had already opened up the core system of the ark at this time; the hidden data files looked as if they were kept inside a transparent file folder that popped up one by one as he went through them. His decoding speed was incredibly fast and was not a bit delayed by dragging Lin Jingheng closely beside him: “I found it, wait, there’s a really complicated locked file in here...hm, it uses the Alecto code, this is going to be a bit troublesome…”

Before he could finish, the locked file was triggered by the hacking attempt and sent out a system alert. What’s even more strange was that the same alert also rang within the AUS internal network.

Lu Bixing: “Did I hit the jackpot?”

Lin Jingheng thought: *Shit.*

Lin Jingheng immediately turned up the shield of the mech to full power and accelerated to full speed. The tiny mech that was just quietly parking in space suddenly charged forward like lightning and barely passed through the line of missiles from the AUS--the enemy really didn’t care about the hostages anymore and would rather blow up both the hostages and the ark in order to protect whatever top secret information they have at the cost of everything.

Countless mid-sized mechs behind the heavy mech all began locking their cannons on the lone fly. At this point, the communication channel had already been cut off and the world around them was replaced with a web of particle cannons and missiles.

It was impossible to escape.

Just then, the long-distance signal they sent out finally received a response as the two-way connection to the operational base in Qiming opened up.

In that critical moment before Lu Bixing sent out all information about the Rainbow Virus over, he saw Turan’s virtual figure--even if both of them perished into stardust, at least the Eighth Galaxy will no longer have to suffer the trauma of a second pandemic.

## Chapter 82 - Let’s Go Back

The connection between Qiming’s operational base and Lin Jingheng had been cut off for a long time. As the central figure of the temporary command center, Turan not only had to cooperate with Weasel’s lies to the civilians, but also had to deploy both the Ninth Squadron and the Self-Defense Squad to high-risk areas. On top of that, she had to be on-call to wait for the worst news. Two days had passed working around the clock nonstop; Monoeyed Hawk already brought over everyone he could to help out, so the medical team took over the work of the Self-Defense Squad and only left a few members of the Ninth Squadron to patrol the area in case of any situations that might arise.

The operational base was filled with people sleeping on the ground inside their isolation suits.

People have already done what they can, and the rest is up to fate.

Turan couldn’t wait until fate gave her a response and fell asleep sitting upright like a bird from exhaustion.

A day on Qiming was almost painfully long; when the crew finally managed to survive until sundown, heavy rain clouds covered the sky, drawing long shadows on the ground. Monoeyed Hawk was leaning by the window with a cigarette in hand. When the second long-distance signal arrived, he gave a quick glance at the knocked-out Turan as he casually unlocked the message.

A loud thump came before he could pull his hand off the screen. The Captain of the Ninth Squadron jumped up out of instinct, thinking there was an enemy attack, subconsciously placing her hand by the gun pocket on her waist. She opened her eyes with murderous intent as she unlocked the safety lock on her gun; she then saw the communication screen that had been dead for most of the day suddenly flash before her and asked in shock: “What happened? Wait, what’s going on?”

Monoeyed Hawk only saw a flash of Lu Bixing’s silhouette as he stepped forward towards the screen. The screen shook violently and flashed in different lights; the alarm on the mech could be clearly heard from the transmission but the individual on the mech could no longer be seen.

Monoeyed Hawk felt blood rushing to his head and his eyes burning. He suddenly had a mad urge to fly out to space along with the communication signal and shoot a bullet right into Lin Jingheng’s head.

Do you know how hard it was for me to find him?

Do you know how much I sacrificed to raise him?

Even if you wanted to use him as an ancient tiger seal to mobilize your troops, then so be it, but how could you…

Monoeyed Hawk swung his fist towards the signal receiver, taking Turan by surprise. She ran over and stepped in front of him: “Calm down, calm down. We all understand your feelings but this data file was sent at the risk of their lives, let me at least receive it...Mister Lu!”

It was as if a volcano erupted within Monoeyed Hawk and blew away all his senses: “Stay back!”

Turan wasn’t in a position to fight back with force so she took a step back in hesitation. She then spotted the screen and said: “Wait, this mech wasn’t the one they left in earlier.”

Monoeyed Hawk was taken aback for a second.

Turan gave him a quick glance before she called into the underground prison’s security: “Bring Hope up to me!”

Outside the territories of the Union, no mech could escape under such an ambush, let alone two small mechs.

A mech shield could hold up to a certain level of particle cannons, but there was no way it could withstand dozens of layers of high-energy waves all at once. The heat from the high-energy would be able to melt anything, and it would be impossible to escape or warp away with the speed of mechs.

Normally when faced with a dead end like this, even someone like Lin Jingheng should be spending time reminiscing his life as it comes to an end. He had already done all he could but still wasn’t able to escape as he had planned -- perhaps this was all fate. Countless civilizations that had existed within human history were eventually buried under the mire of time to either rot or fossilize, or perhaps they still existed as they watched the future of mankind through the lenses of history. This was the beginning of the end for the Eighth Galaxy, and what could an insignificant human do during this raging tide of a monumental turn in history?

However...there was still someone else on the mech; something that must never bow to the cruelty of fate.

Lin Jingheng bit down his lips and called: “Zhanlu!”

Zhanlu’s body “melted” under his command, and within a blink of an eye he had already infiltrated the system of the Ark and immediately replaced the existing mental network on it.

Within this short instant, heavy layers of high-energy particle cannons are already visible to the eye and melted the shield on the Ark.

“Shield damage from high temperature, damage percentage rising, 50%.....60%....”

“Warning, shield deterioration abnormally high--”

The violent effects of the relaxant had almost destroyed the last bit of Lin Jingheng’s immune system.

Zhanlu reminded him inside the mental network: “Sir, your body temperature has reached over 40 degrees, your mental stability is falling, and the sync rate is….”

Lin Jingheng ignored him: “Activate the armory self-destruction system.”

Zhanlu: “Understood, self-destruction system requires double confirmation--”

“Shield damage percentage reached 85%, shield is about to be destroyed--”

Lin Jingheng’s body trembled under the effects of his high fever, but his voice remained firm and forceful: “Confirming again, detach armory and activate self-destruction system.”

The two connecting mechs simultaneously detached their armories and activated their self-destruction system the moment they were removed from the main body of the mech, exploding the few dozen missiles inside into pieces. The explosion ripped through the remains of the damaged shield, the aftershock shaking the entire body of the mech violently. Lu Bixing held onto Lin Jingheng tightly in his arms as the both of them were pushed against the wall. The effects of the Rainbow Virus became much more visible during this moment as skin peeled off from the back of Lin Jingheng’s hand after a gentle rub against Lu Bixing’s sleeves.

At the same time, this suicide explosion was like a piece of metal blocking off a current of particle waves and protected the two mechs. The particle cannons scratched the edges of the mechs and disappeared into the void.

Before the next wave of attack could fire, the two connected mechs made an emergency warp.

Lin Jingheng felt as if his entire body was on fire as the heat wrapped around his skin. His consciousness was like a broken ship sinking into the deep sea as the dark water drowned the last of his soul with no escape. “*I need to let Lu Bixing escape alive*” was like a needle within that ocean, reflecting the only light from the sky, desperately pinning his fleeting consciousness to this world.

Inside the mental network, Zhanlu anxiously attempted to communicate with his master’s consciousness, but Lin Jingheng could no longer gather up the energy to respond. The moment the mechs warped, Lin Jingheng gave out his last command--the Ark would separate from their small mech and turn off all its dynamic systems while the small mech would accelerate full speed towards the transfer portal after they landed.

And then darkness consumed his vision.

The AUS fleet waited in ambus around the transfer portal locked onto the small mech that had passed through and fired a handful of missiles the moment it appeared, blowing the mech into pieces.

Inside the communication channel of the AUS, a cold voice reported: “Team Four reporting in, target has been annihilated.”

“Received.”

“Wait, there's a weak energy signal around the transfer portal. It might be an escaping ecopod, requesting further investigation.”

“It’s not an ecopod…”

After the aftershock of the explosion passed, the Ark slowly made its way out of the transfer portal like a ghost ship.

This mech in disguise was only left with backup energy. It was unclear whether it was broken or not, but the dynamic systems were completely turned off and half of the mech had already been detached and burnt off. It was a miracle that it was still there at all, but even then it was in no shape to battle and was comparable to space waste before the powerful AUS fleet.

“It’s the Ark!”

The pirates raised their cannons up at it but didn’t fire.

The AUS was unaware that the suspected ‘Freedom Corps’ mech they knocked down earlier was installed with a cheat called Zhanlu. In theory, the mental network of a small mech couldn’t cover all the surrounding transfer portals nor could it perform long-distance scans; in other words, nobody inside the small mech should have been able to tell that there was an ambush waiting beside the transfer portals.

It also happened that the little mech that had passed through the portal earlier seemed as if it was running for its life after throwing away its hostages.

“Careful, don’t fire yet. The target has been annihilated already, our comrades might be on the Ark.”

Lu Bixing’s hands were covered in Lin Jingheng’s blood. For the first time, he wished he had grown some more body fat to serve as a cushion as he was fearful to even touch Lin Jingheng with his bare hands: “Zhanlu...Zhanlu...help….help me.”

Zhanlu returned to his human form at the call and leaned down. His hands melted like candles as it transformed into a soft cushion as he carefully lifted Lin Jingheng up and placed him carefully inside the only medical capsule inside the ark. For the first time, this transformable material that cost 6 million a gram finally became useful.

The simple medical capsule once again had no real use aside from physically cooling down the fever and protecting the patient from violent collisions.

Lu Bixing understood what Lin Jingheng planned on doing the moment the two mechs separated. He placed his forehead on the cold cover of the capsule and forced himself to calm down while re-connecting Zhanlu’s mental network.

The Ark floated into the range of the pirates while countless methods of escape flashed across Lu Bixing’s mind, but were all ultimately shot down.

Lin Jingheng had successfully fooled the enemies with his final command, but what about now? How were they supposed to escape safely under the fleet of these pirates?

If the enemy attempted to capture them, should he resist or submit?

Resisting would mean exposing themselves to countless missiles and cannons with no way to escape. If he submitted, that would mean he could only wait to be captured by the pirates.

He wasn’t particularly concerned for himself, but Lin...

Lin Jingheng’s skin was starting to rip away from his body, staining his shirt collar with blood. His lower leg was twisted unnaturally from the side effects of the relaxant, but the pain had already been concealed up by the Rainbow Virus before he noticed. His weak body was no longer in shape to suffer any kind of harsh physical contact, only able to rely on the medical capsule to hold him down.

“Headmaster Lu,” Zhanlu’s voice came from inside the mental network, “the enemy is requesting a connection.”

An idea flashed in Lu Bixing’s mind.

“Requesting once…”

“Requesting twice…”

The pirates’ cannons were glistening as they charged up their beams. How should he respond?

Suddenly, someone’s voice came up: “Commander Lin.”

Lu Bixing turned his head and found that the long-distance connection port was still on. Now that they’d escaped the deadly rain of particle waves and were at an area with a stable energy field close to a transfer portal, the communication automatically connected. A strange middle-aged man appeared on the screen before Lu Bixing’s eyes.

Turan then appeared behind him and said: “Headmaster Lu, this is Mister Hope, what happened to the commander? What’s going on over there?”

Lu Bixing was dumbfounded for a second before he suddenly remembered--

This Hope person once said he was somewhat well-known within the AUS but had been exiled to the Cayley pirate fleet due to internal strife. That’s why he knew where the headquarters was, and if he wasn’t lying…

No, even if he did lie, there was no other choice now.

Lu Bixing quickly ordered Zhanlu to send over the photos of the unfortunate hostages to Hope and jumped right into his request without a self-introduction: “Is there someone you know among these people well enough that you can pretend to be for a while?”

Hope was a bit confused: “What?”

The Ark continued to send out its reminder: “Requesting for the fourth time…”

Lu Bixing could feel cold sweat on his hands: “Can you do it or not?”

“The third person from the left is Prophet Radham, I am only vaguely acquainted with him, but…”

“Requesting for the fifth time…”

“No more buts, our lives are in your hands now. Don’t worry, you don’t need to show your face.” Lu Bixing’s mind processed everything quickly like a supercomputer under extreme stress. He ordered Zhanlu to forcefully break into the long-distance signal port and pulled out the complex core chip of the system to install onto his personal device as a temporary signal station. He then modeled a fake communication port on the Ark onto his personal device, making it impossible for the pirates to track the long-distance signal and allowing Hope to speak with them directly as if he were on the mech himself.

Then, Lu Bixing adjusted the camera of the communication portal towards Lin Jingheng’s bloodied hands. He took a deep breath and accepted the communication request after the seventh attempt.

The AUS respondent called off the cannons the moment he saw that the request had gone through and let his hand down in shock.

The screen before him flashed and showed a person covered in blood from the chest down on screen for a few seconds before the image disappeared. It seemed as if something had gone wrong with the communication system on the Ark, and after a few strange flashes the screen before them completely went blank.

The person in charge of this small fleet frowned slightly, then gestured for the communication technician to step back as he spoke directly to the camera.

Lu Bixing only heard the man speak in an unknown language and turned up to look at Zhanlu.

Zhanlu shook his head--this language did not exist in his database.

Through the long-distance portal, Hope told him through text: “This is the language of the Prophet, only people that have reached the status of a Prophet in the AUS can learn it. He just asked which Prophet is on the Ark.”

Soon after, the person said another line with the same language.

Hope: “He’s asking if the Prophets on the Ark are feeling unwell.”

Lu Bixing transformed what he wanted to say into text through the mental network and sent it to Hope’s screen: “Tell him you got infected with the Rainbow Virus.”

Hope’s expression grew troubled. He was like a very self-disciplined follower that found the act of lying a sin harder than anything he’d ever done.

Monoeyed Hawk was ready to lift his fist and give this cult follower a beating until Turan stopped him.

Turan was a shameless individual that could take her masks and pride off as easily as changing clothes. She was well aware that they needed his help and prepared to say what she needed to as she whispered into Hope's ears: “Mister Hope, isn’t your religion about saving mankind? The rules and doctrine of the religion only exist to self-discipline everyday life, is it even a question to choose between these rules and the teachings of your religion when they clash in extreme situations?”

Hope gave her a helpless look and felt like these atheist soldiers had no morals. It was like she had selective amnesia and completely forgot how she’d just used violence and force earlier like a supervillain.

But what she said was right.

Hope paused for a few seconds and coughed violently a few times to turn his voice hoarse and husky. He took in a deep breath and then said in the language of the prophets: “I am Radham, I...ahem….am not well, I have contracted the mutated Rainbow Virus.”

His voice was weak and stiff from not being used to lying, but it ended up creating a believable tone for a sick patient.

The AUS was clearly shocked by this information and responded: “What? How? Is there anyone else on the Ark right now?”

Hope glossed over Lu Bixing’s hint: “I don’t know, Prophet Rhode fell unconscious and I can’t tell if he’s dead or alive. Prophet Mage is bleeding and won’t respond to me...our kidnappers were from the Freedom Corps. There was a traitor among us that told them about the Nuwa Project, so to force us to hand in our research data, they hacked into the Ark’s database and sent out high concentrations of the Rainbow Virus into our mech…our other brothers and sisters were also forcibly interrogated on their mechs, and just earlier…”

The language of the prophets had a unique tone to it that sounded similar to a kind of ancient language on earth. Zhanlu had been collecting data in an attempt to analyze the language during the conversation. By this point, Hope couldn’t turn back and was finding himself speaking more smoothly. There was an air of a huckster that surrounded him, making his words sound like a tragic epic in the language of the prophets.

The AUS responded: “Don’t worry, Prophet Radham, you do not need to move. We will capture the Ark right now; there is a vaccine sample on board, we also have enough medical supplies with us, we can mass produce the vaccines immediately!”

Lu Bixing’s heart raced at this news. He turned his head towards a small safe under the main control panel, then bit his tongue to stop himself from rushing over and gave Hope another long message.

Hope’s eyes scanned through the message quickly and looked up at Lu Bixing in shock. He then quickly translated the text into the language of the prophets and said: “What makes you think the Freedom Corps didn’t know that we have the sample vaccine? The virus they exposed us to was not the original version nor was it the one from the Nuwa Project; they invented their own, you should also know about their awful experiments…”

“Prophet!”

Hope sighed and said the last of the line: “Don’t capture us and don’t let more people touch this virus. The energy within the Ark is already depleted, and I suspect that even the communication signals will be cut off soon. We will become like stardust as we float into unknown territories in space; the virus will die like the human body will die. My brother, I’m thinking...was the Nuwa Project really right? Mankind uses technology to steal and escape from the forces of nature - avoiding thousands and millions of years of natural evolution made us arrogant. But if we also attempt to reinvent the process of human evolution with our own hands, are we not arrogant as well?”

Between the two channels that connected through Lu Bixing’s personal device seamlessly, a short silence followed.

Hope continued to speak with his song-like language: “Perhaps I can find an answer to this at the end of my life---don’t worry, I’ve already destroyed all the data within the Ark so there will be no risk of spreading this information. Farewell, my brothers and sisters, praise the glory of life and nature.”

Zhanlu appropriately imitated a beeping sound signaling the depletion of energy and cut off the connection with the AUS.

Hope’s turned to Lu Bixing with a complicated expression and asked: “Headmaster Lu, right? How did you find out about the nature of the Nuwa Project?”

The Ark was still not completely safe and Lu Bixing had no attention to spare to answer him, so he only gave a quick smile and said: “I guessed.”

The broken mech sailed past the numerous AUS pirate ships away into the darkness under the gaze of these deadly cannons. Even if he had the urge to immediately warp away, Lu Bixing didn’t dare to even accelerate the mech.

Suddenly Zhanlu announced: “High energy alert!”

Everyone tensed up at this line. The pirates behind them lifted their cannons at the same time while Turan almost fell to her knees thinking they’d failed their mission, unable to even look at the screen directly. Lu Bixing’s hands grabbed tightly onto the small medical capsule beside him and shut his eyes.

However, the wave of particle beams wasn’t aimed at them and only flew by the Ark like a row of saluting cannons. The AUS pirates remained still after this and only watched the Ark sail off into a distance, until both sides completely disappeared from each other’s sight three hours laters.

Lu Bixing could feel his clothes soaked through from cold sweat. He trudged over and broke into the little safe he’d found earlier. There were multiple small sections inside the box, Lu Bixing frantically searched through the numerous samples and finally found a small test tube marked as “α-1 Version Mutated Rainbow Virus”, then fell to his knees in relief.

“Scan the closest transfer portal,” Lu Bixing said hoarsely. “Go...let’s go back.”

## Chapter 83 - His Soul Above the Parliament

Milky Way City entered its rainy season.

Inside the greenhouse left by the AUS in the operational base, plants and fungi that enjoyed moisture began growing rapidly. The sound of rainfall was like the ticking of a clock that ran from morning to night, with raindrops dripping from broken rooftops in the city. The streets were empty as usual with few people occasionally running out with an umbrella like little flowers rushing down a river stream.

The sound of rain woke Lin Jingheng up once--it had been a while since he heard such heavy rain. Beijing-β was dry like a desert - winter almost felt as long as an eternity - and the small space station used an artificial water cycle system with no natural rain as loud as this.

He opened his eyes abruptly from his dreams and saw the cover of the medical capsule above him; he felt as if he’d traveled back 30 years ago to the rainy night when he was stuck inside the emergency medical capsule. Memories and real life convulging into a mess in his head, Lin Jingheng instinctively broke open the cover of the medical capsule. The needles in his body flew out from the impact, and in his half-conscious state of mind he struggled to crawl out of his capsule without a care for the pain. His knees fell to the ground as he struggled out and once again fell unconscious as he listened to his own rapid heartbeat.

“I...I have to go…”

Someone in an isolation suit barged in with a handful of medic robots and pressed him down after a small commotion. A relaxant shot into his veins and Lin Jingeheng’s consciousness sunk back into darkness.

This time, he had a dream about a galactic video record.

It was a top-secret file that Doctor Lance from the Black Orchid Academy had somehow obtained a copy of. On Lin Jingheng’s graduation, he was gifted this video as a present from the doctor.

It was a video recorded on a military instrument on a mech, so aside from the clear view of space, there was also data on-screen that accurately documented data such as the coordinates, environment, climate and energy waves.

The positioning was around the Heart of the Rose within the First Galaxy, documenting the night that Lu Xin “escaped” from the Union.

The Union troops chased him down in desperation and fired multiple rounds of missiles at him. A man’s voice spoke over the slight noise in the background: “Missiles are useless, Lu Xin has seen more missiles than all the meals you’ve eaten in your life combined! The higher-ups didn’t order us to capture him alive -- there’s so many of you against these few mechs, why are you all only trying to block him off? Can’t you all just use the ‘oven’ and finish it all at once!?”

An ‘oven’ was clearly not official jargon, but slang used often by frontline soldiers that refer to overlaying particle cannons.

Superimposing over 30 rounds of particle beams on top of each other would create an energy with high enough temperature to melt a mech’s shield like an oven cooking yams, hence the nickname.

This was a method that was only used by troops that had obtained an absolute advantage over their opponent and had the intention to annihilate said enemy. Countless mechs joined in together and entered a proper formation with great precision, then locked their cannons at the correct angle and fired simultaneously. The key to successfully carrying out this strategy was good command and cooperation among the troops; if the troops were well-trained enough to cooperate seamlessly, every mech would be able to precisely fire their cannons on the clock. The overlaying particle beams would then become deadly enough to lock on its target within a large area, and there was no way a mech would be able to escape the target area even at full speed.

The screen followed the particle cannons and locked on its target---it was a small team of five to six small mechs. The mech leading the team glided over like a bullet while leading its team; it didn’t look any different from regular small mechs, but Lin Jingheng could tell just from one look that it was Lu Xin’s mech.

He watched as the screen flashed with a bright light as the high-energy beam pierced through space. The military telescope even pulled up the energy data of the tsunami-like wave of particles on its screen. The beam was like an invisible reaper of death that passed through the Heart of the Rose with a grim smile, lifting its arm to chase down its prey.

It was a very short video that lasted no longer than a minute, but Lin Jingheng watched it repeatedly for a whole night and replayed it countless times. The video was engraved into his brain so vividly that even many years later, he could still recall the details in his mind when he closed his eyes.

The person that made the ‘oven’ command made a very simple mistake; he entered the wrong number for the target mech’s acceleration speed. It was a very small mistake that would go completely unnoticed if nobody checked for an error, but because the target’s escape route was not a straight line, after his own calculations, Lin Jingheng concluded that under that speed and angle at the time, the particle cannon would’ve passed right by the leading mech by the time it reached its target.

Perhaps there was a greater force out there that still refused to give up and wanted to protect that man one last time; or perhaps there was no god in this world and the commanding soldier was only secretly letting him go...yet none of these had an answer now, and the conclusion was that Lu Xin was not meant to die at that time.

But as soon as the particle cannon fired, Lu Xin’s leading mech suddenly hit its brakes. It was impossible for humans to react at this speed, and before his followers knew what was happening, his mech fell to the tail end of the fleet. Both the missiles that had been fired earlier and the ‘oven’ beam reached their target almost simultaneously; Lu Xin’s mech took three missiles head on, completely destroying its shield before the alarm could go off, burning into a bright ball of fire. And within this deadly explosion, the particle cannon hit a roadblock and flew off its route, passing right by the team of small mechs and allowing them to find time to make an emergency warp escape.

He’d used his life to protect the people that followed him.

At the end, aside from Lu Xin’s vice-captain committing suicide in public, to this day the Union had not released any hard evidence to prove the identities of the people that escaped with Lu Xin or ran away afterwards.

That secret list of names was hidden inside the file after the video and was destroyed after Lin Jingheng read through it. He then spent 30 years quietly replanting the people on the list into the soils of the seven galaxies, waiting until they regrew into deadly plant bodies that could unearth the Union.

But...Doctor Lance could have chosen to only give him the list, why did he also send in the video?

What did he want to tell that young and rebellious child? Lin Jingheng pondered this question for years and never found the chance to ask.

Doctor Lance was already 286 years old the year he graduated and had refused the Academy’s teaching offer to retire instead. At that time, Lin Jingheng was busy reporting to the Military Council, swearing into the military and officially taking on his position. When he finally found some free time from his busy schedule, the doctor had already been hospitalized due to illness and passed away soon after.

That image of the high-energy particle beam ripping through space was already engraved down to his bones.

Who knew that this destructive scene would suddenly give him a flash of inspiration and save his life many years later.

Wait...Lin Jingheng’s heart skipped a beat--it saved...his life?

It was as if his consciousness finally grabbed onto a string within the black hole of his memories, and after following along the string, he walked out of the rainy day from when he was 16 and ran desperately for almost as long as his entire life. When he finally found the exit, he found the cruel and chaotic reality crushing down on him: a galactic war, the Eighth Galaxy, the Nuwa Project, space pirates, a Milky Way City that became the epicenter of the mutated Rainbow Virus, and Lu Bixing...

A massive feeling of anxiety immediately swallowed everything up as Lin Jingheng opened his eyes. As he was about to sit up, he felt something on top of him. With the help of the medical equipment’s dim lighting, he looked down to see a hand laying on his body.

Lin Jingheng’s mind went blank.

This time, the medical capsule’s cover was opened. He held in his breath and turned his head to see Lu Bixing beside him.

There was actually a resting capsule right beside him that people could sit in, but maybe Lu Bixing had complained about it being too cramped or something and had chosen not to rest inside it. Instead, he’d stubbornly built a hammock beside the medical capsule and even added a crab-shaped pillow for that full vacation feel. He laid in the hammock like a big fish with half his face and messy hair shoved into the shell of the crab pillow, sleeping on his side with his limbs draped out of the hammock. His fingers curled up in a resting position and touched Lin Jingheng’s body.

The sky was just lighting up at this time. Lin Jingheng didn’t want to disturb him and carefully laid back down in his capsule. He scanned the small screen from the capsule on the side that recorded his physical stats and saw that even though he was still weaker than normal, his body had already recovered to full health. Someone even added an extra line at the bottom that said: “Patient might be claustrophobic, it is not advisable to close the capsule cover unless necessary.”

Lin Jingheng: “.....”

Nope, never heard of this, what kind of shit doctor added this line?

The last line on the screen was the virus index that had already dimmed out.

“Is there a vaccine now?” Lin Jingheng thought and looked up towards Lu Bixing, “Where did they get it from?”

Lu Bixing turned his neck a little and fully shoved his nose into the crab’s soft pincers. It was unclear where he’d gotten that strange crab pillow from, but it even had leg hair on its little feet!

Lu Bixing rubbed his face a few times and sneezed into the pillow without waking up. He then turned his body to continue sleeping and pulled his dangling hand up slightly.

Lin Jingheng suddenly felt like a whole mountain had finally moved from his body and let out the breath he’d been holding in. Soon after, as if Lu Bixing wasn’t sleeping peacefully enough, he rolled around a few times in his hammock while his hand subconsciously searched for something below his bed. Lin Jingheng dodged the attack, shoved the blanket over and placed it right beneath Lu Bixing’s fingers.

Lu Bixing grabbed onto something and finally settled down back into deep slumber.

Lin Jingheng turned off the medical capsule, pulled the sensors off his body and carefully pulled himself up. He grabbed Lu Bixing’s jacket hanging on the side and placed it on himself as he walked outside.

The calendar showed that it had been sixWolto days since he’d fallen unconscious.

Even though he felt his limbs still felt a little weak, the medical capsule managed to recover most of his bodily functions, making it possible for him to walk on his own.

It was clear that this wasn’t the quarantine rooms anymore: the doors were unlocked and there was no other quarantine equipment in sight. He was greeted by the hallway the minute he walked out of the door, and Lin Jingheng recognized that it was the internal medical center built inside the former AUS operational base on Qiming.

Even though the AUS tended to have questionable aesthetics in the fashion department, their architecture seemed fairly normal. Perhaps they decided to use their resources elsewhere but the building was quite simple in design; the window was just a simple glass window with no fancy construction that reached from the ceiling to the ground. These windows were all strategically placed in the building to allow for the best view outside with countless open hallways and balconies decorated with plants that had just had a nice rainshower.

It was breaking dawn when Lin Jingheng saw the Ninth Squadron pass by uniformly after completing their five kilometer warmup run. As they headed towards the training grounds, the Self-Defense Squad followed after them.

If the Ninth Squadron was an organized line of freshly cut tofu, the Self-Defense Squad were the smashed tofu that they dragged along for five kilometers behind them.

The Self-Defense Squad had spent all of their energy simply trying to catch up with the Ninth Squadron and wishing they could catch their breaths, why would they care about the neatness of their formation? Saturday, who was in the lead, yelled some sort of new team cheer that was then repeated by the group behind them. They pounded their chests as they shouted, creating an image that looked like a bunch of gorillas that had jumped off the mountain ready to invade some territories.

The soldiers of the Ninth Squadron were reorganizing by the entrance of the training grounds and desperately held in their laughter at this scene.

Turan glanced over and said: “At ease! Reorganize for one minute, then you may laugh!”

Most people from the Self-Defense Squad were summoned urgently by Saturday in response to the mutated Rainbow Virus and had almost no break since the outbreak of the pandemic. Because they were severely lacking in resources, aside from armed mobile missions, the Ninth Squadron and the Self-Defense Squad spent most of the time working together.

In these terrifying eight to nine days inside the isolation suits, despite being blocked physically by the face masks, these people grew close like brothers and developed a new kind of friendship under these trying times.

The Self-Defense Squad were surprised to find that these legendary elite soldiers were also normal humans that ate and slept like everyone else. When they weren’t training they would also chat and talk among themselves -- even their complaints about their bosses were awfully similar to the thugs of the Self-Defense Squad.

With a comparable standard right before their eyes, the new marathon runners of the Eighth Galaxy felt like they’d found their pace-maker and leader. Suddenly, the seemingly impossible training menu seemed to be somewhat doable, so the Self-Defense Squad members naturally joined in to follow the soldiers’ footsteps.

The soldiers of the Ninth Squadron immediately turned into a pile of laughter within this minute of break. On the other side, the loud Self-Defense Squad didn’t back down and started reorganizing their formation while throwing a few middle fingers at the Ninth Squadron. The two parties soon began to insult each other shamelessly like a group of hooligans.

Turan blew a sharp whistle once the minute had passed; the Ninth Squadron immediately followed the order and returned back to their professional image. This fleet of soldiers that were just like thugs earlier stood up straight and sternly without a single person standing out of line. The Self-Defense Squad beside them were soon affected by this strict atmosphere and pulled back their playful expressions as they silently stood back in line; this entire scene was as if they were all playing a massive game of red light, green light.

Turan let out a small laugh herself at this scene, and a few more simple-minded soldiers that couldn’t hold in joined her...Unfortunately, the whole group was then sent to do another 100 rounds of anti-gravity training as punishment by the sneaky fleet captain.

Lin Jingheng shook his head at this sight; the Ninth Squadron had never been this lively back when they were still in the First Galaxy.

He searched in Lu Bixing’s pocket but didn’t find any cigarettes, only a slight-melted piece of mint. Lin Jingheng took one out and put it in his mouth as he watched the horizon slowly light up; it was a rare sunny day during the rainy season.

The weak light of daybreak broke through the mist in the air and showered over the wet grounds with soft glows of life. The view from the operational base was wide enough to see the silhouette of Way City from the top. Qiming’s climate satellite had already turned into space waste, but the weather report above the city still stubbornly remained at its job with its lights still on: “The satellite eloped with someone, please wait for an accurate weather report---”

But the people had already waited for 140 years.

Is there a planet or place in this world that you are deeply connected to even in your dreams?

Somewhere that makes you think that you must return no matter where you wandered to to spend the rest of your life…

Is there anything in your life that’s important to you? Something that you must protect with everything you have?

In this daybreak, it was as if the perpetually lazy and tired Lin Jingheng opened his eyes for the first time to carefully look at the lives in Milky Way City that survived, the planet Qiming…...and the Eighth Galaxy.

His empty soul that floated above the Union’s Parliament building finally found the staircase that led him down to the mortal world one step at a time.

And this bittersweet mortal world gave him a hug with the mixed scent of rotting stench and fresh fragrance.

It had been six years since he came to the Eighth Galaxy, but he’d only just discovered the path that Lu Xin once walked.

The Eighth Galaxy of the Union was never supposed to be an underground tunnel oppressed by the Union and space pirates.

A hasty sound of footsteps came from behind him. Lin Jingheng turned his head to see Lu Bixing barge in with his messy hair that had suffered a rubbing from the crab, frantically searching for him. Lu Bixing stopped as the two’s gaze met; it was as if neither of them were ready to confront the other and just stared at each other five meters apart.

Lu Bixing cleared his throat and smoothed down his messy hair and clothing, then started mumbling to himself: “You had an allergic reaction to a fever medicine one night and fell out of the medical capsule while unconscious. I was worried...about you...I….ahem…”

Lin Jingheng--now that his fever was gone, his attitude was back: “So you finally found your guilty conscience for your inappropriate action on the mech?”

Author’s notes: There was a comment last night that I tried to reply to, but my internet cut off the moment I hit submit and now I can’t find it anymore…

So let me respond to it here regarding why the pirates didn’t manage to catch the long-distance signal the last chapter--

According to my bullshitting, the long-distance communication system is built on transfer portals, otherwise it wouldn’t be possible to have real-time telecommunication when they sail outside of the eight galaxies. This is like how we Earthlings can’t communicate real-time with astronauts on Mars ╮（╯▽╰）╭

The dangers of long-distance communication is that there’s a risk of exposing your coordinates--when the Cayley pirates were searching in the out of the Eighth Galaxy for hidden tunnels and passages, they will scan all nearby transfer portals and follow the network signals to track the sender. In the last chapter, the AUS pirates and the small mechs were very close to each other nearby the same transfer portal, so it would be hard to notice a large-scale communication network. It’s the same as how ancient people on Earth don’t realize they’re standing on a globe.

Headmaster Lu used his own personal device as a signal transfer station, so all he needed to do is to cover up the signal sending out towards the transfer portal behind him =w=

## Chapter 84 - I Will Rebuild The Department of Defense for The Eighth Galaxy

Lu Bixing stood wide-eyed and dumbfounded. He was in the middle of readjusting his clothing and half of his shirt was still dangling below his belt. His hands stopped abruptly as if he just had a hallucination.

He opened and closed his mouth until a sound came out of his throat: “Huh?”

Lu Bixing might seem overzealous occasionally and perhaps a bit out of control, but he was actually quite mentally stable and very responsible as a person. He could carry the title of a ‘headmaster’ and ‘professor’ very well; even when he started making up stories on the spot, his demeanor was closer to being a little overexcited and not irritable or naive like an average young man.

Yet at this moment, he was so much in a panic that he even forgot to clean himself up to be presentable and walked out with a dumb face that clearly just woke up. An imprint of the crab leg was still visible on his chin while he stood there like a fool. His brown pupils were completely blank and even shone brightly with a rare hint of childish naivety .

Lin Jingheng leaned against the window with his arms crossed on his chest and stared at him. His heart slowly softened as he looked and developed a sudden urge to touch Lu Bixing’s hair.

“What happened to being so brave and shameless on the mech?” Lin Jingheng taunted as if he was ready to nitpick some unsettled business and spoke calmly to Lu Bixing: “Where should I start? Hm, let’s start with you pretending to fall unconscious, that was pretty believable. Did you have experiences pretending to be a corpse, headmaster Lu?”

Lu Bixing could only laugh awkwardly in response: “You’re praising me too much.”

Lin Jingheng slowly walked towards him. He was wearing the slippers provided by the hospital room, but his footsteps didn’t drag on the floor at all and instead was threatening like a tiger circling around its prey.

Lu Bixing spent the last few days taking advantage of this sick feline and played around with him like a toy; he got a little too ahead of himself and almost forgot who he was messing with until the sick feline finally woke up and returned back to his normal self. The tiger showed its fangs and poked right through the dreamy bubbles the young scientist blew out during the last few days.

“Stealing the mental network, taking off your isolation suit like it wasn’t a big deal.” Lin Jingheng questioned him expresionlessly, “Do you know what happened to the last person that tried to steal the mental network from me?”

Lu Bixing had a very high EQ and could tell that Lin Jingheng wasn’t seriously picking bones with him, but under the threat of the commander he still took a step back subconsciously. He tried to explain weakly: “That...was an accident, a complete accident...also you were the one that tried to throw me away first, you even gave me Zhanlu’s backup access…”

Lin Jingheng took another step forward and cut him off: “Do you know what happened to the last person that tried to nitpick my mistakes?”

This was the first time Lu Bixing ran into someone so unreasonable that could turn this act into a personal fashion statement. He felt like he underestimated Lin Jingheng’s twisted heart, but at the same time this sick attitude tasted strange on his tongue. A strange shudder crawled up Lu Bixing’s back as he trembled a little and felt his mouth dry.

At that moment, an idea suddenly flashed across his mind and answered: “I do.”

Lin Jingheng was just messing with him and didn’t expect this response.

He then heard Lu Bixing continue sternly: “I heard this person fell head over heels for you and completely lost the basic function to survive on his own. So terrifying, so brutal, I can feel my goosebumps rising.”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

He only now remembered that the person that held him hostage in the mental network, harassed him, bothered him with endless lectures was this same young man right before his eyes! He completely forgot about this whole event!

Lu Bixing accidentally found a way to deal with this asshole with a bad attitude and decided to just throw his shame away. He ripped the last thin skin on his face off heroically and said with great confidence while closing his eyes: “I haven’t finished listing out my crimes, commander. I’ve attempted to attack you...uh, break an appropriate social distance, twice, and almost ripped your lips. I’ve also severely blocked your breathing like a madman, so I am requesting to repent for my sins before you. I am also strongly encouraging you to counterattack an eye for an eye, I promise I will not resist.”

Lin Jingheng didn’t know how to react to this textbook definition of a provocation.

Lu Bixing opened one of his eyes and added: “I can also take on double the blow, hurry up and take your revenge!”

Just as he was throwing himself out shamelessly like a child, another loud footstep came from afar.

Lu Bixing, who was just throwing all his shame on the ground earlier, jumped a bit at the sound. Then, as if someone grabbed his invisible tail, he looked around cautiously and ran off.

He made his way straight into the hospital room, took down the hammock within a matter of seconds, shoved that 1 meter long fluffy crab pillow under his arm and pulled out a rope out of nowhere. One end of the rope tied to his wrist, the other end was like the octopus’ sucking disc that can without up to a few tons of weight after attaching onto a wall. He tossed the disc towards the wall and then jumped right out the 4th floor window.

The smart rope calculated his body weight and automatically adjusted the pulling force. When his speed reached 2 meters per second, the rope dragged him down in a linear motion and sent him to the ground safely.

Then, the footsteps--Monoeyed Hawk, turned the corner into the room.

Lin Jingheng glanced over at the timer on his personal device and noticed that it took less than 15 seconds for this young scientist to pack up his belongings and jump out the window. He was well-equipped and swift in action that would be up to standard if he were to be put in the Silver Fortress. It was clear that he had been practicing numerous times.

Monoeyed Hawk scolded: “Little shit…”

“Mister Lu,” Lin Jingheng said with a threatening smile towards the old persian cat, “is it a tradition in your galaxy to pay hospital visits before the sun rises?”

Monoeyed Hawk was originally here to search for his son and didn’t expect to run into a living Lin Jingheng. He completely forgot his original intention as his blood pressure rose and turned to him for revenge. Lin Jingheng pointed towards the window and gave away Lu Bixing’s whereabouts without hesitation: “Over there, he just left.”

Monoeyed Hawk turned towards the direction Lin Jingheng pointed at and caught the little suction discs on the wall falling off. He took a few steps forward and leaned by the window to see Lu Bixing running away by the wall as the rope swiped through the air in a handsome curve like a long tail proudly wagging behind him.

Monoeyed Hawk had never seen such a phenomenal skill of “escaping after getting caught with an affair” from his son and didn’t know what went wrong while raising this child. He yelled: “Lu Bixing!”

Lu Bixing ran without a response.

This howl by Monoeyed Hawk triggered the alarm on all the medical capsules in the room as they all announced at once: “Please do not yell inside medical facilities and watch your manners---”

Monoeyed Hawk: “...”

Lin Jingheng walked by calmly during this chaotic episode and made an appropriate comment: “Don’t worry, the Ninth Squadron also has something similar to that, I can ask Turan to find you a rope next time.”

Lu Bixing barely left Lin Jingheng’s side during the 6 days he fell unconscious. When he wasn’t allowed in the room at first, he just sat down by the door inside his isolation clothing like he was meditating and even slept in the same position. On the third night, Lin Jingheng suffered an allergic reaction and got another high fever, then fell out of the medical capsule. Lu Bixing couldn’t even pretend to comply to the rules any longer and insisted on staying beside the capsule---it’s not like any digital lock could stop him nor was there any security camera he couldn’t hack into, so he disappeared and reappeared as if he was fighting a guerilla war with the security.

Monoeyed Hawk chased him down for days and immediately recognized the jacket that rested on Lin Jingheng’s shoulder. He was suddenly both exhausted mentally and physically and complained sluggishly: “Fuck off, asshole.”

Lin Jingheng just recovered from the Rainbow Virus and planned on taking a walk around, yet little did he expect to run into such a troublesome bunch and already felt tired.

He stretched out his legs and sat on the opened medical capsule, then spoke to Monoeyed Hawk like his boss: “Take a seat, and give me a cigarette.”

Monoeyed Hawk didn’t want to give him the attention and stood straight like a pole by the wall.

Lin Jingheng: “Turan’s been wiping a lot of asses ever since she enlisted. She’s not bad at destroying things, but she was never around for jobs like maintaining order. I just saw that they were quite relaxed earlier, so the virus situation must be settled...it’s only been a week, were you the one that found help?”

“What, are you saying you’re the one that brought help over?” Monoeyed Hawk responded annoyingly, “Commander Lin, I think the most significant thing you can give to humanity is to die early.”

“Thanks for your praise,” Lin Jingeheng shot back, “But unfortunately even if you died right now, it wouldn’t be considered an early death.”

Monoeyed Hawk, who was reaching close to 200 years old: “......”

Just then, Lin Jinghend said: “He told me about the Nuwa Project.”

Monoeyed Hawk was stumped at first before his expression completely changed and forgot about his petty anger: “What did he tell you? That’s impossible!”

“A lot, including the part where you dissected him out of a corpses’ womb, how you kept the Nuwa Project a secret from him to keep him safe, and rebuilt his body. You…” Lin Jingheng wanted to thank him, but as the words reached the tip of his tongue he felt like Monoeyed Hawk might simply taunt him back and swallowed his words. He then asked in a very businesslike manner, “What’s the reason why he didn’t catch the Rainbow Virus this time?”

A number of expressions flashed across Monoeyed Hawk’s face as he walked around in circles a few times in frustration. Lu Bixing is a very honest and open person that won’t hide his feelings and thoughts, but this was the only thing he never brings up in front of anyone, so Monoeyed Hawk didn’t expect him to lay everything out to Lin Jingheng.

A long youthful life gave people plenty of time to wander about. A young love was like a kid’s fascination with an amusement park; while strong and desirous, it doesn’t last very long. It would always start from the desire to try out something new and end with a new obsession elsewhere. Lu Bixing wasn’t a kid anymore and had plenty of ideas of his own. Even if Monoeyed Hawk didn’t approve of his crush, he really didn’t have the power to stop his son.

However…

Monoeyed Hawk’s gaze glossed over Lin Jingheng, who was still sitting on the medical capsule and thought: *Why did you decide to hand your heart over to someone like this?*

“I don’t know. He’s never been exposed to this new type of Rainbow Virus so I’m not sure why he didn’t get affected. I also don’t know what the ultimate goal of the Nuwa Project is, and the Rainbow Virus was only one of the tools they used. My original intention was to use the Nuwa Project to rebuild a body for him---his own body, not some artificial organs that would turn him into something like Ares Von. The Rainbow Virus can let normal cells devolve into stem cells, so in theory they can rebuild an entirely new body. However...the process also changed the natural human genes, and this was something we didn’t even think about at that time, so it caused quite a bit of problems. The Nuwa Project was exposed at the time and got destroyed. I spent over a decade making him look like a normal person, but even then it was hard to tell what the Rainbow Virus might do to him.”

Lin Jingheng remained silent for a moment and made a surprisingly decent comment that could almost be considered a consolation: “From the looks of it now, perhaps the change was rebuilding his immune system, which is a good thing.”

Monoeyed Hawk’s heavy gaze fell on him.

Lin Jingheng continued: “This matter ends here with me. I’ll keep it a strict secret and won’t let it fall into the hands of a third person---did anyone suspect him this time for not contracting the virus? How did you explain that to them?”

“The research on the mutated Rainbow Virus was also quite flaky on the AUS’ end. They were just doing human experiments earlier so it’s hard to say,” Monoeyed Hawk paused. “Vaccuocerebrals seem to be unresponsive to the mutated virus; one of his students, that little girl, took off her isolation suit once in public and didn’t get infected--of course, it might also just be that she was lucky and didn’t come in contact with carriers of the virus. There was a time when he was little because of….that, it made him show some symptoms of a vaccuocerebral, so that’s a valid reason.”

Lin Jingheng’s heart jumped as he raced through his memories in his head to see if he had made any offensive comments about vaccuocerebral patients in front of Lu Bixing….because he did really think that way in the past.

“In the data you guys sent over, there’s a portion of the Nuwa Project that is heavily locked as top secret, and they still haven’t been able to unlock the code right now.”

Lin Jingheng nodded absent-mindedly.

The two were silent for a while. Monoeyed Hawk was very conflicted right now as he looked out the window. His precious son now turned into spiderman--the most shameless of them all that was also impossible to catch.

As for warning Lin Jingheng...First of all, Lin Jingheng hadn’t left the hospital since he returned so it wasn’t his fault. Second, the old persian cat knew very well that Lin Jingheng wouldn’t listen to him anyway.

Monoeyed Hawk attempted to communicate with him as peacefully as he could: “What exactly are you thinking? Don’t you find him annoying? If he is that annoying, can’t you just straight up tell him to fuck off away from you?”

Lin Jingheng answered cordially: “Don’t worry, he’s not annoying.”

Monoeyed Hawk stood wide-eyed for a second before realizing what he meant and yelled: “Did they fucking feed you the wrong medicine!?”

His loud voice once again triggered the medical capsules: “Please check your manners.”

Monoeyed Hawk: “Manners my ass! Lin Jingheng, you…”

Lin Jingheng turned to look outside the window: “The people you asked for help from were the Independent Union Navy from the past right?”

Monoeyed Hawk: “Don’t you dare try and avoid my question!”

“I heard that even though the pirates were kicked out back then, they were still persistent in harassing the Union and were the biggest threat to public safety. The Eighth Galaxy is the outermost galaxy that suffered the most damage. Lu Xin had brought up to the Military Council numerous times to completely wipe out all the foreign space pirates but was shot down again and again with the excuse of lack of funding.” Lin Jingheng didn’t look at him and said slowly, “So he proposed giving the Eighth Galaxy military autonomy. As a commander of the Union, he voluntarily left Wolto and brought his proposal to the Eighth Galaxy because he didn’t want to let down the hopes of the people that once believed in him...that’s right, the whole debate on military autonomy was a can of worms he opened that eventually sparked the debate among the Military Council and the seven galaxies--his fame and reputation in the Council was one in a million that isn’t comparable to anyone within the last century. He wasn’t aware that his light shined so bright that it blinded other people’s eyes, and continuously poked right into the most vulnerable spot without any care for politics.”

Monoeyed Hawk was speechless.

Lin Jingheng lifted his head. His grey pupils were like a blackhole that sucked in any light that passed through: “The Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy and his group are still alive, right? At least I hope they are--now that the Union has fallen, even the pirates all forgot about this place that’s filled with the poor and vaccuocerebrals, so what do you all plan on doing? The last time you all stood up to fight against pirates instead of becoming the unfortunate prey, you were disappointed with the result, do you all still have the guts to stand up once again?”

Lin Jingheng stood up as he finished and gave himself a diagnosis: “Tell them that I’m out of the hospital---if you all don’t want to rot and die in this pile of mud, come find me.”

“Find you?” Monoeyed Hawk questioned, “Commander, it’s been 6 years since you left the Union, can you announce the independence and autonomy of the Eighth Galaxy? Who gave you the right?”

“When I’m in the Silver Fortress, the Union’s Military regiment and jurisdiction is also in the Silver Fortress. When I’m here in the Eighth Galaxy, the Eighth Galaxy will naturally have military autonomy.” Lin Jingheng glanced back at him, “Whoever disagrees, I can talk with them when I’m free--if the Prime Minister isn’t dead, let him come see me with his opinion once he recovers.”

He walked out of the hospital building in his medical pajamas and slippers with Lu Bixing’s coat around him towards the training grounds. The noisy training grounds suddenly grew silent as everyone, including Saturday and Turan, subconsciously stood upright.

Lin Jingheng scanned the group---even though the self-defense squad was following the lead of the Ninth Squadron, their training schedules were still independently decided and didn’t coincide with the elite soldiers. Neither parties bothered each other during training but continued to chat and hang out during their free times.

“Captain,” Lin Jingheng said, “report your training schedule.”

Turan: “Commander, we’re following regular training…”

“Have you heard anyone doing regular training during wartime?” Lin Jingheng interrupted her calmly and walked right through the training grounds, “Starting now, the Ninth Squadron will be split into 10 individual teams. The self-defense squad will join in each team based proportionately for training and readjust each function accordingly. From now on, every battle will be a drill, every drill will be a real battle, you are the instructor.”

Turan: “.....No, we….”

She wanted to ask, are we not returning to the Union? Are we still staying here?

Before she could speak up, she heard Lin Jingheng throw down a line: “I will rebuild the department of defense in the Eighth Galaxy.”

1. The original text is 啟明星, which is the ancient Chinese name of the planet Venus in Chinese astrology. This refers specifically to when Venus shines during sunrise, and it is also known as Changgeng 長庚 when it sets in the evening. (Yes this is the same Changgeng from SPL!) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness.” - George Orwell, *1984*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the alternative version of the last part of this chapter, please visit [the bean blog](https://motimotibeans.wordpress.com/2020/03/14/ccp-chapter-76-og-text/) with more details on it and why it exists. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)