Can Ci Pin | The Defective

Author: Priest

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

TL: [beans](https://twitter.com/69lulinbeans) Editor: [@alterskyfall](https://twitter.com/alterskyfall), [@OSK\_spice](https://twitter.com/OSK_spice), [@labocat](https://twitter.com/labocat)

\*\***PLEASE DO NOT REPOST**\*\*

# Book 4 - Rose of the Azure Sea

## Ch 85 - The Azure Sea

“Madame, please have my condolences for your loss.” A woman handed over a bouquet of flowers as she spoke, “these are home-grown flowers. Everyone’s living spaces shrunk significantly after we moved here, I had no choice and could only manage to keep a small garden. I can’t grow too much of a variety so the colors might be a little bland, please accept my apologies.”

Lin Jingshu was stopped in the middle of her walk. Though quite annoyed by the interruption, she still thanked the lady and took the flowers.

This was a type of rose called the “Azure Sea”. The heart of the flower was a dark blue close to black that grew lighter towards the outside like a gradient. The blue was richer the closer it was to the root, and light as it reached the edges of the petals until it ended up with a white rim on top. This wasn’t a pure white color but a cold and hazy white that resembled the distant horizon of breaking dawn. In the center of the flower, silver glitter shone on the dark blue like the night sky while the gradient layers of blue on the petals represented the different colors of the sky on Wolto--the clearer the “starry sky” portion of the flower was, the deeper the blue gradients and the white horizon was, indicating the quality and price of the flower.

The Azure Sea started trending among civilians after the Union’s central government moved to the City of Angels; because the environment of the artificial fortress was completely man-made from the source of energy to the atmosphere, the sky naturally wouldn’t have those changes a real atmosphere would have. The City of Angels was small and compact with not a lot of space, so there were no horizons visible. Thus, the horizon soon became the most meaningful and bittersweet scene in the hearts of the refugees in the City of Angels; the Azure Sea became a symbol carrying the memories of yearning like the ancient epics documenting the fall of great civilizations, elegant but fleeting; the flower language was “the hometown of no return”.

Lin Jingshu glanced quickly at this home-grown flower and noticed it was a rare breed of high quality. The heavy scent of the rose covered the surrounding air on top of the glittering center of the rose and was almost hypnotizing---it was quite an expensive piece, while not worth very much it was enough to trade for a medium-sized mech.

“If it wasn’t for the current circumstances, raising the child externally could’ve been an option. With Eden’s supervision, there wouldn’t be any issues...this is such a tragedy and shame. You’ve barely gotten out of the hospital and already need to work for the committee, I’m so heartbroken to see you looking so exhausted.” This lady was perhaps a madam of a high government official and had a forgettable face; her voice and tone were a standard Woltorian accent that was soft but filled with emotion.

Lin Jingshu patiently thanked her for the kind words but still couldn’t remember who she was.

The woman waxed poetic to herself for a while after pouring out a half bottle’s worth of tears and finally got to her point to ask: “By the way, Madam, when will we be able to return to Eden?”

Before the mass exodus of Wolto, Secretary General Gordon was assassinated and left Lin Jingshu’s child the last of the Gordon bloodline. The unborn child’s status immediately earned political importance; as one of the seven directors of the Eden Committee and the grandfather of the late secretary general, Elder Gordon let Lin Jingshu escape on the first fleet of mech that left to the City of Angels with the luxury of the top directors of the committee.

However, even with the top security of the committee, it was as if karma finally knocked on the Gordon family’s door: they were suddenly met with events of misfortune one after another.

Elder Gordon had two sons and three underage grandchildren that were on a separate fleet to the City of Angels that were supposed to follow right after him. However, they didn’t expect the space pirates to arrive in the First Galaxy so soon. Wolto’s transportation system for evacuation was limited and wasn't fast enough to carry all refugees at once. Unable to wait for the third fleet that may not even arrive safely, the Gordon family all rushed on the same mech towards the City of Angels against all safety precautions and were unfortunately shot down during the trip by a pirate invasion.

The elder Gordon fell into illness from shock after this incident. As the main family that had close ties to the founding of the Eden Committee, their position was a hot seat that attracted many distant relatives to seize this opportunity to claim a spot in the committee. The elder had no choice but to temporarily bring his grand-daughter-in-law Lin Jingshu onto the stage to be his spokesperson to calm the situation.

This event officially put Lin Jingshu onto the political stage, but to everyone’s surprise, despite being a puppet spokesperson for the Gordon family, her presentation on stage was almost flawless. She exercised her unique charisma and unexpected tactics to plant herself down within the committee as a key player, and with the addition of her good reputation she essentially became the brand ambassador of the committee.

One week ago, Lady Lin insisted on leaving the City of Angels to visit the Eden experimental lab as a representative of the people despite her physical condition. Her fleet was ambushed unexpectedly by space pirates and barely managed to escape under the protection of her special force bodyguards. Though unfortunately, she lost the child she had---in an era where a large portion of the population would choose to raise babies in vitro, a noble madam was forced to bear the child in her own womb due to war. She also faced a tragedy that could only be seen in ancient times; according to the rumors of the upper class living in the City of Angels, everyone shed a week’s worth of tears for her after hearing this story. Some said that there were people still running around today crying for this year’s Freedom Contribution Award to be awarded to her.

Lin Jingshu responded gently: “You should know that the eight galaxies are like broken plates smashed to the ground by pirates right now. It’s not realistic to rebuild the communication network within a short amount of time, and Eden still lacks a reliable hardware to support its functions. The committee is looking into alternative methods right now, our experimental lab has already brought up a number of proposals, is it possible for you all to wait a little longer?”

The lady frantically took a step forward: “I understand, I’m just saying...has the committee considered a partial Eden? We can ignore the parts that haven’t recovered from the broken network, we can just use the City of Angel’s internal network and create a small-scale Eden, is that possible?”

Lin Jingshu lowered her gaze and pretended to ponder for a bit even though she really wanted to shoot this fool right in the head deep down--then this foolish lady could get what she wanted and go to heaven.

Yet the smile on her face was still sweet and graceful like honey. Lin Jingshu’s clear voice reached the lady’s ears: “But we can’t recover the most important database of Eden right now.”

The lady responded: “That’s okay, we just need the basic functions. I’ve suffered through a lifetime’s worth of anxiety and depression ever since I left Eden. I don’t know how to deal with those old robots without it, my life is also a mess...on top of that, they’re also planning on limiting sales of mood stabilizer medication!”

Mood stabilizer medications were never provided based on market demand; without Eden, people can easily overdose. The central government had passed down regulation laws to prevent abuse, and now in the City of Angels they were only obtainable through certain methods.

Seeing Lin Jingshu’s slight expression of realization, the woman immediately followed up: “We’re not asking much, we’ve already sent some tips to your account, I…”

Lin Jingshu lifted a faint smile on her face and leaned in towards the whimpering woman and said something into her ear. She then opened up her own personal device, connected to the woman’s device and scanned a special logo over as she warned softly: “I only have this much, please use mood stabilizers with caution.

The woman’s eyes suddenly brightened: “Madam, I...I don’t know what to say, thank you! Thank you so much!”

She desperately hid her frantic excitement like a drug addict from ancient times while her face twisted into an almost terrible smile. After thanking Lin Jingshu, the woman ran like the wind as if she was escaping for her life.

These were the elites in the City of Angels, the nobles of the Union.

They were willing to do anything for their mood stabilizer medications.

Lin Jingshu stood gracefully as she watched the silhouette of the woman disappear before she continued walking forward. She then casually spoke to the personal guard beside her: “Old Chuck from the committee got his hands on a box of mood stabilizers that slipped through inspection and everyone that heard the news went crazy. His backyard was filled with young women fighting over this 260-year-old man for these medications...I’m a little jealous, no men have physically fought over me like that before.”

The guard behind her watched from afar as the personal guard beside her was the only one that had the right to stay close to her. The personal guard answered to Lin Jingshu: “The old man woke up once when he heard you had an abortion.”

Lin Jingshu glanced over: “Oh? For how long?”

“About 20 minutes. We were forced to give him a strong sedative because of it.” The personal guard said very quickly in a mumble, “First, his grandson dying was a ‘terrifying coincidence’, the second time his family died from a ‘tragic accident’, but the third time was always the charm. If he didn’t catch something off this time, he would have wasted his life in the committee. Pardon my words but you made it too obvious this time, what’s the purpose? It’s simply a child that won’t threaten you even if they were born.”

Lin Jingshu gave him a slight smile that sent chills down the personal guard’s spine.

“A baby is something that fights for nutrition with its mother inside her womb, especially those children that were not blessed to arrive in this world, they’re not something that you would grow to like logically. But once you’re under the influence of hormones, you’ll naturally be caught in the illusion that you love this child. Then, it can greedily ask for care and love until they grow up to get back to you.” Lin Jingshu sneered, “maternal ties of mammals, hah. Did the old man only just realize this? It’s always too late, can he not see the big picture? If so, then I suggest we should just give him dementia and save ourselves from pretending to see him every day.”

Lin Jingshu walked quietly along the road in her leather shoes as she spoke. The City of Angels was like a mini version of Wolto with elegant scenery and organized streets and sidewalks; when cars drive by the signal light will project the silhouette of the car onto the closed tunnel above ground through a specialized system. People taking walks on the ground can see a giant shadow fly by above their heads like legendary creatures from ancient mythos. These creatures would swim or fly by to the music of the water fountains into the forest of the sky, making it seem like one was walking through a land of fantasy.

The water fountain rested in the central plaza. A six-meter-tall statue of a crystal goddess stood at the center of the mist, one hand holding up her long silk dress as she gazed up at the sky. Her face was moist from the mist, giving the illusion of tears while her long neck reached up like a swan ready to fly off into the distance.

Who could imagine that the Union was amid an all-out war from this peaceful scenery?

Suddenly, a siren rang from the streets. The guards quickly got up before Lin Jingshu to protect her from danger.

A properly dressed middle-aged man rushed out from the other side of the sidewalk; in contrast to his appearance, his body trembled unnaturally while his bloodshot eyes stared to the distance as he yelled: “Move it! Move it!”

Everyone’s personal device flashed red in alarm. The next instant, a piece of cement raised from the smooth ground surface and tripped the middle-aged man. He fell about a meter out as a group of security robots rushed over to press him down.

The man struggled desperately and even dented the cement board with his head.

The security robots swiftly knocked the man out with electric handcuffs, covered his mouth and bowed apologetically towards the bystanders around. Their robotic voices repeated their standard dialogue of “Thank you all for your cooperation, sorry for the inconvenience” as they dragged the middle-aged man away.

“Don’t worry,” the personal guard waved towards the team behind him, “it’s just another drug addict.”

This was a new type of drug with a long name called “injection type human neural oscillation biological chip”, also known as “opium”.

The security department couldn’t find the source of this new drug and could only put the blame on space pirates as they usually do. The drug broke into the market first under the guise of “improving physical health, neutralizing biological disruption caused by the disconnection of Eden.” People soon discovered that after injecting these biochips, not only did they feel much better, but their body would also gain some ‘superhuman qualities’ overnight that allowed them to control other people’s minds and machines under certain conditions like a simplified Eden.

Within a short time, ‘opium’ became a hot seller within the Union until the government called it off in an emergency and publicly announced the dangers of its addictiveness. Long-term injection would increase the addictiveness and slowly drive people insane, making authorities place it into strict regulation under the category of illegal drugs.

Lin Jingshu asked in a voice that was almost too soft to hear: “What happened to the opium after the ban within the Union?”

“It’s completely out of control because these days without Eden are too difficult. Look, there are people in the City of Angels that have already given up on their public image for them, it’s not hard to imagine the situation outside of here.” The personal guard whispered into her ears, “the Union’s been trying to block off the chip’s ability to hack into digital devices, so we have to change the chips once every month. Because of the ban, we’ve also raised the prices of the chips; even then, the sales within the seven galaxies this month increased significantly.”

Lin Jingshu: “What about the Eighth Galaxy?”

“This...the Eighth Galaxy is filled with the poor and vaccuocerebrals…”

Lin Jingshu stopped and turned to her personal guard with a blank face: “And that’s why we can let them roam freely?”

The personal guard lowered his head immediately: “Madam, we’ve already started testing the waters as you’ve ordered us, but…”

It was hard to tell the expression on Lin Jingshu’s face. She lowered her head and breathed in the scent of the rose in her hands. She then casually handed this expensive piece of Azure Sea to her personal guard: “Give this to your daughter when you visit her next time. I like her a lot, she’ll grow up to be a gorgeous young lady worthy of this flower.”

The guard’s hands trembled as he took the flower; he lowered his head even more and swallowed the rest of the line he was about to say.

“The Azure Sea,” Lin Jingshu’s smile was almost bright and innocent. “What a beautiful name.”

There was a hunting game battle in the interstellar terminals of the Eighth Galaxy.

A ‘merchant ship’ without a license just landed in the Eighth Galaxy, and after inspection they’ve discovered that this was a mech in disguise.

“What’s my line again? Something about my mountain and the trees I’ve planted..hey, hey,” Turan complained within the communication channel, “Yo! TOC-R type missiles, nice! Don’t you all dare blow those up! Watch your damn fires! Where are those losers from yesterday’s team battle that had to run naked? Get out there and take down their mental networks or you’ll all run naked again today!”

Team battles were a type of psychological training within the Silver Fortress. Since the Self-Defense Squad joined in, Turan reentered the training into their daily schedule--the training grounds on land would simulate an in-mech environment with a fully equipped mental network. Each team had four members that shared one mental network in a battle to take down their enemies. Getting booted out of a simulation network wouldn’t cause any brain damage and would at most make one puke; therefore, the absolute menace of a Captain Turan invented a new ‘run naked’ punishment to motivate her soldiers.

Commander Lin once ran into this awfully obscene punishment game and gave Turan a bloody scolding on top of cutting off the two little ‘antenna hair’ on top of her head. The Captain swallowed this humiliation and was forced to make amendments to this punishment---men were allowed to wear underwear and women were allowed to wear two piece bikinis, but they were all required to sing.

The entire squadron exploded from this new rule. In order to avoid singing in the cold in front of the whole world, everyone ran up towards the merchant ship like a bunch of desperate butchers ready to cut down its prey.

The small team of mechs in disguise were completely caught off guard--they didn’t expect this lawless land in the Eighth Galaxy to have a patrolling team that would inspect merchant ships. Before the war, none of them would even know the difference between a proper terminal and a secret passage in the Eighth Galaxy.

And yet the patrolling team here wasn’t simply just a group of newbies; there weren’t a lot of people, but they were extremely dexterous like a swarm of piranhas that took down the merchant fleet’s mental network within a blink of an eye.

“Captain,” The first soldier that took down the enemy’s mental network spoke up within the channel, “there’s something wrong with the goods they’re carrying.”

Two hours later, the patrolling team dragged down the hostages through the transfer portal and landed in the operational base on Qiming. Lin Jingheng, who already heard of the news, was already waiting by the landing dock. Turan walked quickly towards him and gave a salute as she pulled out an evidence bag containing a small chip from her pocket: “Commander, it’s this thing again.”

This was the same kind of biochip that the Freedom Corps once experimented with on the cult station. Most of its general functions remained the same but received an upgrade.

“This is the fourth batch we intercepted within three days.” Turan said, “these people’s equipment and allocations are all standardized, they must have an organization behind them. We’re currently toughening inspection in all trade routes and underground passages around the area.”

Lin Jingheng glanced at the unconscious hostages and walked up towards the fake merchant ship only to see a giant box filled with biochips. The neatness of their products was clearly industrialized with no sign of the sloppy pirate experiments from the Freedom Corps.

“Where did these come from?” He asked.

Turan answered grimly: “The Union.”

## Ch 86 - His #1 Interest is Lin Jingheng, #2 is Cooking Chicken Soup for the Soul

Lin Jingheng frowned.

“Commander, I’ve always thought the Freedom Corps are kind of different from the other two pirate forces,” Turan followed behind him and said, “those Glory Troops that took over Wolto are the most ambitious and the AUS are the craziest. The two share a common characteristic - that you can tell they have money and are well-prepared the moment you cross fires with them. They both have very well-developed plans with a fleet of heavy mechs that are almost comparable to the Union’s fortress fleets, but...the Freedom Corps are an exception.”

Lin Jingheng nodded; it was clear from a commanding perspective that the Freedom Corps’ management was a mess. They collaborated with a small cult in the Eighth Galaxy on the human experiments of the opium, but while they were doing horrible things at the ends of the galaxies the researchers involved were like inexperienced interns.

Lin Jingheng had been in contact with them twice; whether it was the useless 001 or the fleet of small mechs that ran aimlessly after a disruption, the entire organization didn’t seem to be a serious or immediate threat.

“These biochips were all made outside of the Union and tested in the Eighth Galaxy, so we didn’t really make the connection to the Union at first.” Turan said, “but now that I think about it, over 1/5th of the population in the Eighth Galaxy are vaccuocerebrals with no money, where do they even get the money to do drugs? These must be specifically targeting the Union, especially the current Union after Eden broke down. So is there a possibility that these people already knew Eden would break down and started planning this out much earlier on? This ‘Freedom Corps’ is just a branch of small gangsters this mastermind is raising outside of the Union.”

“The Glory Troops want to build an empire, the AUS... regardless of what their religion teaches, they should have the ability to perform their own research and don’t need to rely on others to test biochips.” Lin Jingheng’s voice was quiet but firm, “so whoever is behind the Freedom Corps is likely someone from the Union that already knew what was going to happen and had connections with at least one of the other two major pirate forces. This person might even be a spy for the others; but why doesn’t this person use their existing resources to play around instead of wasting their time to back another force outside of the Union?”

“For money or power, anything is possible,” Turan answered. “Letting opium overtake the Union will bring an unimaginable amount of profit; if this person doesn’t have enough say and power to negotiate within the Union, then choosing to work with powerful pirates would only mean this person will end up eating their own poison. Who else with their own armed forces can most efficiently harvest profit in the shortest amount of time during wartime other than drug dealers that know their targets? They’re so much smarter than random organizations like us growing our own farmland outside of the Union!”

Lin Jingheng gave her a cold gaze.

Turan quickly shut her mouth: “I’m sorry I won’t talk anymore, commander, just don’t shave my head and I’ll do anything!”

“One more thing,” Lin Jingheng ignored her and continued, “why did the Freedom Corps have to attack the AUS headquarters, what do they want? By the way, have we decoded the protected data on the ark yet?”

“No,” Turan shrugged helplessly, “Professor Lu ain’t here and we’re extremely short of technical personnel, sir!”

Lu Bixing went with the Prime Minister---if they planned on revitalizing the Eighth Galaxy, they would need to first recover essential industries and rebuild the social order. After receiving the support of Commander Lin, the elderly Minister trembled in excitement and shed tears of joy for a whole night in his room. The next day, he took the remaining officials with him before he fully recovered to carry out their plans. The first step of their plan involved using the network of the old Independent Navy through Monoeyed Hawk and William Yu to glue the loose ends of the Eighth Galaxy back together into a unified system. Ever since the Navy disbanded, most veteran soldiers have grown to build up their own territories of influences throughout the galaxy; if they would reunite these veterans, it would be much easier to rebuild social order from the ground up.

Monoeyed Hawk took William off towards one direction and appointed his son to follow the Prime Minister in place of himself. He claimed it was a strategy to split up and make the process more efficient, but our brilliant and clever Captain Turan knew what the old man’s real intentions were---he just wanted to throw Lu Bixing out so this little rascal didn’t continue following Command Lin around.

“Who the hell knows where those monkeys in the Third Squadron are right now and Professor Lu isn’t around either. We can’t let this continue, boss.” Turan said with a heavy heart, “why don’t you try and control yourself....”

Lin Jingheng’s expression immediately cooled down as he heard this shameless hooligan starting to ramble: “Control myself for what?”

“I meant your attitude, your attitude!” Turan also realized that her comment earlier had some strange implications and quickly turned to explain herself, “Don’t get me wrong...say, Commander, you look so proper and serious all the time but your thoughts are truly….I’m not telling you to control yourself elsewhere, my point is….you know, you can be a little bit more kind and start from winning his heart first, and then you’ll find that the world is full of love and pleasure…”

Lin Jingheng turned to her with a cold smile on his face as he listened to her ramble. He suddenly felt like this Captain of the Ninth Squadron should get buried in a pile of human waste and experience what a truly beautiful ‘world full of love and pleasure’ was.

Turan’s voice grew weaker until it disappeared measly as she closed her mouth. She turned around and said, “I’ll go interrogate those hostages.”

“Wait,” Lin Jingheng called her back, “How long will it be until it’s all done?”

Turan answered: “It won’t take long; I’ll report back to you immediately once we get information out of their mouths!”

Lin Jingheng: “....Who the fuck asked about you?”

Turan, who just lost her two whiskers, only now realized that she completely got ahead of herself. She mourned for her broken heart for a moment as she glanced at her beautiful reflection on the steel door of the mech. After suffering the pain of having her pride hurt, she responded without a second thought: “They’re on their way back already, they should arrive within a day.”

Lin Jingheng nodded slightly and gestured for her to leave.

What part of me is ugly? Turan pondered in her mind as she walked and cursed, *hope you can never get hard, asshole.*

Lu Bixing was indeed already on his way back and left his four students to pilot the mech in turns. He found a bar inside the mech and sat down quietly to work on something in his hands.

These poor students had always piloted mechs on their own in emergency situations up until now--if they weren’t stuck in a high-energy wave of beams, they were in the middle of battle. None of them have taken passengers before and sailed a bumpy ride as if they were all on an amusement park ride.

The Prime Minister could almost feel himself puking his stomach out. The muscles and skin on his leg hadn’t fully recovered from the Rainbow Virus and he had to rely on a cane to move around. He dragged himself towards the control room to hear the little boy in glasses speak very excitedly to his fellow classmates.

White gestured with great enthusiasm: “I think this plan would work, trust me. Let’s turn in this proposal for Professor Lu’s month-end exam this time--Introductory Mech Study. How’s that for something practical? Think about it, when you first start learning how to swim, you all have to carry floaties to keep yourself afloat before you slowly get used to it. Even when you learn how to ride a bike, you’ll usually start off with training wheels, right? So why do we have to suffer through the boring and complicated process of introductory mech classes? Why can’t we just have a ‘training mech’ to help us out here?”

Mint crossed her arms on her chest and stared at him unamused: “Young master, it’s because we’re not concerned about it like you. What ‘training wheel’, do you also need someone to spoon feed baby food right next to you?”

White sighed: “Mint, are you trying to grow up to be the next Commander Lin? You’re going to be forever alone if you do that.”

“That beardless dumbass from the self-defense squad had been chasing her around every day, I think you should be more worried about yourself.” Huang Jingshu stood beside Mint and said, “I never had all that equipment when I learned how to swim, all I needed was a cold-hearted father.”

Everyone turned towards her.

Huang Jingshu shrugged: “My dad was a vaccuocerebral that later found out I was one too, and finally accepted that this was a hereditary disease. After he realized that his genes were doomed to be weeded out of society and that his bloodline will forever be stuck in the lowest class, he grew extremely depressed. It got to the point where he couldn’t even commit suicide himself, so what did he do instead? Tossed me into a river.”

White and Mint both went silent. They were all gradually growing used to this high-intensity learning environment and unconventional lifestyle in the Eighth Galaxy. They’ve gotten used to mechs, missiles, pandemics and war; their lives before the war was starting to feel like a hallucination. When man is forced to walk forward by the violent currents of the world, they will rarely have time to reminisce about the past.

But the past will always remain.

Only Rickhead, who was currently piloting the mech as if he was playing bumper cars, couldn’t read the atmosphere and interrupted: “I take longer to learn how to pilot mechs...is that because I need a harsher mentor?”

Huang Jingshu: “I recommend Captain Turan.”

The temporary pilot received the shock of his life and almost ran into a transfer portal along the way. Almost immediately, all the broadcast on the mech sent out a warning to him: “Going off course!”

The Prime Minister frantically supported himself on the wall as his cane flew out of his hands.

The pilot responded in horror: “No way, she’ll find out that only my face is worth looking at, and I can’t even sing on key!”

The Prime Minister finally interrupted weakly: “Kids, try and sail smoothly; the gravity field inside the mech has been going through hiccups for at least half an hour already. I’m getting old and can’t handle roller coasters...don’t worry, Captain Turan won’t dare to punish you guys, don’t forget there’s still the Minor Protection Law.”

White jumped up and said: “That’s right, RIckhead, you still have two and a half years to practice your singing--get off and switch with me, I want to see how I can install a kinetic sensor on the mech!”

According to Union Law, mech pilots must be at least 18 years of age.

The Prime Minister slowly picked up his cane and thought: *the law should change to 28 years of age instead.*

The Prime Minister’s name was Edward Hunt, exactly 240 years old this year. He spent half of his life idle with no real accomplishments; a case of Rainbow Virus had him walk the fine line between life and death. His physical appearance took a great toll from the illness, and it looked as if he had aged a decade overnight.

Being the executive leader of the Eighth Galaxy wasn’t a feat to be proud of. The position had no authority nor reputation, and even regular salary must be collected on their own, let alone having any grey income. Everyone that was willing to stand in this position was once someone that had hopes and aspirations when they swore in and dreamed about doing something for this hopeless galaxy.

Minister Edward was one of them that spent his long life dreaming. He would sometimes wake up from this dream to feel the harsh wind against his bare skin and turn his head back against reality. After years and years of repeating rising expectations and disappointment, his body had grown old and exhausted, almost dying in the process with disappointment.

When he thought his tragic life would end with an illness, the heavens sent him a ray of hope.

Like a starving animal finding a piece of bread crumb, he daringly clung onto this small ray of hope with his life.

Lu Bixing was completely unconcerned about his students taking control of the mech. Prime Minister Edward carried himself on his cane towards the young scientist to see the latter was carefully working on some crafts.

On his left, there was a giant glass cover on the bar table that was occupied by a few mini sculpting robots only a few centimeters tall. The mini robots each dragged a long tail behind him that connected directly to Lu Bixing’s personal device as they followed the instructions on the device to sculpt the rocks inside.

The rocks were all picked up by Lu Bixing throughout various planets they stopped by in the Eighth Galaxy, each with their own unique properties that glistened in different colors. Larger rocks were sculpted into detailed buildings and scenery on a base tile, smaller ones were polished by Lu Bixing himself into star shapes that were then glued inside the glass cover. The glass cover was brushed with glittery resin that looked as if they were palm-sized starry skies.

Even with robots working, the project still took a lot of patience and attention to detail to completion. Prime Minister Edward held his breath as he watched on the side until the mini robots finished their last job and blew away the scrap dust with their little fans. At the same time, the crystal embossing on the glass cover already dried up. The Minister watched as Lu Bixing flipped the one-meter-long glass cover around and realized that it was a miniature view of the Eighth Galaxy. The bright star at the edge was like a large diamond in the sky, the silhouettes of the small planets around it were also visible. Underneath the glass cover was a street view created by the various rocks that glowed in their unique colors like the lights of each household in a lively city, creating a breathtakingly exquisite view.

Lu Bixing raised his arm to stretch. His neck was stiff from looking down for too long and cracked a few joints around his neck and back. He pressed on his neck after pulling his muscle by accident and turned around with a smile: “How does it look, mister Prime Minister?”

Minister Edward complimented from the bottom of his heart: “A work of art, this can go into the museum of the Eighth Galaxy.”

“Ahem...really?” Lu Bixing found that the Prime Minister wasn’t particularly skilled in complimenting others. The “museum of the Eighth Galaxy” he spoke of used to be on Cayley; Lu Bixing went there once, it was not much different than a dumpster. He carefully cleaned the glass cover and shoved the giant crystal ball into a gift box with foam protection, then turned back towards the Prime Minister: “When the new galaxy museum gets rebuilt, I’ll make a new one for you. This one has an owner already.”

Anyone that’s seen a detailed piece of fine art like this would catch the hint behind his words. Lu Bixing’s unspoken “come ask me about it” line reeked as he waited with his tail up ready to share his story.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister Edward...was not quite the average person when it comes to relationship gossip.

He looked at the box in Lu Bixing’s hand in melancholy: “It would be great if the Eighth Galaxy could look like your sculpture one day. We all should keep an image like this in our hearts.”

Lu Bixing: “...”

A splash of cold water washed away his playful desire as he silently sighed at the Prime Minister’s ability to relate everything to rebuilding the galaxy.

The Prime Minister let out another painful sigh while Lu Bixing quickly put the box cover on and fixed his posture, attempting to put on a similar regretful and worrisome expression on his face.

Prime Minister Edward’s optimism was fueled by the face value of the Qiming defense force and Commander Lin’s support; he left the planet with a full heart and great expectations that this trip would be a successful leap to lead the galaxy into a bright future.

However, the harsh reality once again hit him directly in the face.

Their trip was not very successful, as Lu Bixing had expected.

As society’s ‘sewage’, the Eighth Galaxy hadn’t changed or organized in over a century, how could they possibly be mobilized during a time like this?

This was the objective reality, and not a jab at the Prime Minister’s dreams and passion.

The Eighth Galaxy was like a herd of lost lambs filled with people like old Spencer that only cared to clean up their front yards. Some places developed their own little exclusive social sphere with their own set of order and management system. Their resources were all allocated based on need, though they could sometimes be self-sufficient in providing their own needs like the small shopping district in the Milky Way City. Most of these independent socio-economic spheres ran on a very small scale so they tended to avoid interacting with outsiders in order to protect themselves. Lu Bixing and the Prime Minister visited a handful of more developed communities throughout the Eighth Galaxy that were acquainted with Monoeyed Hawk prior to the war. Out of respect for their old friend and pity for the old Minister, everyone agreed to support the independence of the Eighth Galaxy but only verbally and refused to do anything more.

It was already difficult to create a small kingdom that could feed all its people in a place like the Eighth Galaxy, and therefore almost impossible to convince someone that had already been struggling for years to survive on their own in a deserted land to provide for their neighbors. Poverty and harsh living conditions will swallow up a person’s pride, wisdom, and empathy.

Aside from these small autonomous communities, much of the galaxy still remained in anarchy--that was the real sewage society that even people like Lu Bixing who were born in the Eighth Galaxy wouldn’t dare enter. These places were filled with thieves, bandits, con artists, murderers, and other shameless criminals at the bottom of society. There was no other choice than to become one of them to survive because anyone that even tried to live a proper life will be dragged down by the abyss of sin and crime until they get swallowed up whole.

The Prime Minister said: “I was thinking as we left that I want to help rebuild the communication system in the Eighth Galaxy and contact all our abled friends around here to establish their own governments and start rebuilding the social order. I wanted to rebuild the trust of monetary funds and recover trade, let everyone treat this place as home and find a way to rebuild our galaxy while the war heats up in the rest of the Union so that we can finally have a place in the future!”

Lu Bixing pulled out a white ribbon out of nowhere, held one end in his mouth as he swiftly tied around the gift box from the other end. He mumbled with the ribbon still in his mouth: “Yeah.”

“The effectiveness and respectability of social order, the credibility of the government and law are all at the end of the day built by the trust of the people...isn’t that right?” The Prime Minister said, “Mankind was able to conquer space because of society. Without society, a simple modern man won’t even be able to conquer a small forest. Yet society is like a giant board game that can continue to exist only because each player that acts in different roles all acknowledge the rules of the game; it doesn't matter if anyone tries to cheat, because the concept of ‘cheating’ in itself is also a form of recognition for the rules.”

Even though the Prime Minister never really accomplished anything during his years on the job, it was clear he still understood the basics of sociology. Lu Bixing was only paying half a mind to the old man’s rambles while he worked on his craft and nodded to the words. He didn’t expect the Prime Minister to suddenly stare at him with a passionate gaze: “Professor Lu….”

Lu Bixing responded immediately: “Ah no, I’m not that qualified. All I can do is just teach underaged kids how to disassemble a mech, please don’t call me a teacher like them.”

“No, no, you are worthy of the title,” Prime Minister Edward didn’t mind and continued on eagerly, “I’ve heard the Silver Ninth Squadron and the self-defense squad call you by this name---Professor Lu, I’ve heard that the people from that self-defense squad used to just be interstellar smugglers in the past. But when you arrived, you turned them into a team comparable to a proper army and even defeated the Cayley pirates, so I know you are a man of great capabilities.”

Prime Minister Edward looked at Lu Bixing as if the latter was a brilliant ancient war general that could fix all problems and subconsciously added more sincerity to his tone. Lu Bixing recognized himself as a considerably extroverted nerd engineer and didn’t know what to make of this praise: “Minister, I came out with you this time only as my father’s substitute. I’m quite good with technology, you see, so as long as we have enough resources I can help plan out military factories and even rebuild the internal network within the Eighth Galaxy as you had mentioned…”

Prime Minister Edward was convinced that the young man was only being humble and firmly said: “Professor Lu, if you want, I will certainly be happy to give you the position of the Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy.”

Lu Bixing placed the wrapped gift box to the side and sighed: “Prime Minister, I was just someone that built a school in the past that even scared all his teachers away, I…”

The Prime Minister immediately followed up and fed him a mouthful of dessert: “Then you can take the first public school of the Eighth Galaxy in the future, all funding and government support will follow the same guidelines as the Black Orchid Academy in Wolto, what do you say?”

Lu Bixing let out another long sigh. The Prime Minister was already quite old, and the lure he used to bait a big fish was poorly wrapped in trash paper; not only that, but he also somehow managed to bake an imaginary cake that was hard to swallow. He wasn’t very good with negotiations and clearly not a good politician.

Perhaps all he had was a heart that could dream of reviving the Eighth Galaxy...and a group of followers that would rather be ripped into pieces inside an energy field than to expose their disease to a crowd of people.

“Minister, if someone was good with words, he can use his talent to fool people around him into following him around, and that’s what I’m good at. If someone’s good at brainwashing others, they can build a giant organization filled with hundreds or thousands of followers that could take all his silly words as gospel, and I think that Prophet Hope from the AUS has that capability. But to administer a city might take a bit of luck--the formation of the self-defense squad wasn’t something I planned on my own, nor did I have the capability of doing so. It was a result of various outside influences and coincidences. As for rebuilding a whole galaxy’s social order,” Lu Bixing lifted a difficult smile, “you seem to think of me a little too highly.”

The light in the Prime Minister’s eyes dimmed down with this rejection.

Lu Bixing’s number one interest is Lin Jingheng, number two is feeding his chicken soup of the day and can’t stand seeing such hopeless eyes of despair. His instincts overtook his head for a second and followed up immediately: “But no matter what you need me to do, I will do my best to fulfill your wishes and jump in fire.”

“Good!” The Prime Minister pressed his hand on the young man’s shoulder, “I was waiting for you to say this. I’ve actually already decided your position, you will be the Eighth Galaxy’s wartime planning advisor, the director of the special board of management committee. You have one veto right, and from now on we shall not get on the same mech. When I’m not around, will you be the temporary head minister that can exercise the powers of the Prime Minister.”

The young scientist and rural homeschool teacher was completely stumped by this long title. Lu Bixing felt the need to pull out a small notebook to write down this two-foot-long title three times and memorize it out loud.

The Prime Minister continued endlessly on with his grand ideas until they finally landed back on Qiming. Lu Bixing had to lie about having a stomachache to escape with his heavy gift box and an even heavier hope for the Eighth Galaxy’s future on his shoulders. He ran down a small alleyway with plans to report his new identity to his commander.

## Ch 87 - Is This a Gift for Me?

There was a command post within the surrounding area of the central operational base left by the AUS. Lin Jingheng made himself a temporary living space in the break room on the fifth floor of the command post right next to the meeting room. The command post was located inside the mech station and was normally busy with mechs flying off and landing everyday, and without a noise cancelling system it would be almost unbearable to stay around long-term. They were designated residential areas that were built by the AUS filled with beautiful natural sceneries and away from all the noise in the station, but Lin Jingheng didn’t like how far it was from the base and was too lazy to make the trip all the time.

Lu Bixing wanted to avoid people as much as possible so he didn’t take the elevator. He turned to the security camera in the corner and blew a kiss at it as he ran towards the emergency staircase in the back.

Despite carrying a heavy “Eighth Galaxy” in his arms, Lu Bixing made his way up the stairs without any delays. He got distracted by the concerned old Prime Minister earlier and didn’t notice how eager he was to return home until he reached the empty staircase; all his homesickness and thoughts took over his mind like a flood as his desire to see Lin Jingheng grew stronger by the second. It was as if the gravity on the planet suddenly disappeared around him; Lu Bixing felt his footsteps light like feathers. One step turned into two, and before he realized it, he was already on the 5th floor as if he grew wings during the process.

The joy in his heart was like a balloon getting pumped with hydrogen that reached its peak once he stepped out of the staircase--and then deflated down the stairs.

Lin Jingheng wasn’t here.

Lu Bixing’s excitable heart dropped to the ground and made a dent.

He let out a deep breath and stood there in disappointment for about ten seconds. He promptly adjusted his mental state and let out a self-mocking laugh as he walked towards the door to Lin Jingheng’s room. He carefully placed the heavy ‘eighth galaxy’ down and pulled up his personal device, ready to give his commander a call as he sighed, “I was just about to give you a surprise too.”

As he lifted his arm subconsciously, Lu Bixing felt his elbow touch the door to the room. The second his arm made contact with the door; a ray of light scanned through followed by a robotic voice: “Scanning identity--”

Lu Bixing froze up and thought, is there a visitor recording camera installed in there?

A recording camera was a small piece of equipment normally installed on a door’s lock that could scan and recognize a visitor's identity as people entered and sent the information real-time to the homeowner’s personal device.

Lu Bixing swiftly adjusted his posture and expression and leaned lightly onto the door with his shoulder. He turned towards the camera and greeted it lightheartedly but with courtesy: “Hi commander, it’s me, are you…”

Before he could finish asking “are you surprised”, the door interrupted him and said, “access granted.”

Lu Bixing: “....Huh?”

The lock on the door clicked and opened up. Lu Bixing, who was still posing on the door like a pin-up model, was caught off-guard and almost fell face-first into the ground inside the room.

Lu Bixing caught himself in time as he stumbled back with a hand on the closet door. The door was pushed open by accident, revealing a closet full of the same dress shirts organized neatly in a stack. Lu Bixing stared blankly at the pile of clothing for a few moments before it finally hit him that he broke into Lin’s room.

He turned back to the room door in disbelief: “You just let me in like that? You...are you broken?”

The door lock---which doesn’t have an AI function to chat with him, ignored his question.

It was like he accidentally opened someone else’s personal diary; while curious, Lu Bixing was also flustering, a sense of uneasiness sinking in and didn’t dare to look around. He panicked internally for a while until he finally realized---Lin granted him access to the room on the door lock, which was equivalent to giving him a spare key...even though the commander didn’t say anything.

He hadn’t even given Lin his present yet and already received a surprise himself.

Lu Bixing held his breath as he carefully picked up his ‘eighth galaxy’ and quietly made his way into Lin Jingheng’s small break room, a layer of cold sweat rolling down his back.

The room wasn’t very big, and the furnishing was rather simple. Aside from the closet and restroom by the door, there was only a small refrigerator and a single bed inside the room. The bed was neatly made like a perfectly smooth concrete surface; Lu Bixing was too embarrassed to sit on it, but there was nowhere else inside this small room that had a place for him to sit.

The good news was the floor was also clean, so Lu Bixing placed that ‘eighth galaxy’ on top of the refrigerator and sat down on the floor beside it. He scanned the neatly organized space around him and remembered his messy dog pit at home. The initial unease and surprise died down inside him as stranger thoughts began resurfacing. He quickly began to run through strange ideas in his mind: is he actually mysophobic? Can he tolerate me when we get together in the future?

Romance in books had countless stories about the ease of falling in love but the difficulties of maintaining a relationship. Too many emotions and feelings got buried in the trivial details of everyday life.

The more he pondered this question, the more Lu Bixing discerned the difficulties of this problem and began to take it more seriously. He pulled up the notes in his personal device and projected it towards the wall in front of him, filling it with notes and drawings with his digital pen. He began designing an automated house cleaning system that can automatically detect when Lin Jingheng is only 10 minutes away from home and clean up the entire house--everything from dusting, noise cancelling, disinfecting, doing laundry and putting everything back in place…

Lu Bixing followed the Prime Minister around the Eighth Galaxy for a whole week from day to night and stayed inside a mech for over 12 hours during travel; after the adrenaline rush of excitement, exhaustion quickly engulfed him. The images of the furniture jumbled in his head until they merged together into a blur. Lu Bixing leaned on the small refrigerator and fell asleep with the notes still projecting on the wall.

The door lock wasn’t very smart and would only send an alert to Lin Jingheng when it scans a ‘visitor’. People that were granted access were automatically treated as its master so the lock remained silent.

By the time Lin Jingheng returned, it was already near dawn.

Turan finished her questioning of the hostages and as expected, didn’t obtain much information. She reported to her boss as she walked over: “these people were hired merchants that don’t know who their higher-ups are. Their organization is very closed-in, and someone that looked like a team leader there said that he used to smuggle opium in the Seventh Galaxy and was sent over to the Eighth to test the market. There should be another 10 to 20 small mech fleets that followed them over as well. They said that the benefits of working for the organization is great, it even includes free chip replacement.”

Lin Jingheng: “Free chip replacements? So they all injected these chips already.”

“Yeah, otherwise how is it possible for these thugs to have such a high sync rate with mechs---their average are at least 80%, and ever since our average were pulled down by those lackeys from the self-defense squad, I haven’t seen anything above 80. Fortunately, their piloting skills are garbage and we have more people.” Turan said, “You know how we have to remove the chips before we put them in questioning? Tsk, it was awful...no anesthetics work on them, and even if they get knocked out, they can wake up crying like children from intense pain. We don’t even need to pull out interrogation tools and they’re already going insane. The power and addiction brought by these chips are completely unimaginable, it’s way more intense than Eden.”

Eden at least had an official management and a proper supervising team. Whether it was controlling hormone levels or stimulating senses, every procedure has to go through a strict medical survey to ensure its safety. Back when Yvgenia openly confessed her love to Lin Jingheng, she was caught with overstimulating hormones above the committee standard. The songstress herself, marketing company and area management department all had to pay 500 million in fines…. of course, since they were all political allies, it was hard to say if they really paid the fines.

However, the people’s reliance on Eden was still fundamentally psychological.

Lin Jingheng asked: “You said this chip will destroy brain function and create an irreversible reliance on it?”

Turan answered: “Absolutely. Remember when old Hawk brought that medical team during the mutated Rainbow Virus outbreak? I had them take a look at the chip and they just responded that they would need to do further research, but it’s likely that these chips are more deadly than any other existing drugs in the galaxies. Among the hostages that we captured, the most recent user of the drug just started a week ago and already developed a severe withdrawal reaction. Commander, if this continues, even if Eden recovers in the future, the people that are using the opium chips will never be able to escape from it.”

Lin Jingheng frowned. He remembered that Lu Bixing never suffered any severe reaction when he took out the biochip; despite showing a bit of reluctance at first, he never had any physical withdrawal reaction. Even the injuries on his body were all caused by outside damage and his mental state was considered stable; a full-body scan in the medical capsule afterwards also indicated that he didn’t show any signs of addiction.

He remembered that Monoeyed Hawk once said that Lu Bixing had shown signs of a vaccuocerebral when he was little…

“They market this thing as ‘Eden’ in the Eighth Galaxy since nobody here has even seen what the real Eden looks like.” Turan continued, “the first injection is free, but the chips will need to be replaced about once per month. As for how they will be priced after that, apparently the higher-ups haven’t decided and will depend on the market of the Eighth Galaxy.”

Lin Jingheng mulled over the issue for a bit and said: “The medical system inside Eden can detect the dangers of this biochip, so once Eden recovers, the people that haven’t touched this chip will return to their shell of safety. The profit one can gain from this will depend on how long Eden remains unusable...so is it possible that the mastermind is someone that can affect the reconstruction of Eden? For example, someone that has significant influence within the committee.”

Turan responded: “Right, the seven directors and their close relatives.”

A shadow of unease was cast on Lin Jingheng’s heart at this comment despite knowing that Turan didn’t mean harm and remembered Lin Jingshu, who was sent to evacuate to the City of Angels.

The two arrived at Lin Jingheng’s room as the commander casually opened the door. The lock automatically detected its master’s identity and opened up, letting out a ray of light from inside the room.

Both Turan and Lin Jingheng froze on spot.

There was a dim projection on the wall inside a room that was supposed to be empty and dark, casting a ray of warm light on the cold white wall. Messy lines and numbers covered the wall with a bunch of indescribable notes scribbled below it. The strange scene gave the lifeless room a new sense of vitality.

On the small refrigerator beside the bed rested a large crystal ball with a starry sky glistening on top. The dome-like cover sculpted with natural scenery and buildings glowed in the light of the wall projection, making the little stars and sculptures inside the crystal ball dance with life as its shadows casted onto the white bedsheet in an almost artistic manner.

Lin Jingheng walked forward to see the light source from Lu Bixing’s wrist resting on his knee. Lu Bixing himself was already curled up beside the fridge and fell asleep. The reflected light from the crystal ball also scanned across Lu Bixing’s face; the sparkling lights glistened on his slightly long hair resting on his face like a starry sky on his head.

Turan covered her mouth with her hand and screamed internally; she thought this boy was just a pure science nerd and shared all her hookup experiences with him without hesitation, but she was wrong.

No wonder why Lu Bixing refused her advice courteously back then, he was actually a secret master of the arts! Turan glanced over at Lin Jingheng’s expression and apologized in her mind: I’m off boss, I underestimated him, I’m defeated.

Turan ran off without a second thought and kindly closed the door for them. She dashed into the distance with a lingering fear in her heart as she felt her entire philosophy of anti-monogamy completely shaken-- it might be time for her to stay away from them.

Lin Jingheng only realized that Turan left after the door clicked. He was like a lost lamb standing in the middle of nowhere and remained completely dumbfounded for a moment before discreetly making his way over to Lu Bixing. He kneeled and lifted a hand in hesitation; his fingers reached out and curled back in a few times as he pondered what to do.

He remembered his ten-year-old birthday---due to unknown circumstances, Jingshu and his own birthday were recorded 10 days later on Eden than their actual birthday. The twins would always receive countless greetings and noisy celebrations from both Eden and people around them every year on the wrong day. Only on their actual birthday was Lin Jingheng able to exchange a digital birthday card with his sister.

Except he had just separated with his sister that year, and for strange reasons Lin Jingshu’s personal device couldn’t be reached so he wasn’t able to send out the yearly birthday card. He remembered the home he could no longer return to and the anxious little girl that chased after him; but he was no longer with the little girl and had to hold in his worry, pretending nothing had happened. Young Lin Jingheng’s mood was down for the whole day and refused Eden’s multiple requests to adjust his emotional state...until he went back to his room that night to see a mini model mech a little taller than an average adult man. It was scaled to size as a real mech, where kids could sleep inside and connect to a simulation mental network that let them play games.

Lin Jingheng remembered that he stood in shock in front of his door and almost forgot how to walk as he thought: is this a gift for me?

If it wasn’t for the model mech game system he received when he was 10, Lin Jingheng would perhaps not have entered the Black Orchid Academy and spent the rest of his life working around mechs. He may have been a scholar, a normal government official of the Union, or left Wolto at a young age and become a wanderer in the vast galaxies.

Almost 40 years later, Lin Jingheng watched the young man before him as a strange indescribable feeling resurged in his heart.

*Is this a gift for me?*

Perhaps tired from the awkward position, Lu Bixing suddenly moved. His head leaning on the refrigerator door rolled off and broke his balance. Lin Jingheng quickly held Lu Bixing as he watched the young man about to fall to the ground; the commander’s cold fingers pressed onto Lu Bixing’s face, the latter jumped and woke up.

Lu Bixing was still half asleep when his eyes opened and forgot where he was for a second. He stared at Lin Jingheng in front of him with a blank mind: “Uh, I….”

Lin Jingheng tried to move his hand from his face, but it was like the warmth in his palm was a strong glue that made him almost reluctant to move away: “Hm?”

Lu Bixing grew skittish and licked his own lips subconsciously as he attempted to explain: “I’m here to deliver some stuff, uh...th-that door just opened on its own, you…”

A breath of air caught in his throat. Lin Jingheng’s hand that was on his face earlier rested on the fridge behind him as the commander suddenly moved in closer. That memorable and handsome face suddenly closed in on him with intimidation, the grey mist inside those mesmerizing pupils looked as if they were ready to draw up a storm that would swallow him up whole. Lu Bixing then heard him say with a deep and surprisingly uncold voice: “I set up access permission for you.”

Lu Bixing’s fingers stiffened.

Lin Jingheng’s gaze lowered as his eyes glossed over Lu Bixing’s lips before he ruined the mood and asked: “I’m not that easy to get along with, nor am I that good to you, so why did you choose me?”

Lu Bixing: “....”

*You’re ruining the fun sir, am I supposed to turn in a thesis paper right now?*

Lu Bixing questioned back: “You gave me access first before requesting for an interview---commander, I think the HR procedure in the Silver Fortress might have some issues. If you want to kiss me, why are you holding back?”

Lin Jingheng remained silent for a moment. The slim-fit collared shirt and military boots were both restraining and conservative that kept him restricted within a clear-cut boundary. Even when he was on Beijing-β where everyone was wearing strange outfits, this fully covered military uniform and gloves were still on his body like constraints that always make him second-guess, always keeping himself back.

Why is he holding back anyway?

He repeated this line in his mind numerous times. He suddenly leaned forward, captured Lu Bixing’s lips with his own and closed his eyes. It was like he lost his balance while walking on a wire across skyscrapers, he fell and continued to descend uncontrollably until he passed through the core of the planet into the vast void of space.

His soul ascended weightlessly while a rush of colors poured violently into his monochrome world, dazzling before his eyes until he felt completely disoriented.

## Ch 88 - It’s Like a Sprouting Seed

Lu Bixing looked at Lin Jingheng incomprehensibly as if he was dreaming: “You actually kissed me after I asked...I, I’m probably still not quite awake.”

Lin Jingheng took half a step back and carefully placed his hand on the young man’s head, finally able to touch the hair he couldn’t feel before. Lu Bixing’s hair had a slight natural curl to it and didn’t feel as soft as it looked; it was a little cold with only a hint of warmth near the roots. Lin Jingheng disliked physical contacts with others and didn’t really know how to control his touch. The blisters on the tips of his fingers brushed gently on Lu Bixing’s head like a soft wind that blew by, almost too faint of a touch to catch. Lu Bixing shivered a little subconsciously as he felt all his sensation heighten to a peak; his freshly woken body couldn’t process the sudden adrenaline rush and concentrated a rather inappropriate reaction down his lower body.

Lu Bixing frantically pulled a leg back in the dimly lit dark room and almost performed an ancient sweep kick martial art in this cramped space. His leg moved too fast and nearly knocked Lin Jingheng over, in which the latter responded by adjusting his balance and held his balance on something else--Lu Bixing’s leg. The young scientist gasped audibly and jumped on instinct, then leaned down to grab the empty gift box on the side in a frenzy and held in his breath like his life depended on it.

Lin Jingheng: “......”

Lu Bixing’s burning red face was exposed under the glow of the crystal ball.

Commander Lin---despite used to being the standard of abstinence, still spent most of his time around Turan and probably heard way more R-rated content stories than the amount of nutrient bars headmaster Lu had ever eaten in his life. No matter how clean and unstained he was, there was a limit to how much he could play dumb. Lin Jingheng immediately realized the situation and awkwardly pulled his hand back as he offered: “The bathroom is over there.”

Lu Bixing broke down in embarrassment: “Don’t mention it.”

The two men looked at each other face to face with a giant gift box in between them.

Lin Jingheng wasn’t a good moodmaker or chatterbox; if he wasn’t making snarky comments he essentially didn’t know how to talk. He was desperately looking around and picking his brain to find something to say at this time to ease the awkwardness: “Uh...where did the refrigerator ball on top of the crystal come from?”

“I made it myself...pff…” Lu Bixing only noticed the obvious slip of a tongue the commander made from nervousness during the middle of his response. He couldn’t hold in his laughter and busted out like a comedian finding his own joke funny before he could even say it out loud, “I made it...hahaha...I made that ‘fridge ball’ myself.”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

Moments later, the commander himself also let out a quiet laugh as he kicked Lu Bixing’s leg lightly: “What are you laughing at, you shameless thing?”

Lu Bixing was laughing while flustered, shameless but embarrassed; his arm rested on the gift box on his knee while his hands covered his face as he attempted to explain himself: “Listen, I just woke up, so...you know, it’s just a normal biological reaction.”

“Good morning, Professor Lu,” Lin Jingheng’s short-lived awkwardness passed, and he could feel himself regaining his ability to speak properly as he began making sarcastic remarks: “You woke up before the sky turned dark, you sure are getting more hardworking by the day, what a role model for your students.”

Lu Bixing sneakily peeked out at him from the cover between his arm and the gift box with a slightly mischievous look in his eyes, almost like a little kid ready to try out an exciting new prank for the first time in his life.

Lin Jingheng pulled out a cup and some wine from the fridge. Lu Bixing quickly said: “I’ll just have water, no alcohol.”

Lin Jingheng lowered his head to look at him, and Lu Bixing added another self-exposing comment: “I’m just thirsty, it’s not what you think.”

Lin Jingheng: “How was your trip this time?”

“The Prime Minister gave me a special...uh…” Lu Bixing realized that his brain short-circuited from staring at his crush for too long, everything in his mind evaporated into thin air from the great surprise earlier. He couldn’t remember his title and had to pull up the notes from his personal device, “Oh, special board of management director, I can also temporarily take over for the Prime Minister under special circumstances.”

Lin Jingheng could tell immediately that this trip wasn’t very successful and forced the Prime Minister to latch onto anyone in desperation.

“It’s the Eighth Galaxy,” Lu Bixing shrugged as he took the water cup, “a lot of people have to struggle just to survive and have never gotten any support, so they don’t trust anyone. If you try to give them a hand, they’ll think you have ulterior motives and pull out a dagger before you can ‘carry out your plan’ on them.”

Lin Jingheng took a sip of sweet wine and leaned on the wall; his eyes rested on Lu Bixing through the night light.

“We’ll take it one step at a time---I don’t want to talk about the Eighth Galaxy with you tonight.” Lu Bixing lifted his head, “Commander, you’re probably already tired of seeing the place I grew up in, what about your birthplace?”

Lin Jingheng thought about it and said: “Do you want to hear the 30-year political power struggle between the central Union government and the seven galaxies, the economic battle and games among the galaxies, or the internal strife among the different political factions within the central government?”

Lu Bixing didn’t know if he should laugh: “Why should I hear about these?”

“Aren’t you that…” Lin Jingheng also didn’t remember that long title Minister Edward came up with and almost bit his tongue, “that whatever backup Prime Minister? You can study beforehand.”

Lu Bixing discovered a hidden skill Lin Jingheng had; anything he described could be replaced by a similar derogatory term when it reached commander Lin. The special ‘temporary Prime Minister’ turned into a ‘backup Prime Minister’ out of Lin Jingheng’s mouth. Perhaps it was because the commander just took advantage of him earlier, he didn’t say ‘spare tire Minister’...Lu Bixing was convinced that he was about to say that judging by the way he spoke.

“I’m a ‘wartime’ planning advisor,” Lu Bixing said, “I’m off the job when it’s peacetime.”

Lin Jingheng asked: “Why?”

“Everyone’s normal lifestyle is thrown under the bus during wartime, and we all have the same desire to find peace as soon as possible so we can get our good lives back. I feel like there’s meaning to do something for the people during times like this because you know that you’re improving most people’s lives and working towards the right direction. But once war is over and everyone rests for a few years, society will be like a flowing river that separates land and water as it washes away sand and dirt, forming a new social order and governing organization. A politician can never stand simultaneously in two camps; to step on the stage of politics means that one will always have to steal from others for the sake of your camp’s benefit until all heroes become criminals at the end. I’m a childish and naive person that doesn’t like that.” Lu Bixing pondered for a bit after adding on with serious thought, “Aside from being naive, I’m also very weak and always want to avoid conflict and fights to pretend everything is good...I’m well aware of this myself and will try to fix this flaw in the future, but I’m afraid nature might be difficult to change. Sometimes I might end up fanning your fire, so...yeah, you can scold me, but please don’t get too upset at me.”

Out of 365 standard Woltorian days in a year, Lin Jingheng is irritable for perhaps 360 days. But he understood that being hard to get along was ultimately because he can’t make peace with himself, so why would he even dare to ask others to change their nature for him?

A thousand words were stuck inside Lin Jingheng’s heart that couldn’t be spoken.

Lu Bixing softly asked: “I don’t want to listen to those messy politics in Wolto, I want to hear about your friends and family.”

Lin Jingheng’s mind went blank for a moment.

Lu Bixing added: “Aside from Zhanlu and your Silver Ten friends, there should be at least someone outside of the military that can drink and talk with you outside of work, right?”

Lin Jingheng nodded and remained silent for a few moments: “....Like Monoeyed Hawk?”

Lu Bixing: “....”

This definition of a “friend” was a little too groundbreaking; it was like a friendship of mortal enemies built on vengeance and hatred; can it really last long?

“When I was in the Black Orchid Academy, I had a pretty decent relationship with the school doctor Lance, and a few classmates.”

Lin Jingheng suddenly stopped after this. Lu Bixing waited for what felt like an eternity and realized that talking to the commander was like trying to squeeze out a half-empty tube of toothpaste, he only managed to squeeze out this one sentence and had to continue following up himself: “Where is Doctor Lance now, are you still in contact with you?”

“He’s been dead for 30 years.”

Lu Bixing made a mental note for himself---the commander likes to hang out with people older than him---and asked: “What about your classmates? What are they doing right now, what kind of people are they?”

“I don’t know,” Lin Jingheng tried digging through his memories. The light in adolescence had been completely swallowed up by that rainy day in the past so everything else was like a blur, those years later passed by in a muddle. He only just now realized it was mentioned that he couldn’t even remember whether this ‘good friend’ was male or female, tall or short, and could only respond tastelessly: “I don’t really remember.”

Lu Bixing didn’t give up: “What about your family?”

“My mother died young; my father was a military officer that also didn’t live a long life. He never really went home when he was alive, so I don’t have much impression of him. My adoptive father...Monoeyed Hawk must’ve introduced him to you already when he was talking shit about me behind my back,” Lin Jingheng was reluctant to talk much about Lu Xin in front of Lu Bixing and only glossed over their relationship. “I have a younger sister, a twin. We were adopted by different families when we were young and had no contact with each other for a while. I only found out later that the people that adopted her were the Eden Committee.”

The shadow looming over his heart that Lu Bixing unintentionally cleared out reappeared as he thought about Lin Jingshu: “Jingshu…”

Lu Bixing: “Huh?”

“Not your student, my sister is also named Jingshu,” Lin Jingheng paused. “She is a….quiet and introverted girl. She likes cleanliness, very careful about her looks and rarely cries or throws tantrums. She can always dress herself up nicely, but she used to be a little scared of insects when she was little.”

Lin Jingshu’s image was always blurry in his mind. Whenever Lin Jingheng remembers her, he would always think of the little girl in the past and not the beautiful flower of the Union.

“I can never really tell what she’s thinking; she won’t speak up if she’s happy nor sad, and when she’s upset, she will just hide herself from the world. When she’s happy, she’ll pull out her little piggy bank savings and buy little toys to put into my room, but when I ask why she’s happy or angry, she’ll never say or acknowledge anything.”

Lu Bixing thought: *they’re definitely related.*

“I rarely visited her,” Lin Jingheng said, “My...adoptive father’s death was closely related to the committee, yet she wanted to marry into the committee. I tried stopping her before, but she didn’t listen.”

Lu Bixing asked: “Are you blaming her?”

“Why would I blame her? It’s actually not a bad decision. She’s naturally more fragile and weaker than other kids, always looking a little less spirited than other girls her age. Having someone that can take care of her, walk around with a team of bodyguards and spend her free time doing recreational activities or shopping isn’t that bad. The Gordon family is also pretty decent to her and sent her to the City of Angels in these turbulent times, I’m actually quite thankful for that.” Lin Jingheng finished the rest of the wine in his cup as he twirled the empty cup in his hands, “But I was thinking back then....one of these days I’ll be going against the committee, it’s best for everyone if she distanced herself from me so that she doesn’t get stuck in this battle.”

That way, even if they sever their relationship in the future, it would be less of a hassle, and no matter who ends up winning the battle between himself and the committee, she will still have a decent life ahead of her.

Lu Bixing noticed that despite saying, “good for everyone”, Lin Jingheng’s eyebrows didn’t relax and teased: “Guess it looks like we only need to get my dad’s approval then.”

Lin Jingheng was about to speak when the clock inside the room rang. Lu Bixing only then noticed that there was a little digital board below the clock that had a simple daily schedule written on it. The “evening break” sign flipped over and changed to “mental training”.

Lu Bixing was shocked; he realized that the “evening break” probably included dinner time and the only real break Lin Jingheng reserved for himself. Lu Bixing completely took all the time with chatter and only saved him time for a bottle of wine, then quickly stood up and said: “Sorry, did I bother you?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t say anything and only turned off the alarm with his personal device. He turned the digital sign over and physically showed how kings don’t wake early. However, Lu Bixing knew him and understood that whatever he couldn’t finish today will be made up from sleeping time; without a strict schedule, he would never have such a high and stable mech sync rate. After realizing the fact, Lu Bixing could only leave reluctantly despite wanting to spend more time with him.

The lights in the Milky Way City lit up in the distance, seemingly safe and peaceful. Ironically, the pandemic ended up becoming a blessing in disguise as it reestablished social order within the city. Every resident’s personal devices were connected together and followed the same system as the shopping district before, allocating virtual currency that could be earned through the market and traded for living essentials. The city was filled with jobless residents with no real workers so it was very easy to find work; the essential goods for the citizens were distributed through the self-defense squad’s wartime supplies, and due to the bountiful natural environment, resources and sizable population, the city could be completely self-sufficient once it fully recovered.

Lu Bixing thought: It’s like a sprouting seed.

His excitable body calmed down for a short while before it turned into physical energy that engulfed him whole that wiped out all the exhaustion from his long travel. Lu Bixing felt like he had endless energy that could send him up to space to fly around the planet and rushed into the mech station like a maniac and checked up on all parked mechs in the station. He didn’t rest here and even barged into the central lab under Zhanlu’s full support and spent the whole night battling with the AUS’s protected files.

He worked restlessly for 12 hours until he received a meeting invitation from the Prime Minister and realized the sun has already risen.

Lu Bixing answered the summon with panda eyes in a completely opposite energetic mood as if he had just taken steroids.

“Building order is like gathering all the small streams into the main river and sending everything down the same direction,” The newly appointed wartime planning advisor said. “This requires a strong and powerful attraction force to open up the water passes for the currents to enter and a river course large and tall enough to contain these currents. The ‘river course’ is the galaxy’s productivity, and through the network we established with the veterans of the former Independent Navy…”

Prime Minister Edward asked: “What’s the attraction force?”

“Everyone’s needs.” Lu Bixing said, “it’s the desire everyone yearns for when they’re pushed to the edge, like when everyone wanted to live when the mutated Rainbow Virus broke out within the Milky Way City.”

The Prime Minister hesitated: “The city is currently running on Commander Lin’s wartime supplies, but...we can’t support the entire Eighth Galaxy.”

## Ch 89 - Getting Used to Eating With Him Everyday

Lu Bixing grinned: “Minister, what’s the rush? Do you plan on announcing the galaxy’s independence and inviting everyone over for a big dinner?”

Prime Minister Edward also realized that his question was a little strange and sighed. When young people are impatient, they’re simply short-tempered and naive; when the elderly become impatient, it’s because they know that they don’t have much time left.

“Let’s repair the intergalactic communication network in the Eighth Galaxy first and inform the people that we will be rebuilding the government. But remember that it’s not a good time to advertise it too much right now so we don’t need to create a whole campaign. We can then use Qiming, the Milky Way City as a starting point and work our way up. Prime Minister, stomachs can’t be filled with just one meal, why don’t we try and stay optimistic? Qiming is a nice place, the ecosystem on this planet is near-perfect with plenty of natural resources, and over 70% of the land is fit for humans and large mammals to live on. We don’t need to waste massive amounts of energy to maintain a climate and ozone layer, plus there’s enough population here that can join the workforce on top of old factories we can recover. Production can be broken down into two main sources---physical supply and technology, and we’ve already solved 50% of the problem with natural resources here. Also, don’t you think even the name of the planet sounds pretty nice?”

But the Prime Minister couldn’t stay optimistic. He naturally had a large body frame, but because of how underweight he was and how his back hunched over, his figure looked like a fragile twig. He had also just recovered from a big illness and was often hit with worries, so his expression was always quite grim; the wrinkles on his face were growing rapidly like weed on a grassfield, making him look almost like a walking mummy. If he were to walk around in Wolto like this back in the days, his looks would be frowned upon by the city.

The chicken soup of “everything will be better tomorrow” that the young man was cooking was a little too difficult for him to digest. The Prime Minister lowered his head to look at the interstellar map of the Eighth Galaxy and said: “Sometimes I think Commander Lu Xin did a bad thing.”

Lu Bixing was taken aback.

Minister Edward continued: “If we never learned about dignity and just lived like soulless creatures under the rule of the pirates, it may not have been such a terrible thing. Even dogs and pigs have emotions; they run and jump in the breeding farms without any worries and don’t dwell in self-loathing and pain because they know they’re dogs and pigs. They also never hold out unreasonable expectations for their lifestyle, isn’t that great? Why can’t we also just die peacefully without regrets in our ignorance?”

 “Prime Minister,” Lu Bixing walked toward him and kneeled slightly. He turned his gaze up at the old man and said, “Freedom and dignity are human nature, it’s not something that Commander Lu Xin brought over. Wasn’t the reason why you all agreed to follow him back then that he ignited the fire inside your hearts? You understood the deepest pain in your heart, so you know the pain of others; rediscovering yourself meant you also saw through insanity, foolishness and evil.”

The Prime Minister almost jumped from his seat. From that young man’s pair of eyes, through the tunnel of time, he saw a reflection of Commander Lu Xin from a century ago.

Just then, a notification popped up on Lu Bixing’s personal device. The young man shot up in excitement and said: “Mister Prime Minister, you can replan the Milky Way City and the planet as necessary and form your own team. I’ll take care of fixing communication, so just let me know what your ideas are, and we’ll make it reality, let’s split it up like this! We have too much to do, I’ll have to take a leave first!”

Lu Bixing secretly downloaded Commander Lin’s daily schedule and carefully picked out all his breaks and empty hours. Lin Jingheng had very little break time because physical training was equivalent to rest to this man. His breakfast time was only 20 minutes after morning training, and 30 minutes each for lunch and dinner; aside from these, he didn’t really have ‘breaktime’ on the schedule but saved quite a few blocks of time for emergency situations.

So, Lu Bixing also changed his own schedule to match the commander’s so that he could go bother Lin during his break and meal times. During open hours, he would sneak out to try his luck.

Monoeyed Hawk’s team returned half a month later, and during these 20 days, the impatient Prime Minister quickly rebuilt a skeleton of the new government. He worked restlessly from day to night with his team to search for old documents and began discussing the future plans of Qiming.

Lu Bixing approved of White and his classmates’ proposal of a “Preliminary Mech” and started a new school term--the Starry Sea Academy that only now existed in concept with four students who had a small school term every 2 months. At the end of each term, students needed to propose a new research topic, and after Lu Bixing selected from said topics, the four students would split up the work and complete it in the next term while Lu Bixing shifted the lecture focus to a topic related to their project. He wasn’t a walking encyclopedia, and ever since he was forced to take on the role of a professor due to lack of teachers, he had run into numerous fields from the students’ proposals that he wasn’t familiar with himself. Oftentimes, he had to self-study ahead of time and digest all the information as fast as he could before he could answer questions the students threw at him.

During this time, Lu Bixing also completed an effective plan to fix the entire Eighth Galaxy’s communication network without any delays, and while complaining that there weren’t enough robots and an engineering team around him to help out, he fully invaded Commander Lin’s life...even though Lin Jingheng really didn’t have much of a life.

Lin Jingheng started getting used to eating with him everyday. Sometimes when Lu Bixing left early, he would run into a Lin Jingheng who had just finished his morning run. This was the only time in the day where the commander’s body emitted a bit of heat, and if Lu Bixing could manage to get a hug full of sweat, he could also use the excuse to borrow the commander’s bathroom for a shower. Lu Bixing found immense joy and surprises borrowing anything the commander owns.... even though the young scientist himself doesn’t even understand what’s so exciting about these things.

As long as it wasn’t a time like physical recovery that required specific meal plans, Lin Jingheng wasn’t very strict with his regular diet and could eat things outside of nutrient bars if he wanted. He only needed to watch his portions, otherwise Zhanlu would give him a warning.

Lu Bixing discovered that he liked food with strong tastes; hated sweets, hated foods with sticky texture, but wasn’t a picky eater overall. When he ran into something he disliked, he wouldn’t say anything and only swallow it down quickly and take a drink of water to wash down the taste.

Lin Jingheng was once worried that he didn’t have much to talk about over the dinner table, but facts proved him wrong. Mister Lu could talk to himself for hours on his own and always found ways to avoid awkward silences.

As for Lu Bixing himself, perhaps due to his extreme filter called love, he didn’t find Lin Jingheng boring at all. Even though this person would curse while playing video games, bullied cats and had questionable morals at times, the elite education from the Union didn’t get buried under his rebellious and gangster-like nature. Eden gave him a strong foundation, the Black Orchid Academy taught him how to think about problems critically, the Union’s bureaucracy forced him to sign the Third Squadron’s reports and made him quite a sharp critic of various technological problems. Sometimes, Lu Bixing felt like he found a close friend that shared his wisdom.

What’s more was that this “close friend” had a unique sense of humor when he started mocking people. As long as Lu Bixing himself wasn’t the target of these insults, they were quite interesting to listen to from the side.

If Lu Bixing didn’t have other plans after dinner, he would huddle up inside Lin Jingheng’s little breakroom. While Lin Jingheng continued with his extensive psychological training under a complex simulation, Lu Bixing would lay on his bed to prepare lecture materials for his students or work overtime for the Prime Minister, each not bothering one another.

He usually stayed until late at night before he would reluctantly leave. Once, however, Lu Bixing fell asleep in the middle of researching data, and because Lin Jingheng didn’t want to wake him up, he let the young man stay for the night on that clean single bed.

This one night gave birth to countless rumors the next day; half of them from Turan, the other half from Saturday. The two’s wild imaginations were unparalleled to the point where it was hard to tell who came up with what, and the list became long enough to write a book called “The Indecent Encyclopedia of the NSC Era”.

Yet, this sleepover experience wasn’t quite pleasant. Lin Jingheng was very conservative and morally righteous and didn’t even touch a button on Lu Bixing. In addition, because he had no idea how to take care of people and only knew to leave a thin blanket, Lu Bixing slept the whole night with his jacket on and got up the next morning with a sore back from his metal belt and the commander’s hard bed.

At the same time, Lin Jingheng wasn’t someone that could fully relax before others. Even if he made the decision to accept Lu Bixing and even tried to touch the young man, a decision was a decision, and a habit is a habit. It was already quite rough for two grown men to share a single bed, so when Lu Bixing turned and fell onto Lin Jingheng, the commander’s heart rate couldn’t go down for the whole night as the warm body pressed on him like a heavy but sweet burden.

The next day, Lu Bixing saw that he didn’t manage to sleep the whole night and felt his heart ache more than his back, then decided he wouldn't bother Lin at night anymore.

When they first got together, both of them were very careful, especially Lu Bixing, who kept reminding himself to maintain a good impression in front of Lin Jingheng. He wouldn’t even dare to move around when sitting on the commander’s bed; but while it’s easy to speak of change it was hard to carry out. His30-year messy habit couldn’t change overnight. Sometimes he would still throw things to the side subconsciously, but he quickly discovered that Lin Jingheng didn’t really mind. The commander’s OCD tendencies were trained into habit by the military and not his nature, so he was quite easygoing and able to avoid imposing his own standards on others.

Though when it came to aesthetics, the situation was reversed---Mr. Lin had a closet full of dress shirts that looked like they were mass produced to last him through all seasons of the year. He didn’t use mirrors and had absolutely no interest in dressing himself up, yet he still had an amazing talent in mocking others. Lu Bixing also found out that he was especially harsh on people that looked too gaudy whether it was their outfit or demeanor; he simply found them intolerable. Therefore, Turan and Monoeyed Hawk, who was still on business leave, were the two unfortunate souls that always ended up being the target of his scolding.

These 20 days were both long and short to Lu Bixing. When he recalled what he was doing during this time, he would think it was the longest 20 days of his life; the excitable old mummy Prime Minister followed him around with work almost restlessly and he had no idea how he managed to survive that. Yet when he counted the times, he glued himself to Lin Jingheng, he felt like time passed too quickly and wanted to grab onto those fleeting times and not let it pass.

“Sir, old Mister Lu and Superintendent Yu sent a message saying they plan on returning today.” Lin Jingheng barely managed to send Turan off and found a break for himself. He wanted to go find Lu Bixing but heard that the Prime Minister dragged the young man to a meeting;before he could have time to feel disappointment, Zhanlu added onto the fire with this announcement.

Lin Jingheng: “You have a dad alert function now?”

Zhanlu answered: “This is a special request from Captain Turan. She said that if you can’t get a hold of the expatriates’ locations in real time, you’ll give attitudes for no reason.”

Lin Jingheng: “Expatriates don’t include Monoeyed Hawk, thank you.”

As they talked, Lu Bixing’s four students walked out of the mech station. Saturday also returned from his patrol and blew a playful whistle toward Mint in the same direction; unfortunately, he didn’t catch Lin Jingheng nearby and became collateral damage to the commander’s anger. The slightly upset Commander Lin then punished him for 3 rounds of squats around the mech station for “harassment of underaged girls”.

Saturday caught Zhanlu imitating his little whistle from earlier very soon after. The expressionless AI blew out a playful tune and scared off the people around him.

Lin Jingheng: “What are you doing?”

“Keeping a backup for you.” Zhanlu answered with a stern face, “When humans mate, they sometimes imitate birds with whistles. But to control breathing and tune seems to require a bit of practicing, and since you are still single it seems this skill may be useful for you. Should I search up oral muscle training for you to help you practice whistling?”

Zhanlu blew a slightly off-tune whistle at him.

Lin Jingheng: “.......”

A friendly reminder: an AI that’s too insensitive may be rebooted.

Then, someone called from afar: “Commander! Commander Lin!”

Lin Jingheng looked up to see a shining bald head running towards him like a moving signal light.

This bald man might have looked average on the outside, but his background was quite impressive. He was a researcher that was invited over by Monoeyed Hawk during the mutated Rainbow Virus pandemic and the head of the researching team. He was a skilled man that completed the viral analysis of the mutated Rainbow Virus and mass produced the vaccine--he was a very typical specialist of the Eighth Galaxy that used to sell fake medicine and medical equipment. He once gloated that there wasn’t a medical capsule he couldn’t copy and no specialized medication he couldn’t analyze; he never mentioned his real name but gave himself a nickname called ‘Moonstone’ in allusion to his bright bald head. Unfortunately, nobody acknowledged it and instead called him ‘egghead’ or ‘old egg’.

“That biochip isn’t as simple as it seems,” the old egg howled with a voice comparable to a loudspeaker. “There’s a system built inside it that’s very similar to Eden, an average man can’t reject it once it gets injected inside them. The addictiveness is extremely high, but its effects on vaccuocerebral syndrome is almost close to nothing…”

Lin Jingheng didn’t want to discuss “opium” in public with him and interrupted: “Vaccuocerebral syndrome makes human-mech connection unstable, so it’s normal if they can’t feel the chemical effects of the chip and don’t show signs of addiction.”

“Nonsense, nonsense!” the old egg jumped at the response, “unstable human-mech connection isn’t equivalent to not being able to connect at all, a lot of vaccuocerebrals can still pilot mechs after proper training. If they can pilot mechs, why can’t they control such a small chip? If you don’t believe me you can find a vaccuocerebral to try and I guarantee they’ll experience the same flood of strength it gives normal people. I am one myself so I can volunteer for this human experiment. Commander, I have this feeling that the vaccuocerebral syndrome isn’t limited to unstable human-mech connection; if I can dissect this chip down to its core, we might be able to find a way to completely block off Eden, there must be some sort of connection here!”

Lin Jingheng leaned back in disgust and dodged the old man’s spit as it flew towards him: “How do you think I’m still standing here if there isn’t any way to completely block off Eden?”

The old egg was stumped and mumbled in disbelief: “Commander, you have this kind of technology? A Union-developed...no, no way, the Military Council did it themselves? Commander Lin, where did you get it?”

Lin Jingheng frowned---the “forbidden fruit” is a highly protected top-secret file in Zhanlu that he only noticed after fully obtaining Zhanlu’s ownership. The “forbidden fruit” is an extremely complex file, and what’s unique about it is that aside from the Eden blocker function on the surface, the entire database was heavily locked that not even Lin Jingheng himself or Zhanlu could open it. So naturally, the only person that could have installed this file inside Zhanlu would be Zhanlu’s ex-master, Lu Xin himself. Yet the only thing Lin Jingheng never understood was if Lu Xin could hide himself from Eden completely, why didn’t he use it before?

“Commander,” the old egg stepped forward anxiously, “whoever has this technology might have something to do with the person that made the opium chips!”

Lin Jingheng’s expression immediately grew dark: “Bullshit!”

The old egg placed his hand on his head: “Hey you, what’s with your attitude? You turn your anger like flipping a book. Listen, I have reasoning and evidence to back my theory…”

Suddenly, the personal devices of every armed soldier in the operational base flashed in red alarm. Lin Jingheng lifted his hand and interrupted him as he picked up a call from the command post and asked the operator: “What’s going on?”

“Commander, the post received an SOS signal from Superintendent William Yu’s mech. They were ambushed by a fleet of unknown mechs on their way back; the enemy has extremely high firepower that’s comparable to at least one fleet of interstellar navy, and the long-distance communication had already been disconnected.”

“Send me the coordinates of the last recorded signal. Turan, stay and watch the base, first to third teams follow me.” Lin Jingheng turned and got ready to leave, then added after a short pause, “Team four follow the itinerary of Monoeyed Hawk’s fleet, be mindful of everyone that he came in contact with along the way.”

Monoeyed Hawk’s fleet didn’t have many people and their mech formation followed the standard of personal guards. Their itinerary was very simple and under the radar. “One interstellar navy fleet” meant that there was a central heavy mech with a fully armed vanguard team and at least a few dozen highly mobilized medium to small mechs with powerful armour. If this wasn’t an accidental confrontation, judging from Monoeyed Hawk’s carefulness, he wouldn’t have purposely taken the fleet into pirate territory...that means it must be an ambush.”

The route Monoeyed Hawk took was completely random; those old folks might have their own agendas, but because they were used to solo missions they didn’t choose to talk about it with others;even the command post only knew a vague route, who would possibly know their exact locations?

And yet, having a full interstellar navy to greet a few old men seemed to be a little overdramatic.

Zhanlu asked: “Commander, what about Headmaster Lu?”

Lin Jingheng answered without thinking: “Keep it a secret, I’ll deal with it when I get back.”

Zhanlu: “Yes, sir.”

Lin Jingheng quickly made his way to the command post, and within moments, teams one to four filled with members of the Ninth Squadron and self-defense squad reported in.

Lin Jingheng waved at them to get on the mechs; his hand stopped in midair and then completely stopped its motion.

He let out a small grumble for about two seconds as if he was struggling on something, then finally let out a sigh in defeat and said to Zhanlu: “You...nevermind, contact Lu Bixing.”

## Ch 90 - We’re No Longer Fighters

The missles pierced through the dark space like shooting stars while a single dot indicating a mech on the communication channel disappeared. This was the third time Monoeyed Hawk made an emergency warp and felt the protection airbag crush into his chest; his vision turned black, and he almost fell off the mental network. His nosebleed rolled down as he thought, he really is getting old.

One more emergency warp and he could probably die on the spot.

197 years old, he was still barely hanging onto the definition of youth; there were no wrinkles on his face, no signs of balding nor gaining weight. He could still earn himself a few looks from pretty young girls walking on the street with his characteristic heterochromia and aquiline nose, foolishly buying into his looks without knowing that he’s almost reaching middle age.

He had already seen too many buildings being built and then fallen, people and memories walking into fire and then turning into ashes; after a century of letting himself free in the delusion of women and alcohol, both the muscles on his body and the fire in his heart left without a word. He was no longer the passionate young man that lived and bathed in blood and violence.

“Monoeyed Hawk,” William’s voice came up from the channel, “they’re chasing us down again!”

Their small fleet was made up of veteran soldiers of the old Independent Navy, a total of a little less than 20 people slipped into ten small mechs--some people had already forgotten how to pilot a mech so some mechs required two pilots to take turns for safety reasons.

When these middle-aged men came out of their caves, they left reminiscing the spring-flavored cup of wine under the peach tree, the decade of rainstorm in the night of the mortal world.[[1]](#footnote-1) They planned on lighting their own fire and bringing out their own pans for an overdue gourmet with old friends, only to find out that the rice bowls on the table were already cold--the reunion gathering turned into mindless overdrinking as these old men hold their bellies full of warm alcohol and cry. After recalling the high points of their lives, the only thing that’s left is just a cold floor full of chicken feather complaints with nothing else to say.

They were getting old; their dreams and aspirations shrunk down along with their muscles, and they realized they could no longer hold in a lie as big as the Eighth Galaxy.

While on their way back from this fruitless journey, these spiritless old men only managed to catch a nearby enemy fleet when they were less than 500 kilometers away. There was no way this was an accidental confrontation because with a fleet of this size, unless it was purposely concealed, regular merchant starships and mechs could detect its existence outside half a day of travel even without purposely scanning for danger.

Monoeyed Hawk ordered everyone to escape immediately and sent an SOS signal to Qiming the moment he discovered them. The enemy fleet waiting to ambush then fired without a warning and knocked down two of their small mechs within a blink of an eye. What’s more, the enemy refused to communicate and chased the small mechs down like a cat chasing down rats.

Nobody knew why the enemy wanted to ambush them nor where they came from, let alone who gave away their exact itinerary.

“No, they have a heavy mech with them. Heavy mechs can use transfer portals to do a wide-range scan, there’s no way we can escape! When can the backups come?”

“You look at the damn map yourself and tell me how far this damn place is from Qiming,” Monoeyed Hawk pulled his sleeves up and wiped the blood off his nose, “what shitty backup, even if they come they’ll only be able to make it when we’re dead, we can only rely on ourselves!”

“What are they even doing? Playing around with us?” Someone inside the channel asked, “Say, why don’t we make a strategic concession?”

Monoeyed Hawk snorted in frustration but couldn’t deny that this was a reasonable suggestion.

The old arms seller wasn’t some heroic soldier that would rather die than give in. Despite having a bad attitude that said otherwise, he was someone that will not hesitate to give in under extreme circumstances. As long as he lived, there was hope; that was his philosophy. He didn’t know who betrayed them yet and dying without knowing would be a regret for him. Besides, having old men like them bow down before a fleet like this to forfeit wouldn’t be considered shameful.

This place was not too far from the Old Fart’s underground passage outside the Eighth Galaxy--there were two major routes in his control. One route was from the Eighth Galaxy towards the space station that the Cayley pirates discovered on accident, and the other was from the space station expanding outside of the Eighth Galaxy. The Ninth Squadron had used the latter once in order to collect supplies. Both the old residents of the space station and the supplies on the station were slowly being moved to Qiming, and because Lin Jingheng had cleaned up the remnants of the Cayley pirates without a trace, there was almost no one else that knew about that underground passage outside of the Eighth Galaxy aside from a handful of people.

All the transfer portals in the passage were protected, and without a map it would be very difficult to navigate around it; perhaps they could escape there.

Yet, almost as soon as this idea came up in Monoeyed Hawk’s mind, it vanished silently. The underground passage was still quite a distance away from their location and was unfortunately in the direction of where the enemies were coming from. In order to make it over, they would have to face the enemy fleet head-on. With this old and crippled fleet, asking them to make another emergency warp would take their lives, breaking through a large naval fleet.

Monoeyed Hawk: “That’s actually not…”

Before he could comment, William immediately shot the suggestion down in the channel: “No way!”

Even if they were all part of the Independent Navy in the past, the members that made up the group were all from different parts of the Eighth Galaxy. The battlefields were all spread out in different places and most people had never fought side by side with their comrades. Monoeyed Hawk only had such a wide network because he was a merchant that spent years working with people, and the Independent Navy was more like a tool used to build relationships, similar to how people bring up shared alma maters in social gatherings.

Among the people that came out with him on this trip, only about two or three were Monoeyed Hawk’s old comrades, everyone else was either friends of friends or relatives of fellow veteran soldiers. All these strangers were only recently acquainted with one another after the outbreak of the mutated Rainbow Virus pandemic, so most people were still not quite courteous around each other and only William was thick-skinned enough to start talking to them without reserves.

William accused the person with just: “Did you forget the oath you took when you swore to become a soldier back then? If you want to be a coward, go ahead and do it on your own, but I won’t back down!”

The channel went silent for a few moments before countless mouths opened at the same time.

“Superintendent Yu, I understand how you feel, but we still have to look at the situation objectively here.”

“Are we going to push through if we don’t surrender? We can’t possibly make it!”

“A soldier will never surrender, but we’re no longer fighters.”

“Stop with this nonsense already. This is number 3 here, my pilot partner already knocked out and if we continue running like this I’ll be next; can y’all just be realistic here old fellas?”

“Number 4 needs to change pilots; my blood pressure is too high right now and I can’t handle it!”

Monoeyed Hawk cleared his throat: “Superintendent…”

William cut him off with a cold voice: “If they didn’t fire first and ask us to surrender, I might consider it. Except they opened fire on us first and knocked down two of our mechs, so did our four friends in there all die in vain?”

The Superintendent shifted the argument to morality and left everyone else speechless. They all secretly agreed that this William Yu might be a real dumbass; it was one thing if this guy wanted to die, but he was now waving around a flag of righteousness to force everyone else down with him. If they knew this would happen, they would’ve left him to die during the pandemic when he got infected.

At this time, the signal on mech number 6 flashed in the channel and someone by the nickname of “Grey Wolf” said: “I was the one that brought over the people on number 2 and 7, and the pilot on number 2 was my brother-in-law. I know you guys aren’t acquainted with them, but since it’s an emergency right now, let me say this in place of the dead--Monoeyed Hawk, we’ll deal with avenging the dead later, let’s focus on saving the survivors.”

Monoeyed Hawk was immediately knocked off his horse: “Yeah, you’re right. My condolences...missiles incoming, spread out!”

The crowd separated the moment he yelled the warning; then, a missile fired over like a ball of yarn being thrown out. This was a tracking missile that would automatically reroute after missing its target through an energy detection function. It swiftly changed its direction in mid-air and flew directly towards the closest mech number 9.

Within the split second of passing by the missile, Monoeyed Hawk detected the missile type on his mech as TOC-RV230, which was a model produced exclusively by the Military Council of the Union in Factory 6.

Monoeyed Hawk’s eyes widened, but it wasn’t time to think about who the enemy is: “What are you all doing, turn on your anti-missile functions! You all think you can run from a missile?”

Mech number 9 frantically turned on its anti-missile system and fired an interceptor missile to stop the enemy fire, but the pilot made a mistake under high stress and misfired before he could lock on its target.

An interceptor missile is different from an active missile; due to having system backup, the aim is automatically locked on through the computer, so the pilot only needs to send out a command to fire. Even a child can fire an interceptor without fail with some training. Monoeyed Hawk almost lost his mind over this and couldn’t imagine how this interceptor misfired.

The enemy had fearsome firepower and was well-equipped as if a god of war descended, yet the unreliable teammates of Monoeyed Hawk’s fleet couldn’t even fire a half-automated missile properly!

He recalled someone’s comment in the channel earlier---*we’re no longer fighters.*

They sure were in a laughable situation engulfed by complicated emotions.

The panicked number 9 mech was forced to sail around in circles by the tracking missile, so William rushed in and shot down the tracker with an interceptor. The missiles perished into ashes like a sandstorm in space.

Monoeyed Hawk thought: *What a waste of a missile.*

As the leader of the fleet, he decided to ignore the Superintendent’s complaint and asked to surrender to the enemy as what most people agreed to do.

He once again sent out a communication request to the enemy along with a special peace signal from his mech. Then, according to the unspoken rule of intergalactic warfare, they should all voluntarily disconnect from the mental network and hand control over to the enemy to prove their sincerity.

Before he could send out the order after delivering the message, this “middle-aged surrender-happy team” all disconnected from the network at once. The connection to the channel also cut off the moment they dropped out, and within a blink of an eye the only people left in the channel were Superintendent Yu and Monoeyed Hawk himself.

Monoeyed Hawk: “.... No wait, can’t you guys at least let me do a countdown before we jump off?”

William Yu spoke coldly through the channel: “150 years ago, I would have never imagined that I would kneel down and beg for my life with a bunch of cowardly comrades.”

Monoeyed Hawk didn’t want to argue with him and laughed bitterly: “Not even 150, if this was 100 years ago, I would also pick a fight with them until I’m dead--do you want to disconnect first?”

William fell silent as if he planned on fighting until the end. Monoeyed Hawk had no spare time to worry about him as the enemy fleet was already closing in and sighed: “Prepare to disconnect…”

At this time, mechs number 9 and 3 beside him suddenly changed course.

When pilots voluntarily disconnected from the mental network, the mech would become a pilotless drone; this control was clearly an act of a person, so the enemy must have already taken control of their mental networks.

William broke his silence and called out: “Wait, be careful!”

Monoeyed Hawk lifted his gaze to see number 3 and 9 accelerate like maniacs before he could completely disconnect from his mental network. The two mechs circled around each other as if performing a dance and suddenly crashed into each other without warning.

At the same time, the connection request Monoeyed Hawk sent out was once again denied.

Not only did the enemy refuse their surrender, but they also even planned on toying with this small fleet before killing them!

Monoeyed Hawk cursed and yelled into the channel: “Number 3!”

William understood the message and expanded his mental network simultaneously with Monoeyed Hawk to take over mech number 3. There were two pilots on the mech, who also noticed something was wrong and connected onto the mental network. The four men crashed into the human-mech port and fended off the enemy with their combined forces.

Soon after, Monoeyed Hawk and William both retreated as the pilots of mech number 3 regained control of their mech and turned to sail away from number 9 before they crashed again.

The others quickly caught on and frantically reconnected back onto their mental network after witnessing this mess.

Little dots began to reappear in the silent communication channel like fireflies.

As the decision maker of the team, Monoeyed Hawk couldn’t explain himself after causing such trouble due to his choice. He bit down his lips, sent the map of the underground passage to William and mech number 3, and passed through number 3 and 9 suddenly without hesitation. He opened the way with a missile and charged right into the enemy camp. The enemy fleet that surrounded them scattered and expanded their mental network range to trap him, but Monoeyed Hawk immediately opened fire at the enemy fleet.

William, after helping number 3 regain control of their mental networks, made an emergency warp while Monoeyed Hawk stole the enemy’s attention as if the two could read each other's minds.

After catching Monoeyed Hawk attempting to cover for his comrades to flee, the enemy troops reacted by expanding the heavy mech’s mental network over the surrounding transfer portals and relocated the two small mechs escaping the battlefield. They then split up evenly to chase after the mechs; Monoeyed Hawk heard a large crash coming from the side wing of his mech and proceeded to remove the damaged parts without a second thought. The next moment, the damaged part exploded while the backup energy system was also crushed by the enemy missile. Monoeyed Hawk accelerated his mech to the max under the firestorm, slashing through the enemy fleet like a sharp blade.

Because the position of the mechs made a drastic shift, the overlapping mental networks quickly moved away from each other. The small mechs that had their networks taken over by the enemy were suddenly relieved of their pressure. Two pilots who were still more abled quickly recovered their networks and made an emergency warp to a completely different location without any orders. They could then most effectively split up the enemy’s force by running off on their own, starting with number 4, number 7, then number 8….

The small gathering of eight mechs split up into seven different directions with only one small mech remaining inside enemy territory to contain the fire. Before these gangster-like small teams of mechs, the enemy troops also quickly responded by condensing their forces to split up and focus on capturing only one mech.

Monoeyed Hawk sent out a communication request earlier and SOS signal on behalf of his people and was now containing firepower, making him look like some sort of leader of the group. The enemy stopped firing their missiles and surrounded him; a powerful wave of countless particle cannons made its way toward his shield along with their invasive mental network, ready to capture him alive.

He gave himself a large shot of relaxant without any hesitation and felt every inch of his muscles getting ripped by knives. Yet his human-mech sync rate still dropped steadily.

There was a rumor that there was a guerilla warfare strategy the Independent Navy used in the past called the “wolf pack”--under absolute disadvantage, they would leave a small group of people as bait to run into an enemy fleet like a suicide team. They would contain the enemy fire and find an opportunity to make an emergency warp while others flee into different directions. If the enemy commander was careful enough, they would give up chasing after the individual mechs flee and take down the bait. After escaping, the ally fleet would retreat immediately and attack the enemy in the dark in order to let the bait find a chance to escape.

But these “wolf pack” strategies only remained in theory in most occasions. Emergency warping would send them off to faraway coordinates, and once the fleet formation was broken, the communication network would also cut off. Everyone that had been on the battlefield knew the feeling of making an emergency warp in desperation under fire, so anyone that managed to escape would peak their heads out like someone drowning, finally getting a breath of air. Unless the bait under enemy pursuit was someone that they must save, nobody would willingly retreat and save them.

How would you know an escapee will come back?

What would happen if you were the only one foolish enough to go back while everyone else fled?

In addition, if the bait was really someone that important, nobody would agree to let them take the position in the first place. Not to mention that the skill level required to fight solo against a full naval fleet was extremely high.

Either way, Monoeyed Hawk didn’t expect them to come back. Even if they did come back, would these old men’s physical condition and mech piloting skills possibly pull a high-level guerilla warfare against the enemy?

That’s why he sent out the map of the underground tunnel before they separated.

A decent life of approximately 200 years was enough, he had no regrets.

The armory sent out a warning: the missiles have been depleted and there is not enough energy to fire particle cannons.

It didn’t seem like the enemy was planning on completely wiping them out, Monoeyed Hawk thought optimistically, otherwise they could’ve just swept the fleet with a wave of high-energy particle cannons in the beginning instead of wasting too much time. Perhaps the enemy planned on killing them one by one, leaving a few to torture mentally and then using them as a hostage to negotiate with the people behind them.

But these people would never guess that the armed forces behind them was Lin Jingheng; this kid had a heart of steel that wouldn’t even blink at his own father being held hostage, let alone anyone else.

Monoeyed Hawk almost wanted to laugh as he thought about it and pitied these enemies wasting their efforts. His head throbbed in pain when the mech sent out an alert that the pilot’s sync rate had dropped to 51% and would be stripped out of the mental network very soon. Monoeyed Hawk’s vision began to blur; he habitually accelerated his mech while attempting to go through the music database inside the mech to see if there was the old anthem of the Independent Navy. Yet he was at the end of his rope and couldn’t even complete a simple task like that.

Human-mech sync rate 51%, 50%---

Alert, sync rate declining---

Alert, about to disconnect from the mental network---

Qiming was about 40 sailing days away from the coordinates of Monoeyed Hawk’s last signal location.

When Ares Von discovered Saturday’s little patrol team outside of the space station, the patrol team was less than 20 sailing days away from the station. Due to lack of skill with the self-defense squad, they were forced to travel through normal routes and took 20 hours before reaching the frontlines.

And if they took another 20 hours this time, then they were really going to fish up some corpses.

Therefore, the members of the self-defense squad witnessed for the first time what a “Union elite” was in their first battle alongside the Ninth Squadron after merging.

The former self-defense squad members all picked up a relaxant before departure and were only assigned as backup pilots. The entire main expeditionary force was made of soldiers from the Ninth Squadron; Saturday was completely dumbfounded when he saw the released itinerary. Normal routes would require passage through about 90 transfer portals, but their itinerary only had less than 30 transfer portals.

“How is this possible?” Saturday asked, “the distances between these portals are too far, and the energy within a portal isn’t enough to send us directly to the next one!”

“Have you heard of ‘cross warp’? Every mech today will have two extra backup energy sources because we will need to activate a similar control as an emergency warp the moment we pass through a transfer portal. The energy will overlap, and bam---” The pilot gave him a pat on the shoulder, “enjoy this rollercoaster ride, my friend!”

## Ch 91 - He Grabbed His Hand

The Silver Ten’s standard expeditionary mission was also inhumane when they were fully equipped with proper energy sources. Non-frontline soldiers and unqualified personnel were all required to take large amounts of relaxants prior to boarding the mech, and during the expedition, nobody--including the commander and all pilots, was allowed to walk around inside the mech. Everyone would be locked in their position with airbags, and due to the high-speed of the expedition, all mech-to-mech communications were required to be limited to simple command signals without words.

When Lu Bixing rushed over, his personal device still had the blueprint of the Eighth Galaxy’s new network opened.

Lin Jingheng was waiting by the entrance of the Model 3 and spoke up as he saw Lu Bixing show up: “You’ll need to be at your best physical condition to board the mech today, I can’t let you on even if you feel the slightest bit of unease. If you have any problems, stay at the base.”

Words passed through Lu Bixing’s ears like a gust of wind as he ran over, his chest feeling like it was about to combust: “Give me...give me a backup relaxant.”

Lin Jingheng gave him a good look before he nodded and walked onto the Model 3. The beast in slumber let out a deep grumble the moment he connected onto its mental network, and within five minutes the entire fleet was already on the launching deck in an orderly fashion ready to take off.

Lu Bixing’s racing heart slowly calmed down as he followed Lin onto the Model 3, but another sense of burning anxiety began to fire up.

Monoeyed Hawk wasn’t a textbook definition of a good father; his carefree attitude had him constantly out drinking and partying, setting a bad example for his son. He was never much of a father and naturally didn’t have much parental authority, and of course, never really guided Lu Bixing like a proper mentor figure.

But to a sapling, as long as the soil had enough nutrients to raise it along with sufficient sunlight and water, it could still manage to grow. Even if there wasn’t anyone around to cut its branches regularly, it could still grow naturally into a unique tree.

Monoeyed Hawk was like the rich soil for Lu Bixing. The young man didn’t need to look down and check the status of the soil to know that it was the source that gave him life. He knew that this person would be there for him when he was at his most vulnerable time in youth, and that strong sense of security was like the strongest shield supporting him from behind. The shield helped Lu Bixing back on his feet every time after his rehabilitation, and even repaired his shattered heart after the young child broke down before the faces of the monsters in the underground chamber.

Monoeyed Hawk’s communication with the base cut off immediately after the alarm was received; Lu Bixing was too scared to think about what it meant and could only forcefully distract himself by clenching his fist tightly until his touch numbed.

Lin Jingheng wasn’t going to console him, and fortunately Lu Bixing wasn’t someone that needed words of pity. The two quietly but swiftly made their way through the Model 3’s passageways into the main control room.

Everyone on the Model 3 was already in their position. Unlike normal times, the control room was filled with medical capsules like a bunch of cocoons. Once the mech passed through the first transfer portal, the mech’s airbag would fill up all the space outside of the capsules to provide maximum protection for all members on the mech.

Lu Bixing pulled back his gaze from Lin Jingehng’s back and closed his eyes silently as he accepted the capsule’s full-body scan and sterilization before stepping in. He began counting his breaths to calm himself down and thought, if he was anxious, he could’ve just said so at the base and worried about it himself. Now that he stepped onto this mech, he might as well distract himself with some other thoughts--for example, who would possibly ambush Monoeyed Hawk? Were they doing it for revenge from a personal vendetta? Or did they have other plans? Who could possibly have the power to mobilize an entire mech fleet?

A flood of ideas appeared and then disappeared in his mind that couldn’t form into a cohesive thought. As his mind raced, Lin Jingheng’s hand grabbed onto the cover of the capsule that was about to close down.

Lu Bixing stared at him dumbly. With an arm up on the cover, Lin Jingheng looked at him with a face almost as cold as the steel capsule cover, but Lu Bixing could tell that the former seemed to be struggling to say something. Unfortunately, Commander Lin wasn’t good at expressing his thoughts and ad libs are even more of a challenge for him. Lin Jingheng stared silently for a while before pulling Lu Bixing’s hand up and carefully releasing the young man’s clenched fist, then closed up the blueprint on his personal device that was still open.

For some strange reason, Lu Bixing almost felt his heartbeat escalating again after finally settling down with this small gesture. Guilt and insecurity once again filled his heart.

Lin Jingheng’s gaze lowered as he said in a gentle voice: “I’m right here.”

Lu Bixing grabbed his hand with a powerful force as if he wanted to squeeze through the commander’s flesh and bones.

Realizing he lost control, he loosened his grip and smiled at Lin Jingheng: “Commander, that’s pretty sly of you. Is this the rumored tactic to get into someone’s heart at their weakest time so you can trick them into selling their body to you?”

Before Lin Jingheng could answer, Zhanlu’s voice rang up within the Model 3: “Activating mech pressurization, engine system warming up, please return to your positions---”

He lowered his head and brushed his lips against the back of Lu Bixing’s hand, then closed the capsule cover.

The cover closed up and blocked both of their views. Lu Bixing let out a long sigh, feeling the corner of his eyes warming up.

After a small buzz, the vanguard team began to take off while the launching dock trembled slightly as the mechs shot up into the sky.

“Wait, what happens if we run into unexpected situations in the middle of this?” This was Saturday’s first time seeing such a formation and remained worried even after lying down into the capsule, “are we able to communicate in time inside this thing?”

“If you can’t tell, it’s impossible to communicate during emergency situations, so the pilot has to deal with it themselves.” A soldier from the Ninth Squadron beside him said, “didn’t you notice that the first pilot of every mech was at least a Lieutenant...Oh right, there aren't really any lieutenants and stuff anymore. Don’t worry young man, these people have been fighting more battles than all the meals you’ve eaten in your life, their coordination is like a pianist’s fingers.”

Even though Saturday and his crew had been running behind Lin Jingheng and calling him Commander, these uncultured Eighth Galaxy hooligans never truly grasped the concept of the Union’s Naval Commander. Though he knew what a “lieutenant” was; the smuggling control department between the border of the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy was a lieutenant. Due to his family background, Saturday had heard some stories about the lieutenant and knew that he was an old government official that spent most of his time sitting around his house.

Saturday was shocked and blurted out a dumb question that made him seem like an oblivious child: “L-lieutenants!? Do lieutenants also join in combat?”

The mech slowly lifted and landed on its track, then trembled slightly as it got ready to lift off. The soldier beside him laughed in response: “What’s so special about a lieutenant? You’ve been following our commander around for so long and still find a lieutenant amazing? Did you know that there are only 16 Naval Commanders in all of Union history? Is your impression of the Military Council just a bunch of chubby old middle-aged men pointing their fingers at everyone?”

Saturday was dumbstruck: “.... Are they not?”

“Of course not! If you gain weight or ruin your image, the media will have you in a chokehold while the public spread rumors about you. Only officials in faraway areas like this place would dare to be careless about their image. Even the 300-year-old Commander in Chief needs to watch his diet and figure in the Military Council.”

Saturday took a gulp and was rendered speechless by this rigid standard that even a top model couldn’t compare to.

“Of course, by the time you reach that status, glory is all in the past. Your main job really is to maintain an image, and Commander Lin is the only frontline commander left. He represents the Silver Fortress and manages all the military resources throughout the eight galaxies.” The Ninth Squadron soldier took back his smile and paused, then added, “Commander Lu Xin was given the title of Naval Commander back then because he reclaimed the Eighth Galaxy and rendered an outstanding service to the Union. Commander Lin was born in a peaceful era, and normally he wouldn’t have been able to reach this status with his young age and lack of experience. Aside from playing political games, the reason why he was able to claim the title was because the Silver Ten chose him.”

Saturday was an ambitious and smart young man; he knew that even though Lin Jingheng constantly tormented them, the fact that the commander merged the self-defense squad with the Ninth Squadron was also to raise the self-defense squad. The young man stared wide-eyed and listened closely while the mech warmed up on the track.

“The ‘Silver Ten’ got its name because we were stationed in the Silver Fortress and split into ten different sub-fleets based on our functions. Before it was known as the Silver Ten, it was the number one interstellar mercenary fleet of the universe before the NSC Union was established, called ‘Phantom’.... uh, you can take it as we were the strongest space pirates. At the end of the war, we acknowledged the Union’s Pledge of Freedom and stood at their side, even witnessing the legal establishment of the Union government. But mercenary fleets weren’t domesticated animals, so Phantom refused to be under control of the Military Council. At that time, the Union needed support from all parties and couldn’t give an empty check to their supporters, so they could only sign a treaty with us. In other words, while other navies worked directly under the Council, we were only hired by the Council as partners; this is the history of the Silver Ten.”

“Within 276 years, the Union went through countless changes; many people died, many people changed, but every generation of the Silver Ten followed their tradition and promise. Unless you retire from the military, otherwise nobody is allowed to leave the Silver Fortress outside 10 sailing days unless there is war. We swear to never keep personal arms, never to expand our forces; we vow to give up all of our freedom to fight for the Pledge of Freedom. The only right we reserve as the Silver Ten was that we can refuse the orders of our direct commander and operate autonomously under the Captains of the ten squadrons. We haven’t acknowledged many commanders throughout our history; Lu Xin was one, but ever since the Union recovered the Eighth Galaxy, Lu Xin began involving himself with the overall management of the Military Council. He felt that having the Silver Ten only accepting his orders would prompt suspicion of raising a private fleet, so in order to avoid complications he announced that he will no longer manage the Silver Ten directly.”

The cover of the medical capsules lowered and blocked Saturday’s view. Before the view in front of him completely disappeared, he took a last look at the soldier’s face and felt as if there was a slight hint of frost covering his expression.

The sounds of the airbags releasing rang up as Saturday heard the soldier say in a nonchalant tone: “Now that we’ve reached this point where we turned against the Union, I can say that it was because the Union was the one that ripped up the Pledge of Freedom first…”

A thunderous booming sound covered his voice as the airbags released and filled the mech. With the Model 3 as the central commanding ship, the fleet of mechs shot through the atmosphere like a ray of light toward the first transfer portal. Even without a word between each other, each mech remained in their position as if they were all part of each other’s bodies.

Saturday felt as if his entire body turned inside-out the moment they passed through the transfer portal as his back glued to the wall of the capsule. He had a sudden hallucination that his body was being slowly ripped into pieces, and this fear was intensified by the dark and small space within the capsule. Saturday pressed his nose to the oxygen hole and took deep breaths to suppress his urge to scream in terror.

He couldn’t imagine how the pilot could remain so calm and concentrated under the same situation; he thought about it for a while and suddenly felt that these elite soldiers were much scarier than he had imagined.

It had been many years since Monoeyed Hawk had experienced the desperation of getting slowly forced out of his mental network. Right before he disconnected, he could almost hear that ancient war anthem in his ears--

*We came from the cape, the mountain ranges faraway*

*In the land abandoned by starlight, we lit the beacon fire of freedom*

*We heard…….*

“We heard….” Monoeyed Hawk’s lips opened slightly as he mumbled the lyrics he almost forgot throughout the years, “the storm roaring…”

He realized something at the moment and turned to the dead silent channel in disbelief. A muffled singing voice began filling up the empty channel until it became clear; the song playing was the most wide-spread version back within the Independent Navy. This version had no special remixes, and the complex tones were meddled down to become almost flat at the harmony as people’s voices blended in an unorganized manner, rough yet sincere.

*We heard the storm roaring, blood burning---*

A small mech that escaped suddenly appeared behind the pirate fleet and fired a missile towards the enemy. It was hard to tell whether it was pure luck or an actual skillful aim, the missile hit a mid-sized mech’s armory right in the bull’s eye.

The enemy clearly came prepared with plenty of ammunition as the armory self-destructed. Yet the explosion disrupted the formation on the side of the mid-sized mech, and before they could react another small mech jumped out of another transfer portal and fired a round of indiscriminate particle beams. The beams shot through the remnants of the exploded armory and missile, forming a storm of deadly objects flying into the enemy fleet. At the same time, the person that fired the shot cried into the communication channel: “Footsteps are advancing, flags are falling…. Ah, my friend--”

Another voice interrupted: “Grey Wolf, you’re so off tune you’re heading towards Wolto!”

Before the Grey Wolf could respond, number 6 ran off and disappeared into the transfer portal once again and left the channel with his nightmare-inducing singing voice.

Soon after, numerous small mechs that had already disappeared into trackable distance from Qiming’s base popped up like grasshoppers from different directions and began carrying out a guerilla tactic against the enemy.

The enemy fleet maintained its ground, but due to the sheer size of their fleet, they couldn’t move around freely. They were like an elephant being tormented by ants, growling in anger without a proper way to counterattack.

Monoeyed Hawk’s vision blurred for a second---they came back!

But what are these losers doing here!?

Shouldn’t these old skeletons that need hypertension medication after two emergency warps hide behind their tails and wait until their lives end inside a cave?

They really think they’re heroes for remembering the lyrics to a song!

Monoeyed Hawk struggled to find the medical capsule and shoved his arm inside for a second shot of relaxant. His muscles twitched in pain along with his bone-cracking sound; he let out a howl and maintained his sync rate with the mech at an average about 60% and ran headfirst into the enemy fleet. The mech sent out a shield damage alert as a wave of particle cannons and missiles flew by him, and at that moment Grey Wolf’s number 6 mech reappeared from another transfer portal as he continued with his off tune singing: “Ah, my friend…”

It had been too long since he entered the battlefield, and the sudden adrenaline clouded his thoughts as he ran straight into the line of fire.

The harsh stream of fire stopped his mech inside the transfer portal. The ten missiles left in his armory were caught in fire and began to self-destruct after a violent tremble, taking along the mech’s energy reserve. Due to the high risk of blowing up a transfer portal through high-energy waves, the mechs surrounding the portal all dispersed after receiving the warning on their mechs. Monoeyed Hawk fired one last interception missile and slid through the cracks of the enemy fleet and escaped the ambush while rushing towards the transfer portal Grey Wolf was stuck inside in a deadly gamble.

Inside the channel, the song playing from someone else’s mech continued.

*Ah, my friend--*

*Follow us; break your shackles, raise your sails.*

Monoeyed Hawk won the gamble. The self-destruction power of mech number 6 wasn’t strong enough to cause a portal explosion, and in the last second, he made his way into the portal as the remnants of the explosion scratched past his damaged shield. Small bits of collision fire sparked on flammable gas from one metal piece to another and disappeared in a disorganized fashion like an off-tune music score.

Monoeyed Hawk saw William’s mech number 10 the minute he escaped from the portal; the two men connected briefly through the communication channel.

Monoeyed Hawk asked quickly in a husky voice: “Does everyone have the map to the underground passage?”

William said: “We sent it out!”

“Let’s go then, don’t meet up!” Monoeyed Hawk said, “We’ll each find our way over!”

The SOS signal Lin Jingheng received from them was sent around this area, and as long as the person they sent over wasn’t a fool, they would avoid the enemy and come through the underground passage. If there was even the slightest chance possible, could they manage to survive until backup arrives?

William suddenly asked in the channel: “The only people that knew our exact itinerary were the old friends that came along with us on this trip, right?”

“Of course,” Monoeyed Hawk could taste the salty sweat rolling into his mouth as he yelled, “fuck that bastard, if I find out who this traitor is, I’ll kill their whole family even if I become a damn ghost! They’re following us, split up!”

The two mechs passed by each other at their maximum speed. The connection between them was like a long and thin thread that was pulled to its limit until it cut off as the two disappeared from each other’s sight.

William passed through another transfer portal and noticed that Monoeyed Hawk took most of the pursuers to his side. He passed through a few more portals as if playing hide and seek until his surroundings became quiet. According to their promise, he should be making his way towards the underground passage once he escaped from the enemy’s pursuit and wait for his comrades to come.

He enlarged the map that Monoeyed Hawk gave him to cover the entire wall of the cockpit. Each individual dot indicated a protected portal like stars in the sky that was directing him to safety.

Those Union Naval Fleets that saved the Eighth Galaxy from the nightmare of the Rainbow Virus in the past also came in through underground passages, William thought.

He studied the map for a few moments and began fixing the map.

When Superintendent Yu was still in the Independent Navy, he was a scout soldier that scouted countless routes and had a hand in fixing hundreds of Military maps. Even if he hadn’t touched them in over a century and felt his skills already going down to Commander Lu Xin’s grave, he was still able to fabricate a map based on a real one.

After he completed this task, he sighed and entered a line of coordinates through the network of the nearby transfer portal. It was all the coordinates of planets and space stations they passed by along the way. The long-distance communication quickly connected under the song of the Independent Navy, and William’s coordinates appeared in several signal posts within selected areas.

People that caught the signal at the posts immediately reported to the higher ups, while about two dozen communication screens appeared before William. There, faces of strangers appeared on the screen along with some old friends scattered in different parts of the galaxy, as well as the traitor that was secretly working behind their backs.

William silently replayed the spatial recording captured by the military recorder on the mech; from the time they were ambushed, to Monoeyed Hawk volunteering himself to be the bait as others escaped, then to the escapees returning, Grey Wolf being caught in the frontline, and everyone broke out of the barricade…

If this was a “wolf pack”, this was probably the dumbest bunch of wolves in history.

Williams' hand trembled as he sent out the SOS signal and the fake map he just created. The song of the Independent Navy reached the end inside this empty mech.

He readjusted his coordinates and sailed away according to his fake map.

If there really was a traitor among these old friends, the enemy will soon receive the fake information and chase after them through the map.

But...what about the others that received his SOS and coordinates?

*Will they continue to watch on the side?*

*Will they return to their cave and pretend they never received the message even after hearing the song?*

William didn’t know. He thought, perhaps he wouldn’t be the person that would carry the Eighth Galaxy with his own hands.

He was only an average scout.

It was as simple as that.

## Ch 92 - Our Enemy is Approaching

Monoeyed Hawk wasn’t like Lin Jingheng and didn’t have the bad habit of taking relaxants like coffee, it had been years since he last suffered the side-effects of relaxants in high dosages. After the muscle twitches passed, he felt his nerves tense up again as his lungs were strangled like a tight rubber band. Every breath of air he took in turned into a sharp pain in the chest, forcing him to lean down and relax his breathing.

As his head spun in discomfort, he noticed something strange about the situation---the enemy pursuit stopped.

When he separated with William, most of the pursuers followed behind Monoeyed Hawk. A few teammates from his own fleet showed up in the middle of the chase and wanted to help take some pressure off his shoulders, only to find out that the enemy seemed to be completely set on solely targeting Monoeyed Hawk.

The transfer portals around the area were not protected, so no matter where Monoeyed Hawk went, the heavy mech was able to scan his location and chase after him. All of Monoeyed Hawk’s spare energy sources were sacrificed during the confrontation with the pirates earlier, and it was hard to tell how long his mech could last with the little energy left. Under these conditions, the only logical explanation to why the enemies disappeared was they voluntarily gave up the pursuit.

*Was this a trap?*

*Did karma hit them and destroy their commander?*

*Or did the entire Eighth Galaxy’s spacetime screw up and summon the Ninth Squadron over here?*

The communication channel was completely silent. Nobody else was around him, and there was no way for Monoeyed Hawk to know what was going on.

Knowing the other party’s coordinates or leaving a message in a transfer portal for someone to actively receive it were the basic requirements for connecting long-distance telecoms. While on the run, the former was impossible to accomplish, and the latter was a blatant suicide-move.

Monoeyed Hawk passed through several portals while questions raced through his head, and after a few rounds with no signs of pursuit, he finally confirmed that the enemy lost interest in him and slowly made his way towards the underground passage.

The silent communication channel finally received some signals after he passed through the first protected portal. Someone else already arrived.

“Monoeyed Hawk is back!”

The crowd cheered every time a new dot appeared within their channel.

“Number 4 and 8 are here too, this is number 3.”

Monoeyed Hawk’s shoulders dropped as he slid down from the control panel and fell onto the ground. He pressed onto his throbbing rib cage and answered the channel: “This is number 1…. number 6 is down.”

The channel went silent for a few moments. Four mechs represented by four flashing dots in the channel neatly organized into a rectangle in space.

Among the ten mechs that came along their journey, three were confirmed to be annihilated, and others that weren’t here already were unknown.

Monoeyed Hawk let out a sigh: “Sorry folks, you’ve already done your deed by helping me out of that situation, none of you deserve to go back into that mess again.”

The pilot on mech number 4--that old man with hypertension issues, spoke up: “We wouldn’t have come out with you originally if we just left you there. Don’t worry pal, we don’t have any other plans.”

The pilot on number 8 interrupted: “We’re both old and single anyway so we have nothing to lose, only Old Bay here might have some regrets.”

The pilot on mech number 3 was the oldest among them, everyone calls him “Old Bay” even though it was hard to tell if that was his actual name or a nickname.

Old Bay laughed: “Don’t worry about me, remember how I said I saved up a bit of money? I already took my wife and kid to the Seventh Galaxy back in NSC 216.”

The channel grew lively with people joking and complaining about him being a traitor of the Eighth Galaxy.

“The Seventh Galaxy sure was nice. Streets were filled with service robots that were ready to help you out even if you just tripped over a pebble. Everyone had houses and a respectable status there, and regardless if anyone was acquainted they would greet each other on the streets. But y’all know what the best part was? The pedestrian streets and main roads were separated into levels, all the cars were autopilot...can you imagine? They never have to worry about car accidents there!”

Monoeyed Hawk asked: “That’s not bad, why did you come back then?”

“I had no choice, the currency exchange rate for the Eighth Galaxy was 106:1. On top of that, there was a limit to how much you could exchange in a day; with all of our assets combined, our family could only exchange 5,000 coins a day, it was not enough to survive. Their exchange system was also built for ease of management and bans individual transactions, so we could only rely on black banks. Black banks were run by immigrants that exploited their resources, the highest exchange rate was up to 2800:1 with no upper limit--of course, you can call the police and report the illegal activities. The government would immediately send out robot security over to destroy their black market, but what’s the point? You still need money to survive, and since all those black-market sales are on the same boat they can find out who called the cops. Once you’ve been ratted out, you’re done for; don’t even think about getting any money from their hands for the rest of your life. Native residents of the Seventh Galaxy enter the protection of Eden the moment they’re born, but immigrants are different. Installing Eden was like suddenly giving you a new organ transplant out of nowhere and requires time to adjust to it. You will need a professional to help you make the adjustment in a year-long course, and everyone’s responsible for paying their own training fees, which was extremely expensive. If I put down my entire family’s assets in the Eighth Galaxy, I would be left with virtually nothing after paying for my immigrant application and training fee. You’re able to request a full refund to return to your old citizen status within a year, so I returned my status and left my wife and kid there while I came back here to make some money for them.”

“Why don’t you find work in the Seventh Galaxy?”

“What can I do? The Seventh Galaxy isn’t like this damn place, AIs took over all physical labor and service jobs. Work that requires actual people is already scarce, and once they find out that you’re an immigrant nobody will hire you.”

Monoeyed Hawk asked: “Is your family still well during these times?”

Old Bay stayed silent for a while before he answered: “When the pirates invaded the Union, they wanted to smuggle back to the Eighth Galaxy to stay with me. They ran into a battle between the Union troops and pirates on their way over and were caught in the crossfire; the communication was completely cut off back then so I didn’t find out about this until a month later, and by that time it was already too late...so now I don’t have anything left like the rest of you. It’s nice to finally have something to do in a time like this where life and death are only a blink of an eye apart.”

Then, another mech appeared on the channel. The crowd cheered again after number 5 joined in and washed away all the sorrows from earlier. A reunion after a separation of less than a few hours was as dramatic as decades worth of a family reunion.

Next was number 9, which ran into some troubles. Perhaps the pilot was at a constant state of high alert for the entire time, before they could say anything after the mech joined the party, the pilot knocked out and disconnected from the network. The backup pilot didn’t take over the network in time and was too busy trying to save the primary pilot, forcing the mech to fly out of control off to a distance. The five mechs that were waiting inside the underground passage rushed out to capture it and safely dragged the poor mech back in place.

Old Bay asked: “We’re just missing Superintendent Yu right? What’s taking him so long?”

Monoeyed Hawk took a quick glance. It had already been six hours since they separated, but there were still no messages from William even though he should’ve already made it to the meeting spot way before Monoeyed Hawk did. After a few hours of rest, his mental and physical state slowly recovered to a point where he could analyze the situation calmly. Recalling the pursuers’ strange actions, his heart began to sink.

“Let’s wait one more hour,” Old Bay suggested, “If he doesn’t come, or...we can’t possibly wait forever.”

Nobody objected and they waited for another hour, but there was still no news from William.

Monoeyed Hawk said: “Let’s extend another hour, maybe something delayed him.”

They waited for another hour with no avail.

This time, nobody else spoke up as if there was a silent consensus among the six mechs to wait for their comrade for eternity.

After Monoeyed Hawk and his team left Qiming, they had made stops on 16 planets and space stations to pay the residents a visit. Some places had small military bases, others managed a whole city, but the most powerful among them was an ex-soldier of the Independent Navy called “Tiger Shark”. He managed a small planet with a population of six million people and claimed the title of Top Minister after the war broke out.

Everyone they visited welcomed them passionately with a grand party comparable to pre-war times, almost giving Monoeyed Hawk the delusion that he was still living in those days where he bathed in wine and pleasure from day to night. Yet once they began the talks, it was clear that everyone had their own reserves about the Eighth Galaxy going independent.

At this time while Moneyed Hawk and his group waited endlessly inside the underground passage, William Yu’s little personal speech broadcasted throughout those 16 communication posts he visited.

William piloted his own little mech down the path on his own fake map and began his speech through his personal device: “My name is William Yu, born in NSC 63 and joined the Independent Navy in October of NSC 136. I was one of the first scouting soldiers of the Navy, and later joined the Union Government of the Eighth Galaxy as a cop, then made my way up to be the Superintendent of the Eighth Galaxy’s Law Enforcement Department…”

He was like an awkward stand-up comedian performing through a loudspeaker on the side of the street, with nobody stopping to pay him any attention. In the busy street of people walking by, he fell deep into his own little world.

William explained why he decided to join the Independent Navy in a boring fashion, talked about his mother and younger brother that died from the Rainbow Virus, outlined his old dreams, spoke of his life-and-death situation during the latest pandemic, and even added Prime Minister Edward’s grand outline for the future of the Eighth Galaxy. As he was about to discuss public health and education, his words stopped abruptly--the enemy fleet that suffered a “wolf pack” attack earlier silently blocked his path.

Monoeyed Hawk was right, the traitor was among the people they visited during this trip. William turned and glanced at everyone that was connected in the long-distance channel and knew that the traitor here already leaked his coordinates and map to the enemy. As for the “friends” that received his SOS signal, they were still waiting by the underground passage like a bunch of hamsters huddled up in fear.

William chuckled and sent out the recording of the ambush earlier as he continued: “In NSC 239, I had a chance to join a government-sponsored exchange program and was sent to the Sixth Galaxy for training. Perhaps I did pretty decently back then so they offered to let me stay and bring my direct family over as immigrants. I only needed to turn in an application and the Sixth Galaxy’s Police Force Headquarters would pay for all my immigration fees. I spent a long time thinking about it and completed my application form. Just as I was ready to turn it in, I received a letter from the old Prime Minister. He was Minister Edward’s predecessor and had already passed away...he told me that he just came back from a meeting on Wolto, Commander Lu Xin is currently fighting for more political authority for the Eighth Galaxy. The Fleet Commander of the Union is still fighting this battle for us, how can we run away for our own benefit? I didn’t sleep the whole night after reading the letter and deleted that entire application on my personal device, then returned to the Eighth Galaxy. My lover broke up with me because of this and hasn't contacted me in 30 years.”

William placed the recorder back in its place and turned his face towards the long-distance channel.

“I’m extremely regretful.” He said to his audience, “returning to the Eighth Galaxy was the most regrettable decision I made in my life.”

He turned off the channel after he finished and skipped the closing line, then turned his engine up to the maximum as all the missiles fired out towards the enemy fleet. He was like a little ant carrying its tiny pincers as it charged forward into a flood.

There was no way these missiles could hit the enemy; the defensive mechs on the side of the fleet easily intercepted these missiles while the heavy mech’s large mental network pressed down onto William’s mech. A violent attack shot through the human-mech port and knocked the sync rate down from 70% to 55% within 20 seconds.

He was still at least ten thousand kilometers away from the enemy fleet at this time.

William wanted to run right into the enemy fleet and self-destruct in hopes to deal some damage, but even this suicide attack might just be another daydream for him. He spent his whole life daydreaming.

The sync rate fell to 51%, and William activated the self-destruction system at the very last minute.

Soon after, darkness consumed his vision as he was knocked off his mental network. The damage to his brain shocked him into a coma, and by the time the enemy that took over the network noticed, the self-destruction system was already irreversible. Before they could send out a warning, the countdown reached its end and the small mech exploded into a little firework in space.

Flammable objects on the mech quickly perished into dust while the dark universe swallowed up all its remnants. The pieces of the mech floated away in a rush like the ashes of the late soldier.

The moment William’s connection cut off, some of the signal posts that received the SOS finally acted.

Two armed bases sent out their fleets, then a planet sent out around 20 small mechs and merchant ships immediately after. At the same time, with this small planet’s signal post as the central communication, a new long-distance network spread out among the other planets and space stations within the Eighth Galaxy---

“Backup from Fann is ready to sail towards the target coordinates, we have 20 mechs and three supply ships. We estimate we can pass through the transfer portal and arrive on site in 20 minutes.... are y’all fucking dead or just eating shit?”

“Satellite KD’s military base is still alive but we don’t have many resources, only six small mechs. We’ll head over to the target coordinates in 20 minutes.”

“New York Self-Defense Force is prepared, we’re on our way to the target coordinate.”

“New York 6 Satellite here, we just saw you take off. We don’t have mechs but supply ships are on their way--”

That small explosion finally reignited the dead cinder within the Eighth Galaxy; the ancient battle song blew out an imperishable wind that carried the sparks of flame until it turned into an unstoppable wildfire, spreading rapidly through the empty and vast starry sky.

Yet the igniter can no longer see it. His fire had already perished in the sea of anguish.

His friends had been waiting for almost six hours in the underground passage. Monoeyed Hawk couldn’t wait any longer and started scanning through the nearby transfer portals in an attempt to catch any signals. Using transfer portals to send out long-distance signals will expose William’s and the underground passage’s coordinate, so logically the superintendent wouldn’t do this, but what if....

Monoeyed Hawk caught a weak signal that wasn’t directed to them but was leaked out of the network from the transfer portal.

He attempted to contact the signal with their team’s passcode but was refused by the other party. His heart skipped a beat--it wasn’t one of them.

Normally, only a large-scale communication will have leaked signals, so it couldn’t possibly be that shady enemy fleet chasing them down. Monoeyed Hawk hesitated a little before he subconsciously entered another passcode--the abbreviation of the Independent Navy. The next moment, he successfully connected onto the long-distance signal.

Monoeyed Hawk’s heart raced. The signal was too weak, and after the chaotic hide-and-seek with the enemy fleet earlier, his mech’s signal amplifier already turned into space waste: “Which one of you guys still have a functioning signal amplifier?”

Number 8 immediately turned on its amplifier, the rest of the team held their breaths and listened to the choppy sounds that came out of the signal.

“They dispatched their troops?” Old Bay was in disbelief, “to...to save us? But how did they know...did the superintendent send our coordinates to them?”

Monoeyed Hawk interrupted him” “Even if they are here to save us, as long as the coordinates are sent out our enemies would still be the first to arrive, be careful!”

Everyone tensed up at this one sentence; however, this anxious atmosphere only lasted a short while until silence once again took over their surroundings without any trace of abnormal energy waves.

Soon after, someone spoke up from within the weak long-distance signal: “We’ve arrived at the target coordinates and caught abnormal energy sources; chase down the source immediately!”

The entire group stared at each other in confusion as Old Bay asked: “They said.... captured what abnormal energy? Where’s the target coordinate? It can’t be our location, right?”

Someone else then added within the channel: “I heard that Superintendent Yu used to be a scouting soldier back then, he was in charge of editing military maps.”

The channel fell silent for a second, then mech number 1 suddenly sailed out.

“Where are you going, Monoeyed Hawk?”

Monoeyed Hawk didn’t respond. They didn’t have a heavy mech and couldn’t do a long-distance scan in their current location, so they had to rely on the old method of physically following the weak signal to find its source.

The rest of the mechs followed him out of the underground passage without a word.

The ambush fleet that forced William to self-destruct had their own spy within the galaxy and received the information before those weak forces of the Eighth Galaxy dispatched their troops, so they were already prepared to transfer before anyone arrived. Although the total number of backups that sailed out wasn’t a small number, the forces from the various planets and satellites were all small mechs and teams that didn’t pose much threat to the ambush fleet. The fleet easily disposed of two small teams on their way to escape without thinking much of their targets.

The commander on the heavy mech of the ambush fleet sneered: “Just a bunch of weak old dogs barking at us, kick them away.”

“Yes, sir!”

The ambush fleet fired out a wave of missiles towards the blocking team of small mechs. These small mechs sailed away and attempted to counterattack a few times with no avail.

Suddenly, a wave of particle cannon shot out of a nearby transfer portal and hit the heavy mech’s shield. The shield blocked off the low-energy attack as the commander of the ambush fleet heard someone report to him: “Sir, that’s the target mech from earlier!”

“Good, I’ve been worried about how to find them and now they decided to show themselves. The commander laughed, “go after them!”

At the same time, the backups from the Eighth Galaxy also saw the mech: “That looks like Monoeyed Hawk!”

The scattered backup forces immediately attempted to gather up but were still too slow; Monoeyed Hawk’s team charged forward like a bloodthirsty army of ants attempting to eat up a prey many times larger than them. The ambush fleet responded like a beast ready to swallow their enemies and chased down the small mechs as they covered their surroundings with layers of heavy mental networks. The backup troops frantically followed behind Monoeyed Hawk in fear of being left behind.

Mechs number 4 and 9 disconnected from Monoeyed Hawk’s channel and got swallowed up by the enemy’s ambush. Monoeyed Hawk fired his last particle cannon towards the enemies behind him, the human-mech sync rate once again fell below minimum requirement and was about to break off---

At that instant, the dark space was lit up by a blinding light that pierced through his mental network. Monoeyed Hawk stood in shock.

The next moment, the ambush fleet’s heavy mech turned unnaturally as its armory disconnected from the main body. Its mental network was hacked in for a full second.

As the armory floated away, a missile shot right through it and destroyed the formation of the ambushing fleet.

A ghost-like armed fleet appeared out of a transfer portal without a word. Within the blink of an eye, the fleet stood in between the ambush fleet and Monoeyed Hawk’s team like a powerful guardian.

After 14 hours of travel from Qiming to the frontlines of the battlefield outside of the Eighth Galaxy---

## Ch 93 - The Backdoor on the Biochip

It was as if this fleet descended from the heavens and struck everyone by surprise.

Without a greeting, the Model 3 released a capture net toward Monoeyed Hawk and dragged the small mechs into its large body.

Monoeyed Hawk frantically shifted gears to sail into the capturing net: “Wait…”

He shifted gears too rapidly and overloaded the gravitational balance inside his mech. The protection airbag shot out and filled the interior of the mech, knocking its pilot to the wall.

The small mech was locked onto the Model 3’s launching deck immediately after a rough landing that almost sparked fire on the tracks. Monoeyed Hawk fell out of the airbag’s cushion and yelled: “Which one of you in the Ninth Squadron is this, are you fucking from the same family as your damn boss Lin Jingheng?”

After the air pressure readjusted, a row of medical capsules rolled into the launching dock and carried away all the old and exhausted pilots. Then, the soul of the heavy mech, Zhanlu’s voice rang up in the broadcast.

Zhanlu said in his robotic voice: “It’s a relief to see you in such good spirits, Mr. Lu. Please allow me to first pass on a message from Headmaster Lu. He’s been waiting outside the medical chamber for a while and would like to give you a hug right now.”

Monoeyed Hawk was taken aback by this news and pressed his lips down: “Oh, why is he here too?”

Zhanlu didn’t answer his question: “Next, here’s a message from Commander Lin. He said ‘look at the way you’re running away so pathetically with just one fleet of enemies, maybe you should take your retirement life easy.’”

Monoeyed Hawk didn’t expect Lin Jingheng to come to his rescue and wasn’t prepared to bite back at this taunt, so he could only swallow his frustration and shock like a cat drenched in water glaring at the person responsible for getting him wet.

The enemy fleet chasing after Monoeyed Hawk retracted their forces in shock and turned back in an attempt to escape. Giving up on the hostages they were about to capture, they turned to see the backup forces from the Eighth Galaxy firing at them in a short confrontation.

The guerilla forces were clearly no match for an organized navy and suffered a great damage within the short confrontation.

“Commander.”

Lin Jingheng: “They’re in the way, sail pass them.”

Two small teams of mechs flew by the two sides of the enemy fleet that was stopped momentarily by the Eighth Galaxy forces. Like two sharp blades slashing across its prey, the two teams from the Ninth Squadron sailed past the Eight Galaxy forces and charged right into the enemy’s formation.

A 360-degree round of particle cannons opened fire simultaneously with the mech as its central point, creating a sphere of deadly line of fire as the mechs sailed into the enemy fleet.

Saturday, who was watching the battle on the mech, stared wide-eyed at this formation--this high-speed attack was nothing like he’d ever seen before. Every single mech was precisely located at the deadend of every cannon shot like a perfect rubix cube; even the slightest mistake here could cost a comrade’s life.

Every nerve on Saturday’s body stung as if he could feel the horror of getting caught in friendly fire in the midst of this battle.

Yet, as this breath-taking line of fire shot out and pierced through the enemy fleet like a sharp knife, the organized fleet instantaneously broke down into pieces. The Ninth Squadron’s formation was perfectly executed with no mistakes while a silent signal interception was sent out at the same time.

Lu Bixing waited in front of the medical chamber as he monitored the communication networks of both the enemy fleet and their own; this was a skill he copied from the AUS after paying a visit to their headquarters, and it was the first time he used it in combat. “The signal tracking is very precise, the accuracy of overwriting long-distance signals is above 99.5% and uses less than 16 cals of energy to activate, perfect.” He said.

The enemy’s communication cut off and the fleet formation fell apart within seconds. This seemingly organized fleet was stripped of its facade as the heavy mech was stuck within the center of the fleet. The surrounding mechs sailed around frantically without direction and could only pretend to maintain its threatening presence before the Eighth Galaxy backup forces.

Another small team beside the Model 3 sailed out without a sound during the mess and split up into two different transfer portals. The two small teams then rounded back towards the enemy fleet and stopped right in front of the enemy’s vanguard mechs, shot a wave of particle cannons to disrupt the vanguards, then followed with another wave of missiles.

Firing missiles into a group of small mechs gathered would yield a deadly result. Any mech that got hit and self-destructed would create a chain reaction of explosions within the group from its aftershock, causing an extremely high-density explosion within a short amount of time.

Tonight, a bloodthirsty coven may have led the way for the ambush fleet, but they failed to catch the danger creeping up behind them. The result was a bloody festival on a quiet night.

It took only the blink of an eye from the Ninth Squadron making its appearance for the enemies to drop their guns; before Monoeyed Hawk’s team could react, the fleet that chased after them was already an eagle without its wings. The commanding heavy mech couldn’t wait until their technicians repaired their internal communication and made an emergency warp to escape, leaving the rest of its fleet behind.

Unfortunately, they were not the only one with a heavy mech this time.

The scale of Zhanlu’s network was unmatched by any average heavy mech. The moment the enemy made their emergency warp, Zhanlu expanded his network through the transfer portals and covered the area of their escape. Unable to run from Zhanlu’s network, the enemy mech suffered another wave of strong mental network attack the moment they landed and knocked the pilot out. Before the backup pilots could regain control of their own mental network, the gravity system and backup energy supply were both removed from the main body of the mech, causing another moment of panic. Soon after, a team from the Ninth Squadron followed up immediately with three missiles that hit the tail of the heavy mech, knocking off the launching dock from the main body.

The air inside the mech leaked out of the hole that was the launching dock mere seconds ago and disrupted the air pressure. In addition, without the artificial gravity inside the mech, everyone inside was thrown around the interior like ping-pong balls by the protection airbags with no time to put on a proper space suit. Many of the people inside the heavy mech fell out into the deadly space environment while the limited ecopods left on the mech were taken by the selfish commanders and operational personnel. While the people left behind frantically crawled into the ecopods, Zhanlu’s network locked on its targets before they could make their escape.

Immediately after, the Ninth Squadron released their capture nets all at once and while skillfully avoiding scraps of waste in space, captured both the people exposed in space and the ecopods out of the heavy mech.

The Ninth Squadron swept the battlefield like a violent storm, short yet deadly. The backup forces from the Eighth Galaxy retreated 10,000 kilometers away as they watched this heavily one-sided massacre in awe.

Soon after, they received a communication request. The backup forces accepted the request in hesitation only to see a warm and friendly looking young man appear on their screens: “Good evening everyone, I am the director of the special wartime planning committee. On behalf of the Union Government of the Eighth Galaxy, I thank you all for choosing to side with us during times of crisis.”

His voice was like a soft spring wind that blew gently through the battlefield, only to pave way for deadly missiles following behind him. No missile misfired as the remaining enemy fleet was being cleared out one by one in the background as the young man spoke. Lu Bixing gave his short pep talk about collaborating and working together for a better future in the Eighth Galaxy without giving any mind to his violent surroundings, passing on homemade cookies of hope to all of his dumbstruck audience...even if the cookies all had smog and ashes on them.

While Lu Bixing was busy passing out his cookies, Monoeyed Hawk struggled out of the medical capsule and broke into the Model 3’s control room with an arm over his injured rib-cage: “There’s a traitor among us, they must have news from us already so we can’t let him go!”

Lin Jingheng didn’t even bother lifting his gaze: “Worry about yourself first, who said you can walk around on your own? You sound like you need a….”

Lu Bixing rushed out immediately after finishing his speech: “What are you doing out here, old man!?”

Lin Jingheng pulled his sneer back and turned his head around awkwardly as he swallowed down his “you need a leash” comment.

Monoeyed Hawk wasn’t in the mood to nitpick the commander’s attitude and said: “I heard a lot of planets and stations sent out backups, but if I was the traitor I’d also send out some backup to pretend I was on their side. This traitor must be one of the last ones to dispatch their navy with more mechs than supply ships because the former would be much easier to sneak into the battlefield…”

A Ninth Squadron soldier connected over to the Model 3 before Monoeyed Hawk could finish, “Commander, team 4 is currently tracking all the backup forces from the Eighth Galaxy. Five minutes ago, a mech fleet left the small planet Heart of the Ocean. This planet declared independence not too long ago and witnessed that one of the government official’s mech was among the fleet that sailed out, should we siege them?”

Lin Jingheng glanced over at Monoeyed Hawk. The older man’s face was half covered by harsh shadow from the lighting inside the control room, his eyes completely blank as if he was a wax statue.

Lin Jingheng remarked, “Siege and capture them alive.”

“Commander, the fleet that ambushed Mister Monoeyed Hawk’s team had equipment and supplies from the Union, these are the newer models that came out before the war broke out. The hostages also have biochip ‘opium’ injected into their bodies.”

“Are you surprised? We’ve blocked them off from entering the market here plenty of times already, it’s about time they send out a force to test our military.” Lin Jingheng lifted an eyebrow, “but wasn’t opium supposed to significantly increase mental strength? Look at how pathetic they are even after getting an artificial boost, just how garbage were they before?”

“Tiger Shark from the Heart of the Ocean declared independence half a month after the war broke out and immediately placed three laws into effect. One of them prohibited residents of the planet from leaving the atmosphere and cut off all ties from the outside. All visitors were not allowed to come near the planet within two sailing days distance, so the fact that he welcomed you all into his base was likely a trap.” Lu Bixing quickly flipped through the data Zhanlu provided and picked out the important information for Lin Jingheng and Monoeyed Hawk, “the energy waves we’ve captured around the Heart of the Ocean had been very suspicious; even though they only have a population of six million, it was likely that the planet contained massive military supplies and arms. Hey dad, I remember this guy; he used to do business with you and was also an arms merchant.”

It wasn’t too hard to understand; you can’t have two big fishes in a small pond, and perhaps Tiger Shark chose to use opium for its ability to strengthen his soldiers. Perhaps his ambition and ego were too great to bow down to a weak ‘Eighth Galaxy Government;’ he planned out this dangerous ambush by buying power from the Union.

Monoeyed Hawk staggered a bit as he stepped up and dodged Lu Bixing’s attempt to help him up.

It was truly a strange feeling; the two young men before him both had some connection to Lu Xin that reminded Monoeyed Hawk of that person whenever he looked at either one of them.

When he saw Lu Bixing, he remembered the century of friendship and could feel his heart soften into a pillow that could make him forget all his life's worries and frustration.

Yet when he faced Lin Jingheng, he remembered the anger and grievances during the Crisis of Wolto. His heart would grow a layer of hard metal shield with thorns that stabbed him sharply from the inside, empowering him with rage and pain.

Now that Superintendent Yu perished into dust, his old ‘friends’ all fled away for their lives, he needed this anger to help him stand up on his feet.

Monoeyed Hawk said in a low voice: “Tiger Shark and I are brothers that went through life and death together. We were once stuck inside a mech together and floated endlessly for at least 50 days.”

Lin Jingheng answered without emotion: “Even if you two spent months in the same uterus together, it wouldn’t explain anything. Zhanlu, find a dark corner for the old man, he needs to cry and whine for a bit.”

Monoeyed Hawk: “....”

Lin Jingheng knocked all his weakness with one harsh hammer to the point where he couldn’t even spew out a punctuation mark. In frustration, he could only release his anger on someone else: “Lu Bixing, that damn head of yours is absolutely fucking hopeless!”

Lu Bixing, who just got dragged into the mess as collateral damage: “......”

City of Angels Fortress.

The head guard frantically attempted to walk inside Lin Jingshu’s office, only to be stopped by an AI secretary and be informed that the lady had a guest in her office.

The head guard had no choice but to wait outside impatiently for about an hour. Sweat rolled down his face as he walked around in circles until he finally saw Lin Jingshu lead her guest out.

Lin Jingshu courteously walked her guest out of her office, looked up to see her guard and nodded slightly to let him in. The guard might have been tall and presentable on the outside, but he was a coward that would sweat a river anytime he ran into small inconveniences and was not a very dependable person.

The good news was Lin Jingshu didn’t need to keep a wolf beside her. She asked: “What is it?”

The guard closed the door and answered in a hurry: “Madam, ‘the Eagle’ was completely annihilated.”

Lin Jingshu turned her head slightly in an expression that was hard to decipher as she asked gently: “How?”

The guard cleared his throat anxiously as he watched her expression, more sweat rolled down his face as he answered: “The Eagle recently got in contact with a small warlord in the Eighth Galaxy who claimed that the people sieging our products were the people called ‘the Eighth Galaxy Government’. The government just happened to send out diplomats to make talks at the same time, so the Eagle decided to take this chance to take these people as hostage and pry some information about the Eighth Galaxy government out of them...but who knew that a random fleet jumped in the middle of this...they….”

Lin Jingshu held her chin up with her palm and asked innocently: “A fleet of demons and ghosts?”

The guard’s throat rolled as he answered in hesitation: “...the Silver Ten.”

A hint of surprise flashed across Lin Jingshu’s face for an instant, then she turned her head down and giggled slightly as if she just heard a joke during a party.

Chills ran down the guard’s spine as he saw her smile. He instinctively wiped the sweat from his hand on his pants, then opened up his personal device and projected a military recording onto the office wall: “I have two videos here. The first is from the military camera from the Eagle’s heavy mech, the recording was sent real-time to us.”

Lin Jingshu watched her subordinates get captured by the enemy and sighed: “If I knew they were such garbage, I wouldn’t have given them such high-end equipment. It’s not cheap to buy from the military factories.”

“Madam, the Eagle is as strong as a standard military fleet, they only lost because the enemy is too powerful. If you look at the level of this assault, it could only be…”

Lin Jingshu interrupted with a carefree tone: “I don’t care, I don’t understand anyway. If you lose you lose, garbage is garbage, you don’t need to give me all these excuses. I need someone to pay for my mechs, I can also take lives if there’s no money. You can use your own or a pretty young girl’s life, I’m not picky.”

The guard’s face turned pale as he struggled to say: “There’s…. there’s one more video, please...you must take a look….”

Lin Jingshu looked at him for half a minute with her clear eyes. She smiled in satisfaction as she saw the guard’s legs tremble in fear and said: “Sure.”

The camera from the second video wasn’t very clear and looked as if they were looking at something through someone else’s eyes with very limited perspective. Whoever the person was, they were clearly being carried away and couldn’t walk properly.

“People on the Eagle who carried arms were injected with chips that are slightly different from the average opium,” the guard said anxiously. “According to your orders, we need to be able to control them at any given time so we kept a backdoor on the biochip that can allow us to hack into the chip under special circumstances. We can then share the senses of the person carrying the chip and artificially manage their hormone level.”

Lin Jingshu nodded her head patiently and didn’t interrupt him. She scanned through the enemy’s mech through the hostage’s eyes with slight interest. She even lifted a fascinated smile when she saw that the greenbelt of the heavy mech was filled with little mushrooms.

“The enemy blocked out the biochip’s ability to send out signals but doesn’t know about this backdoor, so we received the recording of what the Eagle’s commander saw on the enemy mech right before they removed his biochip.”

All the soldiers on the mech stood upright like properly trained personnel, sending an air of cold but stern order within the mech. Lin Jingshu’s expression grew slightly more serious as she watched the recording. Then, the people dragging the hostage stopped; the hostage shook a little as the camera panned upwards when the hostage lifted his head.

A man quickly walked by the hostage while a soldier beside the man reported something to his ears. As the man walked by the hostage, his gaze passed the hostage for a few moments as if he was looking at someone standing behind the hostage. Soon after, a robotic arm appeared from the floor of the mech and attached itself onto the man’s shoulder.

Lin Jingshu froze on the spot like a lifeless puppet.

## Ch 94 - Reborned at the Edge of Civilization

*Impossible*, she thought.

She watched the last remaining recording of the Jingyuan spaceship getting blown into pieces by a pirate attack millions of times.

The moment she received the authority as the temporary spokesperson of the Eden Committee's Director Board from the old Gordon, she personally went through all of Eden’s database and checked the time and place that person perished with her two eyes like an obsessive madwoman.

She could even recite those complicated interstellar coordinates perfectly from memory.

This must be fake.

Genetic cloning was prohibited within territories under Eden’s control, but it didn’t mean the barbarians in the Eighth Galaxy and outside the Union wouldn’t do such a thing...it was possible this wasn’t even a clone and was simply a copied artificial being.

A nuclear bomb of rage exploded within Lin Jingshu’s heart. She clenched her teeth too tightly in the mouth to the point she could taste a hint of blood.

*How could they, how dare they!?*

But Lin Jingshu wasn’t someone that avidly expressed emotions on her face and after years of suppression, she could no longer take her cold mask off. Therefore, no matter how much of a storm remained in her heart, she could only suppress her rage silently behind a facade. She subconsciously tapped her guard’s personal device to obtain control and replayed the video on the wall.

This time, she took a much closer look at the man’s face.

For many years, Lin Jingshu liked to collect all news and articles about the young commander even if the majority painted the man in a negative light. Though to her, even these slanderous words the media came up with were fun to read; it didn’t matter whether he was truly a supervillain or rebellious asshole, the young commander’s existence was the last piece of comfort for Lin Jingshu.

Lin Jingheng was only a name, a photo, a vague image to the public; but in her heart, he was a living person. She had traced out every detail of his existence countless times in her mind, from his aloof and cold demeanor, apathetic attitude, and even the way he walked. Sometimes she would think about how if she was willing to change her personality and do a little plastic surgery, she could transform herself into a second Lin Jingheng.

That figure inside the recording was too familiar.

The stone wall inside Lin Jingshu’s heart began to collapse as she looked at him through the screen for the second time.

Even if it was just an artificial man or a clone that made an exact physical copy, was it possible to replicate the same soul?

Also...that robotic arm.

Lin Jingheng never displayed Zhanlu out in public; even when he needed to bring Zhanlu out, he would let Zhanlu mingle with the guards and soldiers in human form since nobody could tell he was an AI. In contrast to the other well-known mechs, Zhanlu was a very mysterious mech that only ever appeared as a giant heavy mech in public.

Lin Jingshu was one of the few non-military personnel that had seen Zhanlu’s core body.

She remembered that was the day Lin Jingheng was appointed the top commander of the Silver Fortress. After the official appointment ceremony, there was a political banquet among the higher-ups of the different departments in the Union Government. The Eden Committee was keen on getting onto the good side of the young commander and brought Lin Jingshu to the banquet, who was still in school as a sociology researcher at this time. She didn’t know how to deal with such social events back then and only stood awkwardly in silence as she reunited with her twin brother for the first time in years.

The guests of the party courteously gave the twins time for themselves, but because Lin Jingheng really had no idea what to say, he ended up introducing Zhanlu to her. Despite knowing Zhanlu was just an AI, he was too human-like that Lin Jingshu was taken aback a little at first. She wore a knit-jacket that day with her school’s logo embroidered on it, and Zhanlu kindly transformed into that robotic arm symbolizing “technology’s impact in transforming society” on the logo of her jacket.

This was probably the one little secret the twins shared between each other since childhood.

She didn’t know that Lin Jingheng changed Zhanlu’s default power-saving mode to that robot arm. She also didn’t know how her brother escaped the Heart of Rose that year and completely erased his existence from Eden. She didn’t know why he was in the Eighth Galaxy, why he didn’t choose to come back, what he was planning, if he was living well over there...she didn’t know why he refused to spare a few words to her even if they were just hints that he was still alive.

*He’s still alive*, Lin Jingshu thought, *he’s in the Eighth Galaxy.*

For a short moment, Lin Jingshu felt as if something stabbed her numb heart. The pain in her chest amplified and began to throb violently as if new flesh was being churned out from a rotting corpse. That realistic pain almost gave her the delusion that she was still alive with a heart.

She lifted her eyes in awe to meet the guard’s timid gaze.

Lin Jingshu’s conscience was immediately pulled back at that instant and realized that the man before her was both fearful and anxiously waiting for her reaction.

“Lin Jingheng is still alive” --this was a powerful piece of information that would overturn the entire war.

And no matter what he was doing in the Eighth Galaxy right now, coming out to personally deal with a fleet like the Eagle himself proved that he had very limited resources on hand right now.

Lin Jingshu quietly glanced at the small mirror at the corner of the desk to make sure she didn’t express any signs of weakness on her face. She was an Azure Sea that once bloomed under the spotlight where every detail of her petals was exposed under the gaze of countless eyes, so she was used to covering herself up with a strong facade.

She cleared her face of all emotions within a matter of seconds and turned off the recording on her guard’s personal device. She sat behind her desk like a delicate doll, then lifted a cold smile: “What is this? The excuse you found for yourself?”

The guard opened his mouth: “Madam, this person in the video…. don’t you think he looks…”

Lin Jingshu’s sharp gaze pieced through his bones. The guard knew that if he uttered the name “Lin Jingheng”, the security AI in front of the door would immediately come for his head.

“If you’re here to anger me, then you’re quite successful.” Lin Jingshu said, “Who gave you this idea?”

The guard understood what she meant after a short pause and cried out in panic: “No, I didn’t plan any of this, Madam. How could I possibly do such a horrible...horrible thing...just to place the blame on others? Besides, how could I possibly get a hold of Commander Lin’s DNA? Please believe me, I…”

Lin Jingshu lifted her eyebrows slightly and interrupted: “Who else could it be if it wasn’t you?”

She was slender and pale like a delicate porcelain doll, her snow-white neck long and thin; how hard would it be to snap it in half? But the guard was still afraid of her. The closer he gets to her, the more he could smell the rotting flesh and blood on her. There was something about Lin Jingshu’s aura he couldn’t quite explain, like a vague silhouette of a ghost in his nightmares that will grin at him as it commits a horrific act before his eyes the next instant.

Lin Jingshu asked him again: “If it wasn’t you, who else could it be? Hm?”

The guard: “I... I’ll go investigate right now…”

“You better go,” Lin Jingshu said, “I don’t care what method you use; I will send this clone back into its grave. I also want to know how his DNA information leaked out of the Union and who made his copy. I want you to chop down every hand that had touched him; if you can’t get this done, you will pay with your own--”

The guard shivered in fear.

“I am going to thoroughly investigate and take control of the Eighth Galaxy.” Lin Jingshu twirled a piece of her long hair with her fingers, “from now on, I need you all to dispatch extra troops into the Eighth Galaxy.”

“Madam,” the guard said, “we really can’t pull out many profits from the Eighth Galaxy, we shouldn’t be wasting too many resources and energy on…”

Lin Jingshu lifted her head and looked at him with a blank face.

The guard continued: “If we do that, our profits and sales will take a hit in the near future, we’ll be experiencing a great loss.”

He knew that if their plan failed, this woman before him will not reflect on her own mistakes and instead put the blame on him.

Lin Jingshu asked: “A loss? How so? Did the first round of opium sales in the military not bring in any profit?”

The guard lowered his head and said in defeat: “We’re still in the experimental phase, and we’re still 15 days away from the first biochip replacement. It’s hard to tell how many returning customers we will get...and you should also know that we need to be extremely careful when selling opium to the military and even within the City of Angels, otherwise the higher-ups might notice…”

Lin Jingshu smiled at him: “That won’t happen. Did you know that it’s virtually impossible to obtain legal mood stabilizers in the City of Angels now? Even my sources are useless now, that’s why everyone is finding their own ways to get in touch with the black market. Some ‘rumors’ say that certain places in the black market have already developed a ‘partial Eden’ system with just one tiny biochip. Now everyone’s desperately trying to find these biochips with all of their resources.”

The guard caught the unspoken words from her mouth and covered himself in another layer of cold sweat. He realized that this madwoman had more than one outlet for smuggling drugs; in fact, she had a spider web of connections, and he was merely one of the many connections she had…

Perhaps even a disposable connection.

Lin Jingshu placed her cold fingers on his wrist and said: “I will not allow anyone to pretend to be Lin Jingheng. This man is a fake, and the fake must die; do you understand what I’m saying?”

The guard had his doubts before because the man in the video looked way too similar to Lin Jingheng, but as soon as he received the stringent order from Lin Jingshu, his doubt was quickly replaced by fear and anxiety. He didn’t have the guts to ask how she was able to tell the man in the video wasn’t Lin Jingheng, but he knew that she wouldn’t have ordered for murder if she had even a tiny bit of doubt. Perhaps there really was some unexplainable connection between the twins.

The guard’s heart was filled with worry from the impossible task that Lin Jingshu just assigned him and subconsciously accepted the idea that the man in the video was a clone. *It’s impossible to create an exact replica of the same person even using the same DNA*, he thought, *this is a fact that even ancient Earthlings knew, who’s the idiot that would do such a thing to Lin Jingheng?* Now that the devil has been angered, he had no choice but to clean up the mess.

He stood without a reaction for a while until Lin Jingshu picked up the cup of hot tea on her desk and splashed it on his face.

After a loud scream inside the otherwise quiet office, the guard took a few steps back with his hand over his reddened face from the burn.

Lin Jingshu: “If he doesn’t disappear, then you’ll perish in his place, understood?”

The guard took a few heavy breaths in as he held in his pain, unable to refuse her order. He nodded in response and quickly made his way out of Lin Jingshu’s office.

Lin Jingshu sat elegantly behind her desk. A refined lady of noble background must always watch her words and body language; she was taught to never make small gestures and should always present herself like a Renaissance painting.

But at this moment, she really wanted to curl up in a ball because it was simply too cold for her.

A cleaning robot walked into the office and cleaned up the water on the floor in silence. Lin Jingshu watched the robot motionlessly. To those beasts that live in solidarity, showing weakness was the most fatal mistake it could make. Therefore, they would always choose to hide their pain and never express any weakness to the outside world.

Lin Jingshu looked at her reflection in the mirror as if she could see the ending of the story.

She slowly fixed her lipstick and turned on the heater inside her office.

*The City of Angels sure is a chilly place*, she thought.

While the shadow of the abyss loomed above the skies of the Union waiting to swallow up its prey, the limbo that was the Eighth Galaxy experienced the first wind of Spring blowing over its deserted land for the first time in centuries. Seeds of miracles began to sprout in the dead field.

Superintendent Yu’s last speech was the wake-up call to his muddling comrades, and the Ninth Squadron’s heroic feat on the battlefield was like a shot of relaxant that cleared the clouds above the galaxy’s head.

Rumors already began to spread before the communication within the galaxy recovered.

Countless soldiers that had once obtained medals from the military stood back on their feet as the battle song of the Independent Navy played from afar. The perpetually anxious leaders throughout the Eighth Galaxy were frantically looking for the live recording of that legendary battle that swept through the galaxy in hopes to find a new shield to hide behind. As for the people who were struggling to survive throughout the galaxy, rumors of being able to exchange living necessities with work on planet Qiming were like a small ray of light in their miserable lives.

Prime Minister Edward took his newly formed advisory team out for an extra two weeks of overtime work and still couldn’t finish processing all the loyalty pledge requests to the new government from all the planets and stations throughout the Eighth Galaxy. The structure of the new government was still under construction, but Lu Bixing received a gift of resources to carry out his project rebuilding the Eighth Galaxy’s communication network. Technicians and engineers from various planets and stations became the first group of people that worked for the new government for nutrient syringes.

Despite being a wasteland, the Eighth Galaxy still had skilled engineers, especially spatial construction workers and engineers from artificial planets. Their skill level was beyond Lu Bixing’s expectations; for centuries, these nameless people were the engineers that built the foundation of the average man’s life. If it wasn’t for them, those heroes that pilot mechs around in flashy space battles wouldn’t even have the chance to fly out of the atmosphere, as a cosmic ray could destroy everyone on land without a protection layer around the planet.

Unfortunately, without proper planning and management, these engineers were stuck doing basic repair jobs simply to make ends meet. They were essentially not any better than an average civilian and could only sit around everyday trying to figure out how to buy their next meal.

Now, the entire Eighth Galaxy gathered like moths to the light called Qiming under the lure of “high pay” as people crawled out of their caves for the first time. After organizing into a fully functional engineering team, the members could even complete all the details of the blueprint on their own.

The network’s repair progressed at a speed faster than Lu Bixing could ever imagine, and by the end of April, the Eighth Galaxy’s new network was completed. April 30th, NSC 276--a day before the Union’s Independence Day, Woltorian time 12:00 P.M., everyone’s personal device throughout the Eighth Galaxy received an automatic update notification simultaneously. The update took a total of 40 seconds, and after the update, the official Eighth Galaxy channel passed through the dark alleys and corners of the galaxy and turned on inside everyone’s personal devices. Prime Minister Edward presented his first speech as the head of the new government as well as the new constitution of the Eighth Galaxy. Within three days of the speech, countless private military and organizations within the galaxy announced their decision to join the new government, then connected into the centralized executive system and economy. The census survey began almost immediately while private arms were being turned into the government as soldiers and veterans joined in the Eighth Galaxy Self-Defense Force.

The chaotic streams finally returned to the main current and flowed down in a unified manner, the soils on the riverbank began to reappear as fertile land.

May 15th, NSC 276. The new government finally recognized the century-old Independent Navy as a legal military force and acknowledged it as the predecessor of the Eighth Galaxy Self-Defense Force. In the Milky Way City, the new government building and central plaza completed its construction under the work of around 300 robots. The statue of Commander Lu Xin that was once thrown out by Wolto returned to the side of the central plaza near the entrance. After returning from over 30 years of being stardust, the face of the hero remained unchanged as he was reborn at the edge of civilization along with the ruins of the former Eighth Galaxy.

The small city of Milky Way transformed into the Wolto of the Eighth Galaxy. Residents cheered and danced by the statue to celebrate the completion of the new plaza, complete with a full band playing music in the background. Lin Jingheng, who liked his peace and quiet, ran into Monoeyed Hawk inside a new bar that opened up inside the plaza. They exchanged a cigarette and a glass of wine and surprisingly didn’t bicker for once. Monoeyed Hawk didn’t bring up stories of Lu Xin, and Lin Jingheng didn’t explain the acts of ‘betrayal’ he did in the past.

It wasn’t until night rolled around and the crowd outside began to disperse that Monoeyed Hawk finally opened his mouth: “The production lines around the galaxy have recovered slightly, but it will need at least another year before they can match up to modern industrial standards and expand to the point where each planet can sustain themselves. The military supplies we collected before are almost out.”

Lin Jingheng put out the fire on the cigarette and hummed in response.

Monoeyed Hawk: “We’ll need to deal with this soon.”

Lin Jingheng lifted his eyes: “What, Bixing’s engineer team is coming back soon, so you want to send me away?”

Monoeyed Hawk’s eyes twitched.

Lin Jingheng stared at him for a while and laughed. For the first time, the sneer and taunt in his smile disappeared as a rare hint of mischief from a young man appeared on his face. Those clouded grey eyes turned to the statue in the plaza bathed in the light of the dusking sun.

“Put it all on his tab.” Lin Jingheng pushed the old man towards the cashier and strolled out of the bar.

## Ch 95 - I Didn’t Know You Were This Kind of Person

There were two main missions for the engineering team this trip. First, they needed to collect data regarding the status of the four planets that were blown up by the Cayley pirates and check the state of the surrounding areas. Second, they needed to fix the interstellar routes of the galaxy and inspect the transfer portals. During times of war, the security and defense of a territory were of the utmost priority. The initial plan was to establish a few more military stations within the Eighth Galaxy so that the armed forces from the closest station could react real-time when they received an alert, avoiding another 14-hour long expedition backup delay. Due to the lack of resources and size of available troops, Captain Elizabeth Turan personally joined the trip in order to ensure careful initial planning of the stations.

After a long trip working in space, everyone from the guards to the engineers all grew a shade paler than before.

On the way back from the mission, Captain Turan’s frustrated voice overtook the broadcast within the mech: “Professor Lu, the mech’s steer positioning is malfunctioning right now, what’s going on!? What did you nerds do to my precious child last night? I can’t believe you guys would mess with a moving mech, are you all just sexually frustrated from being out so long!?”

Lu Bixing poked his head out from his small room in the second floor of the mech and scolded his students sternly: “White, was it you guys again? Such troublemakers, go help Captain fix it!”

White: “.......”

The small academic term of the students got extended because Lu Bixing decided that their “preliminary mech” warranted further research to fully realize

That same night, Lu Bixing took over the pilot’s seat of the mech. The brave Professor Lu personally took over the mental network as he let the students take apart the mech’s engine and motherboard in order to analyze the human-mech port in real-time. Halfway into the lecture, Lin Jingheng connected into the mech’s communication channel and interrupted the lesson. Sold by love and desire, the professor ditched class halfway through to talk to his commander and left the half-opened mech to the four students.

The poor students had no choice but to clean up the mess after their teacher. Rickhead covered White’s mouth and dragged the child that couldn’t read the atmosphere back to their self-study.

Lu Bixing adjusted his clothes and walked towards the small bar inside the mech. He nodded towards Hope, who was watching with amusement from the side, and smiled: “Kids these days sure are getting more adventurous, I apologize for the noise.”

The Ex-prophet of the AUS, Hope, was also on this mech.

This middle-aged man played a pivotal role in helping to obtain the vaccine for the mutated Rainbow Virus; a service of this scale was worth more than a few years of jail time even under Union Law, so there was no more reason to lock him up.

Hope was well-aware of his situation and didn’t expect someone like Lin Jingheng to express gratitude. While the commander released him from imprisonment, it wouldn’t be surprising to the ex-prophet if the commander came in with a newfound reason to sentence him to death the next day. Therefore, Hope released a handful of the more civilized followers of the AUS and accepted the strict supervision of the military. Aside from bathing and taking restroom breaks, miniature securities followed him around from day to night, showing that he remained at home when he had no business outside and always took public transport assigned by the engineering team. In addition, he even began to manage a farm with his knowledge in agriculture and helped reform the plantations in the Eighth Galaxy.

The AUS’s eco-friendly farm fields were the result of years of careful research that maximized agricultural production and had a unique standard for production quality and efficiency of delivery. Security basic necessities such as food and clothing was the first problem the Eighth Galaxy had to tackle, and Hope’s job this trip was to collect the first sample of products from these farms to bring back to Qiming for quality inspection.

Hope returned a smile at Lu Bixing and handed the young man a glass bottle filled with a thickly colored liquid: “It’s wine I made. It hasn’t been filtered so it doesn’t look particularly appetizing, but the taste isn’t bad, would you like some?”

Lu Bixing graciously accepted his offer. According to the map, they had less than a day until they returned to the base. Ever since the incident with Monoeyed Hawk’s fleet, a chain of work filled his schedule with no time to spare. Lu Bixing was busy rebuilding various aspects of the Eighth Galaxy with his team, while Lin was like a mercenary flying around everyday. Their schedules hadn’t been able to match up for a while as the two ran around with numerous tasks on hand. Lu Bixing hadn’t seen Lin Jingheng in person for quite some time now, and the excitement of finally being able to see his commander lifted his spirits to a point where he could crank out a microphone and sing on the spot; even if Hope offered him dirty water from the restroom, he was sure he had the mood to drink it down without complaints.

He immediately noticed the unique taste after a small sip and found the wine surprisingly good despite its looks. Lu Bixing was an extroverted person that would never hesitate to give out praise and said: “This is really good, do you have more?”

“Different bacterias, different grains and even the slightest difference in climate will change the flavor of the wine, so every sip is unique,” Hope said, “I still have a bit, but it might taste slightly different than this bottle. If you don’t mind, I can send you two bottles when we return.”

Hope was quite a speaker himself. Every word that came out of his mouth would reflect his own morals and ideals, even a small talk with him could become another missionary attempt if he wished.

Lu Bixing pretended to not notice the hint behind his words and said: “Don’t worry, I grew up eating condensed nutrients so I’m not too picky.”

Hope nodded: “Even though nutrient syringes and packs have taken away the joys of tasting food, it certainly has saved many lives.”

Even though nutrient syringes and meal packs were significantly healthier to the human body than normal food and were ideal alternative food sources in the military, they undoubtedly changed the human habit of consuming natural food. They were always popular subjects criticized by food lovers and technology critics, but Lu Bixing didn’t expect that a prophet of the AUS would acknowledge these food alternatives and looked at him in slight shock.

“Did you think we were all sociopaths that deny the advancement of society?” Hope chuckled slightly and then immediately let out a sigh afterwards, “I can’t say you’re wrong, many people in the organization certainly are like that and reject technology for the sake of rejecting. They don’t bother looking at the reasoning behind it. Anything that forgets its initial body of thought and reasoning to step into the realms of extremism will always lose its original purpose.”

Lu Bixing wasn’t sure how to comment--- wasn’t the AUS just an extremist religious cult?

“In the beginning, we simply wanted people to stop for a moment and reflect on themselves so that they don’t walk straight into destruction due to their conceit and rashness.” Hope said, “human civilization may seem like an indestructible fortress, but it’s closer to a broken ship that will fall into the darkness of the abyss if you can’t constantly maintain a close eye and steer it in the right direction.”

Lu Bixing nodded in agreement: “For example, right now.”

“Like the world right now,” Hope said, “in the great Interstellar Era where human souls are being swallowed by Eden. The awesome interstellar heavy mech can carry an armory deadly enough to destroy a planet while everyone is fighting amongst each other, while we all walk towards destruction. You see, no matter which side anyone stands on, everyone will fall onto the same dusty ground at the end. This is why we are against weapons of mass-destruction, against artificially manipulating natural order, and against relying too much on man-made products.”

Lu Bixing took another shot of rice wine. It was the first time he tasted homemade alcohol; the liquor was gentle to the tongue but filling in the stomach as it warmed his body. The aftertaste wasn’t as sweet as the initial flavor and instead carried a hint of bitterness, but this was also what made it unique.

Hope continued: “Look at how great the Union’s Pledge of Freedom was, yet in less than 300 years, before a modern man’s life could end peacefully, the Pledge is now in shambles. Why? Is this not related to the fall of Eden? The moment Eden was destroyed, people immediately began to spread drugs in place of it. I’ve heard that the drugs are starting to make their way into the Eighth Galaxy; there will be more lives lost and families broken in the future, is this not a result of human intellect? We’ve already heard the bells of the underworld, yet we still refuse to repent and continue to sink deeper into purgatory. While it’s true that some madmen have obtained respectable status in our organization, is the Union not also mad? Is Eden not also mad? You can’t assume that the madman is normal simply because his voice is the loudest and has a sizable following.”

“You have a point,” Lu Bixing nodded in acknowledgement. “Perhaps you’re right, perhaps you’re wrong; or maybe in the eyes of the future generations, you all had some foresight of the moment. But in the long chronicle of history, you will all become short-sighted fools to people in the future. History is a long stream that has a different view from different angles. I don’t know if I should agree with you because living 300 years is already my greatest feat, I don’t have enough time to give you a solid conclusion with all the years in my life.”

Hope: “You’re being quite humble.”

“I can’t help it,” Lu Bixing laid out his hands, “my job is to continuously fail and get inspired with new ideas, then repeat the cycle as I reject my own ideas. After a while in this job, you’ll notice that you’ll start to grow less concerned about what’s right or wrong. It’s probably an occupational disease. At the same time, I do think faith is a very wonderful thing. Especially in a time like this where we face a change in our lives every five to ten years but are blessed with a lifespan of 300 years. Faith can protect your morals so that you don’t lose yourself to the world.”

“I’m quite impressed that Professor Lu could think this way.”

“But Mister Hope,” Lu Bixing asked, “let’s put a hypothetical situation out there. You can fight for your position, your perspective, or even your own benefit right now. As time passes, you can change your position, revise your perspective and even give up your profits; all of these can be proven wrong, and you can fix what’s wrong without breaking your bones. But this can’t be the case for your faith. I believe faith needs to be deified; it can’t be too close to the mortal world to the point it clashes with mortal conflict because it’s either eternally correct or it is completely crushed. But human civilization’s development is not a straight line and faces continuous twists and turns, so nothing can remain righteous or correct forever. So if one day you realize that you walked down the wrong path, what will you do? Will you break down or be like those people that have sunk in too deep to get out and hurt yourselves and others in the suffering of ignorance?”

Hope remained silent for a while before he nodded: “You also have a point---but Professor Lu, I don’t know if you’ve heard of this saying before. ‘Mankind is born from faith’.”

Lu Bixing answered: “Mankind will also die from faith.”

Both men were charismatic talkers that had mouths full of speeches and pep talks, putting them together was like having two raccoons trying to wipe dirt on each other. After realizing neither could get dirt on the other, they resigned to laughing it off and discovered a new fellow chess player at the same level.

White’s timid voice came out of the mech’s broadcast at this moment: “Professor Lu, this question is a little complex, can you come help?”

Lu Bixin placed his wine glass down in slight disappointment, then turned to Hope and said: “For space traffic safety, I’ll need to go clean up after these lost children.”

Hope nodded then asked suddenly as Lu Bixing got ready to leave: “Professor Lu, do you have your own faith?”

Lu Bixing stopped for a moment. He was about to respond with how he was a scientist that enjoys looking at different perspectives, but before the words came out of him, he suddenly remembered the day they got ready to rescue Monoeyed Hawk. He remembered the man that held his hand inside the medical capsule when he was filled with worry for his father.

Days have passed, yet the scene from that particular day repeatedly showed up in his dream as if it was beginning to carve its way into his heart.

Lu Bixing almost choked as he dozed off and said: “I...do.”

Lu Bixing’s ship arrived in Qiming’s atmosphere around evening. The signal of the mech dock flashed to greet them the moment their ship closed into the station---large fleets of military mech would be taking off in three hours from Terminal 4 outside of the Milky Way City, all nearby mech pilots should turn on autopilot and beware of traffic.

“Wow there,” Turan’s fumes were still floating above her head as she glanced at Lu Bixing in taunt, “preparing for take-off three hours ahead? Is this large-scale parade a sending-off party for the Commander himself? You just came back to say goodbye to him, looks like you guys weren’t meant to be.”

Lu Bixing just took apart her mech and broke at least a whole page full of interstellar traffic laws; unable to rebuttal, he could only rub his nose awkwardly in silence.

“That’s what we get for being poor,” Turan shook her head and said, “the head of house is always out hunting for food to feed us and doesn’t even get a honeymoon vacation…. hey, by the way Professor Lu, I’ve been wanting to interview you for a while now, so how does it feel to finally get to sleep with Lin Jingheng?”

Lu Bixing almost choked on his own spit as the mech dived down into the atmosphere: “What?”

Turan laughed and gave him a good pat on the shoulder: “It wasn’t that great, right? That’s completely normal, I was about to say I don’t see you spending the night at his place that often. Let me tell you, those expensive-looking fancy flowers usually don’t taste that great anyway. They either can’t let go of their work or they’re too spoiled by wealth and don’t know how to care for others, you should know if you’ve experienced it---I bet he just left you for a cig after that and didn’t even leave a blanket for you, right?”

Lu Bixing didn’t want to continue these vulgar discussions with an experienced warrior and could only respond with a courteous smile, secretly complaining in his mind that this same person was the one that sold him on Commander Lin brand ice cubes befores.

Turan asked loudly while the noise level rose as the mech passed through the clouds: “I got some nice poppers at home, do you wanna try some?”

Lu Bixing pressed his ears and pretended he didn’t hear while planning on reporting her for harassment when he returned.

The mech station was extremely busy. It was strange that those biochip sellers from the Freedom Corps suddenly became so obsessed with the Eighth Galaxy and attempted to fly in with a new fleet like flies at least once every few days. After getting their asses beaten, they would reappear after a short while like flies in the summer. This time, the scouting squad managed to find their commanding post and military supplier base within the Eight Galaxy. Discovering this bountiful nest to steal from, Lin Jingheng purposely ordered an extra team of merchant ships to follow along their expedition this time. Unlike mechs, merchant ships lacked flexibility to dispatch immediately and took a longer time to warm up and prepare before take-off, so the station was busy doing initial preparations.

Lin Jingheng would normally be waiting at the command post inside the mech station, so Lu Bixing ran over towards the main building after he snuck his way out of the engineering team, hoping to catch the commander before they took off. Yet little did he expect to see a Monoeyed Hawk patrolling around the entrance of the command post like a cop ready to catch any underage children attempting to sneak into a bar meters away.

Lu Bixing felt the back of his head throb as he hid around large equipment within the station, pondering how to pass through this troublesome guard. A small mech parked behind him, and as he leaned back towards the door, the mech’s door suddenly slid open. Lu Bixing was caught off-guard and almost tripped over from the surprise, but before he could fall, a pair of hands reached from the inside of the mech, covered his mouth and forcefully dragged the young man inside.

Lu Bixing: “......”

The green light of the mental network fell as the door locked before him. The light inside the mech dimmed down to the pilot’s preference. Lu Bixing stared in awe as the commander that was supposed to be inside the commanding post stood within an arm’s reach before him; the glowing light of the mental network reflected in the commander’s eyes, the whole scene looking suspiciously similar to a typical affair scene in a classic movie.

Lu Bixing felt his heart rate rise up to 180 uncontrollably.

Lin Jingheng moved his hand away from Lu Bixing’s mouth and frowned: “How do you have such an annoying dad? His menopause is reaching centuries long.”

Lu Bixing responded smoothly: “Why don’t you just kidnap and hide me inside your mech then?”

Lin Jingheng lifted an eyebrow expressionlessly as if he was seriously considering the possibilities of this act: “That works. This mech will be incorporated into Team 3, you can just report malfunction and enter the Model 3 after we leave the atmosphere, I’ll make Zhanlu shut up.”

Lu Bixing quickly took his joke back in fear the commander will actually take it seriously: “No, no, no, it’s okay, Minister Edward would go crazy.”

Lin Jingheng looked at him without a word. The commander’s gaze earlier was like a lion surrounding its prey, but the cold corners of his eyes gradually grew a hint of harmless mischief.

Lu Bixing only realized now that the stern commander was teasing him. He pushed Lin Jingheng away and pressed the commander onto the door of the mech: “Oh I see now, mister commander, you’re just a mouth full of this and that but have completely different ideas inside that head of yours---how come I didn’t know you were this kind of person?”

Lin Jingheng was ready to go on an expedition and was dressed appropriately for the job. Even though his gloves were still peeking out of his pocket, the rest of his uniform was clean and dustless. Yet despite his proper outfit, his current actions were anything but proper; Lu Bixing felt a wave of heat rise up in his chest and suddenly remembered all the garbage talk that Turan dumped on him before they landed. He completely forgot about the plan to report the Captain as his gaze fell onto Lin Jingheng’s collar and grew a newfound desire in his mind.

## Ch 96 - Why Am I So Smitten By You?

Lu Bixing didn’t consider himself someone that was obsessed with the human body. He appreciated the aesthetics of a nice body like an average person that enjoys fine art, satisfied after a few looks and wouldn’t think too much of it afterwards. The young man was able to find endless excitement and joy in the vast universe and felt that his journey ahead was long and filled with surprises, so he didn’t quite believe in the ancient fascination with lust through hormonal reactions. As for the hidden implications of lust--fulfillment, conquering, and shame-- they all seemed to be exaggerations that reflected the societal ideologies of the time to the young scientist.

Even when he picked up the completely exposed Commander Lin near Planet Beijing years ago, he was able to look at the man without an inch of questionable thoughts. The Lin Jingheng at that time was like a nameless model in fashion advertisements to him, even R-rated novels were more exciting than the body before him.

But at some point, this person became much different to him.

When one starts to find themselves deeply fascinated by another person’s small gestures from a smile to the lift of a hand, this carbon-based flesh would no longer be an insignificant one of many in the world. To Lu Bixing, Lin Jingheng was like a great treasure that was worth all his attention and thoughts in every detail; even the smell of detergent left on the collar of the commander’s shirt could make his heart race. It was as if the smell itself was a vine that traveled its way into his soul, carefully binding him and forcing him to lean his head towards the source of the scent.

Lu Bixing subconsciously wanted to ruin and destroy that neat collar and suddenly leaned in to bite Lin Jingheng’s neck. He could feel the tip of his teeth touch the soft veins as Lin Jingheng trembled slightly in response. Lu Bixing immediately pulled his sense back and took a step backwards like a shocked puppy that got caught with some wrongdoings, pulled his teeth back and stared at Lin Jingheng nervously without a word.

He felt as if his limbs were numb and began to panic. W-what am I doing? What was I thinking? I-is, is he mad? Did Turan do something to me on the mech?

But Lin Jingheng didn’t get upset at him nor did he scold the young man. His sense of pain was numb from long periods of military training and could only feel as if Lu Bixing bit him lightly. It didn’t hurt, but it was quite shocking; Lin Jingheng held his arm up and glossed his hand over his neck only to smell a hint of alcohol: “You drank?”

“Oh, right! I had some wine!” Lu Bixing mind flashed with an idea--the two sips of rice wine gave him the answer. “People get more excitable when they’re tipsy and drunk, it’s normal that I lose a bit of self-control.”

Discovering a valid excuse for his actions, Lu Bixing very quickly tossed all his shame and pretentious social etiquette to take advantage of the situation. He shoved his face to the commander’s nose and gave a playful smile as he whispered in a daze: “Commander, did I meet you before I was born? How else can I explain why I’m so smitten by you?”

Lin Jingheng was stunned for a second.

Lu Bixing studied his face carefully and took in a small breath. Then, he closed his eyes and carefully pressed his lips down to meet the other’s as his hand made his way inside Lin Jingheng’s uniform jacket. As if exploring an unknown territory, Lu Bixing’s hand pressed gently against the thin dress shirt onto the commander’s waist.

In contrast to the mood of the scene, Lin Jingheng felt extremely awkward due to being connected to the small mech’s mental network.

Connecting to the mental network meant that the pilot had two sets of senses--when Lin Jingheng opened his eyes, he could see both the young man before him and the people outside of the mech through the network. Past the busy crowds in the station to the command post not too far away, he could even see Monoeyed Hawk still patrolling outside of the building...that grumpy old man also shot an unsuspecting glance toward their direction right now.

When that question of “have I met you before I was born” rang into his ears, he could also hear the broadcast of the mech station and the footsteps of the soldiers passing by outside.

Lin Jingheng felt himself engulfed in that sweet scent of the rice wine and sank into Lu Bixing’s presence as if he was drowning in this hidden and private space. At the same time, he felt as if he was standing out in public as he embraced the cherished person in his arms without restraint.

He felt as if the gaze of Lu Xin’s stone statue pierced through the Milky Way City, military base and the heavy doors of the mech onto his back.

He felt like he was floating in midair but also pinned down on the door of the mech. The young man’s breath was boiling but sincere while the coldness of the metal door seeped through his clothing from behind. A complex wave of senses swallowed him up like a storm that triggered an even more foreign sensation inside him--30 years of painful memories that haunted him in his dreams like an endless interrogation jumbled together and exploded at that instant. Those traversing, sizzling, and even decadent blood on the battlefield, the forgotten inscriptions on the tombstones in Wolto, the vibrant lives shining within the Eighth Galaxy…

He began to crave these emotions as he feared them; these precious and embarrassing feelings that had been hibernating inside his cold heart began to touch upon his numb senses. They were like sparks of flames that were thrown into the woods and spread uncontrollably like a wildfire inside him.

Lu Bixing suddenly spoke up in a gentle voice: “So you aren’t actually sexually apathetic as they said, huh, commander?”

Lin Jingheng grabbed the young man’s hand as the door to the inner control room of the mech opened. Lu Bixing took a few steps back as he found himself pushed to the corner of a small sofa.

Lin Jingheng spoke quietly into his ears: “I have to leave soon, there’s not enough time.”

Lu Bixing didn’t catch the implication in the line and looked at him dumbly.

His gaze was pure like a clean spring of water that reflected his emotions as clear as a mirror. Lin Jingheng hesitated for once and felt like he was about to step onto a freshly formed layer of snow untainted by footprints, unsure where to place his feet.

“You……” Lin Jingheng paused awkwardly, “spent all this time in the Eighth Galaxy, haven’t you at least tried giving your heart to someone else? Maybe you should try.”

These words sounded ironic even to Lin Jingheng himself. He felt like Lu Bixing deserved better, but he also didn’t know what ‘better’ meant. At the same time, he also knew that he would be reluctant to let go of the young man he cared for as his treasure.

As brilliant as Lu Bixing was, he couldn’t possibly understand that split second of struggle Lin Jingheng faced and asked in surprise: “Huh? Hey Lin, aren’t you more of an ‘if you dare look at anyone else I’ll drag you away and blow you up’ type of person? Uh...wait, don’t actually kill me, please save me one last breath to reflect on my actions.”

Lin Jingheng lowered his head to laugh and shook his head. *How could I possibly do that?* He thought.

He slid the back of his hand down Lu Bixing’s chin and carefully undid the young man’s shirt button with a gentle touch of his finger.

Lu Bixing, who only managed to muster enough courage to freely harass his commander after pondering for almost half a century, was caught completely off-guard by the close touch. His goosebumps shot up as he suddenly realized what the commander was trying to do from either nervousness or excitement.

“Don’t worry,” Lin Jingheng said gently, “There’s not much time left, I’ll use my hands.”

Lu Bixing, the young scientist who spent decades of his life talking in theory and paper without any actual experience, could feel his soul shoot out of his body at the speed of Qiming’s second cosmic velocity as he digested these words. It was as if he broke out of gravity and transformed himself into a billiard ball that had to hit every planet within the Eight Galaxy until he completely lost his sense of reason, leaving him with only the ability to repeat Lin Jingheng’s name like a broken record.

However, this daze across the galaxy didn’t last very long before he was pulled back to reality. What happened next might not have been an actual disaster but was close enough to be considered one.

Turan’s sour grapes about the commander were completely correct. Lin Jingheng wasn’t very good at ‘taking care’ of others--Lu Bixing suspected that this man was a true martyr of abstinence hiding in the middle of a bunch of hooligans that never even really tried dealing with his own needs. Perhaps it was out of nervousness, but the commander’s techniques were not quite on par to say the least. To make matters worse, Lin Jingheng wasn’t quite good with controlling his grip and somehow managed to completely turn the sensual atmosphere into an absolute mess and more with his unique inexperience.

Lin Jingheng: “......”

Lu Bixing couldn’t imagine what the appropriate response was under this situation. He held in his breath for two seconds before he decided to be honest with himself and laughed out loud.

Lin Jingheng picked up the uniform jacket he tossed onto the ground and threw it on Lu Bixing’s face: “What are you laughing at!?”

Lu Bixing found the situation funnier the more he thought about it and shoved his face into Lin’s jacket as he laughed nonstop. This flustered commander before him was suddenly much closer to him than the two ever were as a new sense of intimacy began to grow between them. It was indeed a strange feeling--though at least he knew that if he somehow had the desire to bite Lin Jingheng again, he wouldn’t need to worry about angering the commander.

“You can clean up after yourself, I’m leaving.” Lin Jingheng put back on his signature bitch face, “You...what do you want now?”

Lu Bixing reached for his dress shirt and pulled a bit of that neatly tucked-in shirt out as he wiped the tears from his face: “Hey, can you move out of that ‘closet’ beside the meeting room? How about moving in with me instead? I’ve told Minister Edward already; we’re planning on building a new residential area near the Milky Way City with direct transportation to the command post. All personnel working in the post can move there, so can I stay with you?”

“Stop with your nonsense,” Lin Jingheng pulled the corner of his shirt back, “What about your dad? Tie him up?”

Lu Bixing bluffed with confidence: “I’ll take care of him.”

Lin Jingheng had a complicated expression on his face. He rebuttoned up his shirt without a word, fixed himself up and walked out as quickly as he could with a blank face.

Lu Bixing sent him off with a smile on his face and whistled a tune as Lin Jingheng walked toward the main door of the mech. It took the commander until he disconnected from the mental network to realize something was missing: “Give my jacket back.”

Lu Bixing’s whistle tune took a turn as he clung onto the commander’s uniform jacket like a monkey on a tree trunk, shoving his face into it and then responding with a playful voice: “Nope.”

Lin Jingheng’s expression darkened as he frowned at the response, but finally gave in to the young man in defeat after realizing he couldn’t win, then hastily made his way back to the command post without his jacket.

Lu Bixing finally crawled back up from the floor a while after Lin Jingheng had left, giddily holding the jacket in his arms. There was no particular reason why he felt so giddy, he simply couldn’t stop whistling his tunes and could almost write a song or poem for the empty mech. He stood around to ponder the possibilities only to conclude that he didn’t have the skills for creative arts as senseless words and phrases jumbled in his mind. The young scientist did find it amusing and wanted to jot them down to send to Lin Jingheng, but the moment he opened his personal device all words and phrases were lost from his mind.

Those chaotic words and lyrics in his mind died down like fireworks in his mind and left a calm soul in his body.

Why did stories need romance? Was there nothing else worth writing about?

Lu Bixing only sort of understood now that romance did deserve to be written down. He placed the jacket around his shoulders like a cape and quietly snuck out of the mech as he walked towards Monoeyed Hawk under the broadcast calling for all teams to get ready for boarding.

Monoeyed Hawk saw Lin Jingheng earlier making last appointments in the command post and took a team with him onto the Model 3. He felt like he accomplished his job and was about to leave his post.

That was when he saw Lu Bixing strolling over to him, and the sly old man purposely asked: “What do you want? Who are you looking for?”

Lu Bixing cleared his throat and said: “Commander Lin. I heard the blueprint for the new military factories are out, so I wanted to take a look.”

Monoeyed Hawk;s gaze pierced through the young man’s lie with the butt of the cigarette still in his mouth--the blueprint of the factories were designed by the engineering team, not the commander himself. He curled his lips up mischievously and answered: “Oh, Commander Lin? Sorry, man’s not here, I just saw him leave. He’s going out on an expedition, who knows when he’ll come back. You know him, he might even just take over the Seventh Galaxy while he’s at it.”

Lu Bixing let out an unamused “Oh” and slowly pulled the jacket on him like a walking advertisement as he shamelessly presented the details of the jacket before Monoeyed Hawk’s face.

Monoeyed Hawk looked at him in confusion for a few moments before he realized who the jacket belonged to. His gaze then fell onto Lu Bixing’s messy hair and facial expression that was lit up in joy, then yelled: “Lin Jingheng, that son of a….is he a damn weasel or something!? I can’t believe he has the guts to do such nasty things, does he not have any shame!?”

Lu Bixing only continued his whistling as he watched Monoeyed Hawk explode into a ball of fury.

The angry Monoeyed Hawk gave a slap on the young man’s head and complained: “Get the hell out of my sight you ungrateful brat, I might as well be raising a pot of plants than you!”

Lu Bixing leaned on the staircase by the entrance of the command post building and received that gentle slap of a cat’s paw on his head, then shook his head: “Dad, we’ve been through life and death together for so long already, can’t you just admit that your opinions on him are mostly wrong?”

Monoyed Hawk: “Wrong about him being a son of a bitch? Am I really wrong?”

Despite these words, the frustration on his face vanished. Monoeyed Hawk pulled out another cigarette as he glanced at Lu Bixing and saw the young man drowning in love like a foolish child. He realized that this ‘human tiger seal’ already belonged to Lin Jingheng and was out of his hands. The commander could make his way back to the Union with the young man, recall the Silver Ten and retrieve all of Lu Xin’s ex-subordinates that were currently fighting in the frontlines against pirates.

In a warring era where demons and monsters rampage the battlefield, cold-blooded warriors like Lin Jingheng could easily change the climate of the world with their own hands and didn’t need to take each step with caution.

Yet he chose to protect the secret of Lu Bixing’s identity with his life. He stayed in the Eighth Galaxy and even guarded this game-changing young man behind Prime Minister Edward’s government in fear that this fragile flower in the open field would break under the deadly storms of war. Lin Jingheng constantly threatened to leave the Eighth Galaxy behind yet continued to risk his life to protect this underdeveloped galaxy against his own words, proving time and time again that he was still too soft to hold onto his ambitions.

Monoeyed Hawk may be short-termpered but he wasn’t stupid. When he heard about the whereabouts of Lu Xin’s ex-subordinates in the Union, he slowly caught on to Lin Jingheng’s intentions. However, he still got frustrated when he recalled the commander’s actions; Lin Jingheng was too headstrong and his conceited attitude of “I have everything taken care of” without any explanations, his “I don’t trust anyone” mentality deserved a good beating in Monoeyed Hawk’s opinion.

Lu Bixing said, “you said he was Commander Lu Xin’s adopted son, wasn’t the late commander someone you admire? Lin even helped you all build the new plaza and government, why can’t you be a little more kind to him?”

Monoeyed Hawk muttered: “Lu Xin couldn’t possibly raise a bastard like that, I bet he grew up to be that way on his own...seriously what do you even like about him, are you a masochist?”

Lu Bixing answered without thinking: “He’s hot.”

Monoeyed Hawk choked as he couldn’t deny it.

“He’s especially handsome. Remember how I could drool over his picture all day when I was a kid? Admit it, dad.”

“Who’s your dad? Didn’t I say many times before that I’m not your dad, I picked you up from the garbage. There’s no way I can have a dumb horny son like you, now get the hell out!” Monoeyed Hawk waved him off lazily as he walked off in defeat despite being the one that asked the other to leave. He made his way towards Lu Xin’s statue with a plan to leave a few flowers to apologize for a hopeless child.

A researcher from the engineering team ran over as Monoeyed Hawk left: “Oh, there you are, Professor Lu, we’ve been looking for you!”

Lu Bixing answered in high spirits, “what is it?”

“We followed your suggestion to use the Port Circuit code to decode the protected document you found in the AUS headquarters and made some progress, come check it out.”

Lu Bixing got up and left.

20 minutes later, Turan also cleaned herself up and made her way over.

The researchers were all drowning in excitement as they surrounded themselves in the joys of decoding to the point where they almost forgot what they were decoding. Lu Bixing grabbed his team of engineers for a small meeting to focus on decoding the file and even decided to ignore the Prime Minister’s calls.

Turan borrowed a small break room beside the lab to go over the inventory of military supplies for Lin Jingheng. While she was writing comments on military drafting in the Eighth Galaxy, she heard a loud cheer next door and rushed over immediately as she closed her personal device.

She stepped into the lab to see a large 3D screen in the center of the room filled with lines of files and data.

A researcher opened a video file to be greeted by a woman facing the camera.

She wore a long white lab coat with her hair loosely tied behind her head. A hint of fatigue showed on her face without any makeup, but her features were still elegant and beautiful by modern standards. Those cold grey eyes pierced through the screen and took everyone’s breaths away inside the lab.

Turan stared at the woman in dismay as a strange eerie feeling began to unfold within her.

“We have less than 15% of energy left, and the backup battery system has already been destroyed. Our missiles and cannons are completely out. I’m currently recording this under Lin Wei’s cannon.”

A loud explosion interrupted her words as the screen trembled a little, visibly showing that the tail end of the mech had been hit. Sparks of fire appeared in the background while the people on the mech ran off in panic.

The woman on the screen turned her head and lifted a slight smile: “Heavy nuclear missiles, looks like he isn’t even willing to say goodbye.”

## Ch 97 - My Name Is…

“My name is Laura Gordon,” the woman continued.

Turan’s eyes widened. The sharp jawline and misty grey eyes of the woman on the screen felt familiar, but she couldn’t place her finger on it. On top of that, she carried the “Gordon” last name; however, the famous Gordon family of Wolto were known for how much they loved cameras and always made appearances in public. Turan was sure she could name every member of the family, but who was this woman? A distant relative of the family? Or did she just happen to share the same last name?

“.... Head of the first research lab of TDGEC…”

Turan suddenly remembered who this person was. She immediately turned off the screen with her commander access, earning her a few confused looks from the engineers that helped decode the files.

Her expression was grim as she waved off the looks. Among the engineers, a few were former technicians from the Ninth Squadron that Lu Bixing had dragged over. These old colleagues noticed their Captain’s face and quickly turned off all equipment, blocked off the internal network and locked up editing permission for the documents they decoded.

“Sorry,” Turan quickly brought up an excuse, “I just saw that the decoded files contained a lot of research data that looks to be related to the human experiments the AUS were doing. There will be a risk of public panic if they get leaked, so we’ll need to pass this on for professional inspection before we can release this information, please understand.”

Most of the engineers on the team were technical hackers who were more interested in technology than living beings and would rather sit in their rooms to play video games than run around picking fights with pirates. They all nodded in understanding and left the room without a word under Turan’s customer service smile.

Turan lowered her voice and commanded: “Bring Prime Minister Edward over and contact Commander Lin, quick.”

Yet as expected, they couldn’t get a hold of Commander Lin. The fleet was out to hunt down the nest of drug dealers, and naturally the base of the pirates would be able to intercept outward communication signals. So in order to make sure their signals didn’t expose their position, it was normal that Commander Lin would decide to cut off communication when they entered enemy territory.

Turan let out a deep breath, lowered her head, and walked around in circles as she fell into deep thought.

Lu Bixing, who had been quiet during this whole time, suddenly asked: “Is that first research lab of TDGEC the rumored ‘White Tower’?”

TDGEC was short for “Technology Department of the Garden of Eden Committee”, and the first research lab was the central building of the department. Due to the tower-like architecture and snow-white color, it was also known as the “White Tower” among people. The White Tower gathered the world’s top network engineers, biologists, and humanities experts. As the top research laboratory with the most authority in the Union, it also managed all technological affairs of the Eden system.

Turan lifted her gaze: “Laura Gordon, do you know who she is?”

Lu Bixing thought about it for a second and answered: “If I remember correctly, one of the members of the board of directors in the Eden Committee is called ‘Gordon’?”

“The Gordon family is one of the founding members of the Eden system,” Turan said. “Charity work is a necessity for the elites of Wolto, so the Gordon family naturally had their own charity organization. They once picked out a group of exceptionally intelligent orphans in the Union and built a public school on a planet near the border of the First Galaxy with their family funding. Every child that was adopted was required to sign a contract with the Gordon family to work for the family upon graduation from between five to ten years. Laura Gordon was one of the graduates of the school.”

“So they’re raising talent for their benefit as well.” Lu Bixing nodded in understanding. “So I’m assuming this Laura lady was one of the better students?”

“Better? Not even close.” Turan responded swiftly, “Laura Gordon was a genius that later caught the eye of the head of the Gordon household--the old man that had been on the director’s seat in the Eden Committee. He personally appointed her to be raised with special attention and eventually adopted her as his daughter, even giving her the Gordon family name. With the help of the Gordon family and her own talent, she entered the White Tower at the young age of 85. She then went into a political marriage with the Military Council representing the Committee and married Lieutenant General Lin Wei.”

Lu Bixing was shocked: “So you’re saying the person that was chasing after her in the video was her husband?”

“Right, but that’s not the point. This seemingly united couple had a twin boy and girl together,” Turan paused for a few moments before lowering her voice even more. “The boy’s name is Lin Jingheng.”

Lu Bixing almost felt his jaw drop to the ground.

Hope walked out of the lab on the top floor of the research building with the newly produced results of the farm food. The product was eco-friendly with a great taste, and an ideal base product to use for extracting nutrients for syringes and condensed meals.

Saturday brought a few soldiers and followed him out to keep an eye on the ex-hostage walking about the military base. Fortunately, Hope was a reasonable man with a big heart who didn’t mind the inconvenience and even made conversations with the soldiers as he shared samples of the food with them.

“This is all-natural honey?” Saturday tasted a small bit at the tip of his fingers. “Nobody in the Eighth Galaxy had ever seen such a thing because all we had were artificial...hm, this isn’t as sweet as I imagined.”

“That’s because you all eat too much artificial sugar,” Hope responded politely. “To the ancient people that lived with nature, sweetness meant high calories and was rare to find in nature, making sweet food very important for energy when supply was scarce. The preference to consume sweet food became engraved into our genes, but the need to consume them began to fade as mankind started creating artificial flavoring.”

“Right, so it’s like mass-produced blow-up dolls printed with the faces of your crush….uh, sorry, we’re too-used to not having filters around each other.” Saturday gave another sniff before he closed the bottle. “There’s a flowery scent in it, would girls like these?”

Hope gave him a slightly teasing smile in response.

“Wait, no,” Saturday waved it off in slight embarrassment. “We have a very strict diet normally anyway due to training and I can’t eat too much, so you can leave some for the kids...really, I don’t have any other intentions. Even Professor Lu keeps thinking I’m up to no good towards his students, I can’t even get a break.”

Lu Bixing’s four students passed by as they spoke, seemingly in the middle of a debate. Rickhead carried a mech part they removed from somewhere on his shoulders, Mint shot a glance over towards Saturday and Hope’s direction and made a face at Saturday across the walkway.

“I heard they’re designing a beginner’s mech or something,” Saturday explained to Hope proudly. “If they succeed, even an average man can easily get a handle on these mechs, isn’t that amazing? If we go to war, anyone can become a soldier.”

“Oh?” Hope’s gaze flashed in concern for a moment. “Warfare in space requires weapons with high energy and density comparable to nuclear power. No matter what kind of mech it is, even a beginner’s mech will have to meet these hardware requirements, am I right? These things can easily wipe out a whole city on land if you bring them over; do you think it’s amazing that an average person can control these mechs like a bicycle? I think that’s rather frightening.”

Saturday was speechless: “I guess you’re right...but this is just a school assignment, I don’t think you need to take it too seriously. You can read a book a million times and you still won’t get the same experience as physically taking apart a mech with your own hands…”

He also felt strange as he continued on. The young students were curiously working around weapons of mass-destructions and yet he still thought that was something worth bragging about.

“It’s a time of crisis, we don’t really have a choice. War is breaking out everywhere and we don’t have enough mech engineers. We still have to protect ourselves at the end of the day.” Saturday continued to find excuses as he sighed, “sometimes when I think about it, this sure is pretty depressing. It’s like everyone is walking on a thin rope on a cliff, it’s way more relaxing to just go to your place and listen to your birds chirp in the morning.”

They ran into Minister Edward who was hastily making his way towards the research lab with his new team of government officials.

“That’s strange,” Saturday watched as these people walked by. “The Prime Minister doesn’t normally come to the research labs.”

A soldier standing by the entrance answered: “It looks like Professor Lu and his team cracked the code of the AUS’ protected files.”

Many soldiers of the military were newly appointed members from the former Self-Defense Squad who barely washed themselves up from the status of uncultured peasants. They didn’t understand the difficult topics regarding technology and data, so they left very quickly after shooting a few glances over.

Yet Hope fell into silence; he turned his head towards the direction the Prime Minister left and deepened his gaze.

A large man-made space station slowly orbited its way near the former planet of Cayley. It was about 200 square kilometers large filled with weapons, equipment and military supplies like a fully equipped headquarters. Its supply amount was almost at the level of that Old Fart’s inventory back on the old space station, yet the most incredible thing about this floating monster was that it even had its own engine that can sail around like a massive starship.

This massive creature used to belong to an arrogant fleet from the Freedom Corps an hour ago and was now Lin Jingheng’s property.

Lin Jingheng pulled a small team out to disguise as galactic smugglers; they wandered over and surprised even him as they ran into this fruitful prey. He snuck his way in to steal from it with the help of Mister Weasel who was disguised as an extremely believable smuggler. After they made their way into the station as ‘hostages’ caught by the pirates, Weasel even ran into a few familiar faces from the black market and comedically added onto his act as a horrible gangster that had fallen into the hands of pirates.

These people from the Freedom Corps originally wanted to open up a market for their opium in the Eighth Galaxy, but due to their lack of connections in this foreign land, they were always beaten up by the patrolling Self-Defense Forces of the Eighth Galaxy. Without a proper local connection to help them out, they were at a loss until they were lucky enough to find an ‘unfortunate fleet’ today to use for paving the roads to their future market.

Weasel quickly made his way into the space station and cut off the power of the central command post while opening the backdoors to the mech dock on the station. At the same time, they infiltrated the internal network of the space station using the signal disturbances Lu Bixing copied from the AUS and manually created a blind spot in the security system. When the unprepared forces of the space station realized what was going on, the Model 3’s mental network had already covered the entire armory and claimed control of all weapons on the station.

Lin Jingheng essentially took over the entire space station without wasting a bullet.

The hostaged pirates they captured were all taken in by armed robots. Lin Jingheng walked down from the Model 3 with a human-formed Zhanlu following behind him like a secretary. The first order the commander gave after leaving the mech was to have Weasel turn off the gravity system on the station--in a time where supplies were scarce everywhere, even someone born in a wealthy elite-class family like Lin Jingheng had to breathe in the air of poverty and was learning to frown at anyone wasting energy like that.

“The mech launching deck’s construction standard, tracks, lock code style, and even the model on the energy supply system are highly similar to the Union’s Military Council standard.” Zhanlu said, “It’s almost exactly the same, which means that this station itself and the supplies on it are all produced in organized batches.”

Lin Jingheng: “A whole set? They sure are flexing their wealth.”

A full set of launching decks and military supplies was not easy to obtain. Before the military production system of the Eighth Galaxy was completed, the mechs and supplies these soldiers collected on Qiming’s operational base were all random items from different manufacturers; they had to rely on Lu Bixing and his engineering team’s ‘conversion plugs’ to charge up.

Lin Jingheng paused for a moment, then said: “If this is also part of the Freedom Corps, don’t you feel something different about it?”

Zhanlu answered: “Yes, sir. According to my data history, the Freedom Corps is unique in their small and scattered armed fleets. While they seem to enjoy trying new things, I have to say that they do not look like a group with a lot of funding in their hands.”

“This is like if their sponsor in the Union personally came to the Eighth Galaxy and fought for our supplies while donning their brand clothing,” Lin Jingheng’s gaze glossed over the station as he mumbled, “is there something they want in the Eighth Galaxy? This is a bit strange, why are they doing this?”

“Commander, we’ve finished cleaning up the hostages on the station and will recover the long-distance signal with Qiming soon…”

Zhanlu immediately warned out loud: “Be careful!”

A few of the hostages that were quietly being held by the armed robots did an about face as they violently broke out of the robotic grip, turned their ferocious faces around and jumped towards Lin Jingheng.

The grip of the robots and the ropes that tied onto the hostages were stronger than the extreme limit of human strength, so it was clear that these people were injected with some strange biochips. It was as if they’d completely lost their sense of pain when their arms and shoulders twisted in an unnatural way but remained reactionless as they ran off with their broken bones.

The armed robots immediately chased after them, and Lin Jingheng’s personal soldiers also reacted quickly as they shot a wave of lasers towards the hostages. The bodies of the hostages turned into smashed watermelons as pieces of blood and flesh exploded to the ground.

Yet even as their chests were shot into beehives with their rib cages exposed, they continued to run forward without hesitation.

Lin Jingheng stood motionlessly as the soldiers beside him quickly turned their gunpoints at the legs of the hostages. The hostages that were shot down fell to the floor but continued to crawl forward like insects that refused to die, leaving long trails of blood behind them like a horror movie.

The most tenacious of them all almost made his way towards Lin Jingheng’s feet. Just as he reached his skeletal arm towards the commander, a small explosive pierced through his nape along with the biochip, then after a low growl the man fell back to the ground without another movement.

Blood stained onto Lin Jingheng’s sleeves and left a red mark on the back of his hand.

“A life-threatening danger, huh.” The phrase suddenly appeared in Lin Jingheng’s mind as he wiped off the blood from his hands. He didn’t give much of a reaction to this hellish surprise and walked forward as he ordered, “Tell Turan after the communication is back…”

A message request was sent directly to his personal device before he could finish. Lin Jingheng was slightly surprised--Prime Minister Edward and his team were all present. Through the still-unstable long-distance connection, everyone looked at him with a stern face.

“Commander,” Turan said, “two hours ago Professor Lu and the crew decoded the hidden files of the AUS, I think you need to look at this.”

The blood on the back Lin Jingheng’s hand hadn’t been wiped off fully. Due to working long-term in a space environment, his skin was paler than most people, and the red stain on his hand almost looked like a flower petal of misfortune in contrast against his skin.

A woman with grey eyes appeared from his personal device and stood against the contrasting bloodstain on his hand. She was strange yet familiar; Lin Jingheng’s eyes widened a little and he felt as if he suddenly lost his breath.

“My name is Laura Gordon, Head of the first research lab of TDGEC. I’ve worked and provided service to the system of Eden for nearly a century since I graduated. I am leaving a message here today because I want to inform you all the truth of Eden--it is a timeless monster that swallows anger, anxiety, pain, and foolishness. It doesn’t let anyone lose at the starting line by condensing 20 years’ worth of basic education into a whole month. It is a haven created by the hands of mankind for themselves.”

“Everyone had doubts about it in the past. Since the founding of the Union, the debate about whether personal privacy can be protected under the Eden system has been a hot topic among scholars and even society. We all have the basic knowledge to question this: if a system can control your emotions and flow of hormones, will we still obtain the rights to keep secrets in the face of this system? Do our thoughts still belong to us, and do we still have free will? Later, we grew used to Eden and solved these two problems. First, we shifted the mainstream social ideology into believing in transparency on all manners where boldness and outspokenness became the norm. The culture of seeking privacy became the new radical conservative. Next, we passed laws to strictly manage the Eden system. The purpose of Eden was to better humanity and not hinder free will, is that correct?”

The woman’s expression was calm while her voice was clear. It struck a contrast with the rounds of explosion and panicked people in the background; the alarm lights inside the mech flashed across her face as she spoke.

“If we had any free will left, why would we believe in this nonsense?” she continued.

“If we had any free will left, how could we forget that anger, anxiety, pain, and foolishness were not defections of the human genes that we must overcome, that they are the original faces of the human soul. These ugly, spiteful, awful things inside your hearts that you would rather throw away are all part of mankind’s free will itself!”

## Ch 98 - May We Reunite In Hell

Lin Jingheng had just effectively destroyed a shady base of drug dealers and cleaned up a few berserk biochip men, and was ready to take the chip back for the engineering team to see if there was anything hidden inside these chips.... he even managed to obtain a fruitful prize of military supplies in this massive 200 square kilometer space station. Thanks to the miracles of technology that made it possible for people to live a few months off a single nutrient syringe, the supplies inside this station had enough stock that could last the new Eighth Galaxy government for a while. Especially at a godawful time like this, these syringes could even help build trust for the government’s new currency.

He almost turned into a hunter that had to feed his needy and large family from hunting for food everyday.

Until he saw this woman.

She pulled him from the wilderness of the Eighth Galaxy back to the dead land of the Union within an instant. Lin Jingheng stood there with a blank face and almost forgot where he was for a brief moment.

The father of the Lin twins, General Lin Wei, was supposedly a simple descent of an elite family. His parents were heroes that sacrificed their lives for the Union, and Lin Wei himself was raised personally by Chief Commander Woolf. All the founders of the Union were his uncles and elders; if he had a normal life, he would’ve gone up the ranks in the military with a stable career for the rest of his life. If he had a bit of talent, he could’ve been a possible candidate for the next Chief Commander of the Military Council; and even if he didn’t, it wouldn’t hurt to have a more relaxed life. His only worries would have been a mid-life crisis when he reached his age and taking care of those rebellious kids in his house.

A man like him would’ve been a modest and gentle father, or perhaps a free spirit not bound by marriage and family. Yet whatever the case, he shouldn’t have been a reticent man of a few words with a perpetual dark cloud over his eyes.

He passed away too early. Lin Jingheng’s biggest impression of him were those cold eyes that looked as if they had been frozen in time and the fact that he never smiled.

Of course, Lin Wei never abused his children--the civilization under Eden would never allow such a thing, but he also wasn’t a person that the kids can cling onto and ask “where’s mom” innocently.

Lin Jingheng still remembered that when he was still very little, he seemed to have an unexplainable fear towards Lin Wei. As for Laura, it seemed almost as if there was never anyone by that name in the house. Even back when he was still in the Union, he could only manage to find a few old pictures of her from the internet.

This was the first time he saw a moving and talking Laura Gordon.

She spoke amongst a stifled sea of fire: “The technology of human-machine connection began in the field of entertainment, then branched off into two distinct fields: mech engineering technology and automated smart living. They were both developed tremendously back in the old Sideral Era into distinct research fields. After the founding of the Interstellar Union, people began to rebuild their homes after the years of warfare that preceded the establishment of the Union Government. They also pushed for economic development and founded a handful of pillar industries to help get the ground running with the help of the early government; among them, the system of Eden was the most important project. With the lead of the eight famous directors and the Central Union Government as their biggest sponsor, their initial plan was to create a public service platform that could unify all man-machine interaction protocols within all galaxies to enable fair access to public services for all citizens.”

“When did things start to go wrong?” She said, “It started with the Eden Legislation--”

This was a famous historical event all citizens of the Union knew about--in NSC 21, artificial intelligence officially completely replaced human doctors. Medical capsules were controlled by Eden, and Eden allowed all capsules to share data real-time to allow everyone in the world to share the same ‘artificial health professional’ at the same time. It increased efficiency and safety of treatments and solved the long-time issue of doctor-patient relationships between galaxies.

Yet on the flip side, the problem of patient privacy arose and led to the first public questioning of Eden a few years later. At the time, most people were against Eden’s function of “real-time medical treatment” and would not even think about letting it control their emotional levels.

During NSC 26, a famous scandal triggered the public’s boycott of Eden--a high government official that was pursuing a female celebrity held a grudge after having his confession rejected. Then, through bribery, he obtained her personal medical history including her treatments of bipolar disorder and sex addiction. To get his revenge, the man publicized her personal information to ruin her healthy public image. However, to the surprise of the foolish man, not only did he not see the result he wanted, but the publicized information also further induced the fear of privacy violation among the masses. The victim had overwhelming supporters that organized demonstrations on the streets against the government and Pledge of Freedom. The government was prompted to immediately investigate the corruption within Eden’s management, punished related parties and passed the Eden Legislation to protect the privacies of all citizens.

The Eden Legislation could be said to be a milestone victory of modern democracy. During the event, the central government upheld the Pledge of Freedom and showed an appropriate response towards the concerns of its people as the executive and legislative departments promptly acted. They were clear on their stance and proved that they would never leave any citizen behind--the most influential among the eight directors of the Eden Committee was arrested due to their association with the scandal, and after releasing a public apology along with paying a hefty fine, they stepped down from their position and left the board of directors to only seven seats.

“The real numbers are here. Before the scandal of NSC 26, only 3% of the citizens chose to use Eden’s health monitoring function, and all of them are patients of obstinate chronic illness. It was nowhere near the 30% that the media reported back then. This number only began to increase after the scandal.” Laura continued, “After the legislative council brought the Eden Legislation to the tables and the eight directors became seven, the legislation began publicly surveying the citizens to make amendments for this new law. The legislation went through a total of seven amendments before its passing, and the number of using Eden’s health function increased every time an amendment was made. By the time the legislation was completed and passed officially, the percentage of people using the monitoring system of Eden rose up to 64%...”

“Doctor Gordon!” Someone yelled from the background of the video, “The ecopods are ready, please leave!”

Laura gave a quick glance at the direction of the voice but didn’t respond to it. She continued to the screen: “The result of this event was a happy ending for the public. Everyone felt good about the future and were confident to learn that their voices were being heard. Their demonstrations and involvement in politics will make the Union a better place. At the same time, some intelligent individuals also learned the way the Union functioned and ran this society.”

“The centuries after, whenever a problem arises in Eden, the public would respond to it in protest. Within these protests, there’s a very clear and specific pattern that cycles throughout the years--the public gets upset, both the people and the central government work together to identify the ‘enemy’, fight against the enemy, and after finally defeating the evil, they revise the Eden Legislation. It’s a happy ending with the same tropes, and after endless cycles of the same thing, people naturally began to carry Eden on their heads like their best friends and family. They will report and complain about anything regarding Eden, and within a mere century, these foolish people actually believed in this nonsense about education being a downloadable file that can be installed to the human brain. They let the system freely install thoughts and knowledge into their children’s heads and turn people into fast-food biochips.”

“Because you’re allowed to get angry at what you’re permitted to be angry at, protested what you’re permitted to protest at and received the happy ending written in a script, you believe you’re in control of your own life. You’re held up by this false sense of righteousness and freedom under your feet.” A sneer flashed across the woman’s face, “besides a circus animal, I can’t think of anything more foolish than this kind of popular opinion.”

“Allow me to announce another truth--every clause written into the Eden Legislation and passed by the government will never be broken by people. It’s as if this law wasn’t written on paper and was instead carved into everyone’s genes; it isn’t because people are all smart and respectable to not break laws, it was more like the hand of god removed the will and ability for the average man to commit such a crime.”

“The second truth, when Eden wants to trudge into a new territory with less than 10% approval rate from the public after six months, a few rebels will appear within the system. These rebels will be captured and publicly tried like ancient witch hunts, and once the witch burning ritual ends, Eden’s light and new law will shine on land.”

“The third, when the ‘ritual’ first started, there would be at least one trial every two to three years. The number of trials eventually decreased over time, and it had been 15 years since the last time we had one of those rituals. As society develops, these rituals will eventually be lost to the streams of time because everyone will be well-trained enough to live a happy life and won’t complain to Eden anymore.”

A cry echoed inside her mech: “Doctor Gordon, please hurry, the last guarding mech has fallen!”

Laura smiled and said towards the screen: “Is that so? General Lin, it looks like your hands are quite shaky today. With such a big target before you, how could you still miss me after so many rounds of fire?”

“Doctor, they sent us a message and asked us to surrender.”

Laura shrugged her shoulders emotionlessly: “Tell them to standby.”

“Doctor, the enemy is attempting to hack into our mental network!”

“Oh,” she lowered her head, took out a chip injector and stabbed it into her neck while facing the screen. “Sorry fellow generals, I’ve never been through military training and don’t have the means to wrestle with you guys or fight over control of the mental network, so I’m going to cheat--give me the network, they won’t be able to take it away.”

Lin Jingheng felt as if a bucket of cold water poured over his head--the place where she injected the chip was in exactly the same place the weirdo from earlier had.

But the chip she injected was clearly more completed and high-quality than the garbage the Freedom Corps used. So was it possible that the ‘opium’ came from her--and the creator of the ‘opium’ today didn’t retrieve the full recipe of the biochip? And because Laura Gordon clearly had connections to the AUS, that’s why the Freedom Corps sent people out to ambush the AUS headquarters back then...

“Why do vaccuocerebrals exist in such a perfect world? Why can’t we save these ‘cursed’ souls with our technology today? My friends, are you all shedding tears for our friends that were exiled into the Eighth Galaxy? Even today, there is still a research team in the White Tower dedicated to solving the problem of vaccuocerebrals, and trust me, it’s not easy--of course it’s not easy, because vaccuocerebral syndrome may be the last warning our souls are giving us.”

“My dear commander Lu Xin, do you know why your Eighth Galaxy has to suffer? Does the Union really lack that funding and sympathy to help the poor? Stop fooling yourself. It’s because a contrast must exist in order to secure people’s loyalty to Eden. It’s a shame that perhaps you won’t be able to hear my words, my friend. I hope you get a bit smarter and stop rushing into things like a gorilla, otherwise you might be the next victim of Eden’s public trial 20 years from now.”

The mech shook violently as an alarm went off: “backup energy number 2 has been damaged, alart, backup energy number 2 is falling off--”

Whoever was chasing after them might have gone onto the battlefield with Parkinson’s and hadn’t hit the target after so many rounds of fire. They only managed to shoot down a few backup engines and energy sources in a desperate attempt to deplete their energy for a capture.

Laura shook her head in defeat with a complicated expression on her face: “Lin Wei, oh Lin Wei…”

“40 years ago, the former head of the White Tower, who was also my teacher, was burned at the stake under Eden. His crime was anti-humanity, association with foreign space pirates, abusing his career status to obtain samples of mutated rainbow virus for illegal genetic experiments. He had also been involved with countless cases of missing individuals that were rumored to be captured for human experiments. It was claimed that he had already lost his sanity and not even Eden could save his mental illness--because of him, registration to the Eden system became mandatory. Therefore, everyone will be able to confirm the life and death of their loved ones and no longer suffer the pains of a missing person, completely eliminating the concept from our society...I wonder what kind of crimes they will place on me.” Her cold grey eyes glistened slightly as she faced the screen, “to the people outside of the Union, the light of freedom for humanity is in your hands. Prophets, for the sake of life and nature, I will give you everything I have. May we reunite in hell, farewell.”

The recording ended, followed by silence.

Turan cleared her throat softly after a while and said: “So, aside from this there were a lot of detailed receipts and financial information within the file folder. It recorded massive amounts of funding from the AUS within Union territory...in other words, the AUS can maintain a place outside of the Union and become one of the three major pirate forces because of this sponsor. The list of names of AUS sponsors and members within the Union isn’t that surprising. We all know that the head of the White Tower--Miss Laura’s predecessor Doctor Hardin was jailed for anti-humanitarian crimes. He and his group of Union politicians that were captured were the early members of the AUS, but I didn’t think that Doctor Gordon would take the torch…”

Prime Minister Edward interrupted her and said: “Why doesn’t anyone know about this? Was she silenced in secret by the Union?”

“Uh,” Turan glanced through the long-distance channel at Lin Jingheng carefully. Perhaps due to the delays in the connection, Lin Jingheng displayed no emotion on his face. “It could also be that she self-destructed before she ran out of energy...but Doctor Gordon’s incident was indeed covered up by the Union. If I remembered correctly, they only said she died of illness…”

“The Union couldn’t possibly get rid of two heads of the White Tower back-to-back with the same ‘anti-humanitarian’ crimes. That would immediately catch the media’s attention and anger, can you imagine what the consequences would be? Even the most foolish people would think there’s a conspiracy behind this.” Lin Jingheng answered suddenly, “plus, with General Lin Wei’s position in the Military Council at the time, if he insisted on covering up this incident, the Council would be more than willing to back him.”

Lin Wei left a will before he died, refusing to enter the mourtrary in Wolto. He wished for people to completely forget him after he died and be erased in the history of the Union, but why? Did it have anything to do with Laura?

Lin Jingheng couldn’t tell, but felt this whole situation was deeply ironic as he looked around. Fate was like a noose tied tightly on his neck, making it hard for him to breathe: “What else is in the protected files?”

“The Nuwa Project.” Turan said, “The outbreak of the Rainbow Virus in NSC 129 also leaked into the Union. The Union established an emergency pandemic response team with experts on nanomachines and medical professionals to research and develop a vaccine. After the vaccine was successfully made, the Eden Committee added the vaccine into Eden’s medical database. At the same time, people noticed the Rainbow Virus’ characteristic of making mature cells devolve. The AUS began massive research both inside and outside of the Union as they thought that this could be key to human evolution, so they developed the Nuwa Project--in their perspective, human society under Eden is dead and the future is outside of the Union. The entire Union was united under Eden with no way to break free. That’s why Doctor Hardin and his team thought that pirates wouldn’t be able to break the Eden network by force even if they had the technology and supplies of the AUS.So while he helped expand the influence of the AUS outside of the Union, the doctor and his team wished to raise a stronger, smarter, and more perfect evolutionary man...there is plenty of detailed data on the Nuwa Project inside the protected files….however, we haven’t been able to find information on the biochip so far, maybe it was lost during data transfer.”

“Nuwa”, “Eden” ---these were all words that came from the romantic tales of creation from ancient Earth that were later drenched in bowls of human blood by the modern man.

Prime Minister Edward finally spoke up after a long while: “For the sake of life and nature...for the sake of fighting for freedom.”

He crossed his fingers and pressed his forehead on his hands, then chuckled mockingly: “Such heroes and great predecessors. But what about us? Those of us that lived through the Rainbow Virus that took billions of lives, the people that lived on those three planets that the madman Prince Cayley blew up, the people that are currently starving, and the people like us that almost died from the mutated Rainbow Virus...what are we? What is this called? ‘All people are born free, but some people are more free than others[[2]](#footnote-2)’, is that what it is?”

## Ch 99 - Landing on Planet Beijing

Lu Bixing quickly shot a glance at Lin Jingheng on the screen, whose figure still looked as if the screen was lagging and attempted to cut in: “Prime Minister, we…”

Perhaps the Prime Minister was getting old or still had some lasting damage to his hearing from the Rainbow Virus, but he would easily hear ringing in his ears from getting too worked up and didn’t hear Lu Bixing’s voice. He continued with agitation: “We’ve rebelled against the Cayley family, and after sacrificing a whole generation of people we finally managed to kick them out of the Eighth Galaxy. The Union never fulfilled their promises to us and left us to survive on our own; that was fine, we could wait. Even if they couldn’t provide, we could figure things out on our own. The Eighth Galaxy had no say in the interstellar meetings, our currency was equivalent to garbage; that was all fine, we didn’t have any complaints. That just meant that we’re poor, and being poor was still better than living like slaves and cattle under the Cayley rule back then, right? The Union won’t give military autonomy to individual galaxies, this is still fine. If these are the laws of the Union, we’d be willing to follow and adapt their cultures. Even if we are the furthest galaxy of the Union, even if our neighbors are space pirates and live with the lingering fear that the Cayley pirates will come back and threaten the peace we finally built…”

Lu Bixing reached his arm out past Turan towards the old Prime Minister but didn’t reach him--the Prime Minister banged his hands on the table and stood up: “I don’t understand all that she said, and I can guarantee you anyone you pick up randomly on the streets won’t understand either. How would we know anything about the legislation for Eden and whatever historical event, or how many famous people were arrested? We’ve never even seen what Eden was, so I only know that they had money, status and power to sponsor the AUS outside of the Union, feeding the pirates!”

“Are we not people as well? Do we not deserve to live? Simply because we don’t have any grand ideals?” The Prime Minister turned to the screen; his gaze as sharp as a blade when it landed on the chest of the man on the screen.

Lu Bixing also got up immediately and interrupted him in a louder voice: “Prime Minister!”

At that moment, Lu Bixing realized that the old Prime Minister did have something to say to Lin Jingheng.

It wasn’t because Laura Gordon was Lin’s mother, but because he himself came from the complicated Military Council of the Union. His presence here represented the corruption of the central Union government--as well as the arrogant attitude the central government had looking down on the Eighth Galaxy.

Also, as the head of the Silver Fortress who’d faced a strange ‘death’ and then ‘revived’ suspiciously, the pirate invasion and fall of the Union both happened right as Lin Jingheng came back. Anyone with a clear mind could tell that there was something going on behind the scenes, and it wasn’t that the old Prime Minister didn’t have his own guesses, he just chose to keep quiet and cooperated with the commander for the sake of the Eighth Galaxy.

Heroes and people of power all had their own burdens to carry and challenges to face. They stood above everyone else and could see through the galaxies; their thoughts were always for the sake of the bigger picture and had the power to influence the world. They would fight amongst themselves for the sake of their ideals, hatred, or even personal gains on the stage of the universe. Every battle could change the fate of the world no matter who won or lost.

But what about the commoners who died in despair during a revolution?

These heroes that stood on a pedestal weren’t even aware that these people existed. They didn’t know that not only did they exist, but they were also sacrificial lambs of their political games. Perhaps if they knew, they would all be shocked like the famous Commander Lin right now.

This time, the Prime Minister finally heard Lu Bixing’s voice. His face trembled lightly as his dry lips pressed together. Just as Turan reached her arm out to cut off the communication, the old Prime Minister lowered his head silently and quickly walked out of the lab.

Lu Bixing immediately turned toward Lin Jingheng: “Lin, you…”

The communication was cut off from Lin Jingheng’s side the moment he opened his mouth, and the screen turned black.

Lu Bixing’s words were stuck in his throat. He pressed his hands on the meeting table and took in a deep breath; by the time he looked back up, his expression had already calmed down. Now that the Prime Minister was gone, the group of people that remained in the lab turned blankly towards him like lost lambs.

“The Eighth Galaxy is essentially operating independently now, so the ideological battle between the Union and pirate forces no longer concerns us. From the recording earlier, it looks like there are only two things we need to pay close attention to.” Lu Bixing spoke as objectively and calmly as he could. “First, the pirates have spies within the Union, but Captain Turan inspected the entire file earlier and noticed that the ‘spies list’ only included the names of the people who were arrested decades ago in the Union that everyone knew about. This is strange -- these are all from the internal database of the AUS, so why did they need to hide from their own people?”

The room was completely silent for a few moments until everyone caught on to what he meant and exploded.

“Professor Lu, are you saying that someone must’ve removed something from the files before we decoded it?”

Lu Bixing lifted his head and looked towards Turan: “Captain, I heard that when Mister Hope first saw Lin, he immediately recognized the commander’s identity.”

“...fuck.” Turan cursed and slapped her personal device harshly, “Keep that Hope guy under strict control!”

The newly appointed director of the lab felt this discussion was getting out of hand and commented; “Professor Lu, the lab is a heavily restricted area. If Hope were to come close, someone would notice so he couldn’t possibly find a chance.”

Lu Bixing looked into his eyes deeply and asked: “Director, do you know who among the researchers working on this file within the last few months have spoken to this ex-Prophet of the AUS?”

The director froze.

“Second, we can see from the video that Miss Laura Gordon injected a biochip into herself in order to block off the enemy’s attempt to hack the mental network. This chip was strong enough for her to handle a well-trained military fleet all on her own - this is something that even Commander Lin can’t do with his mental strength. If a biochip like this can increase a non-military personnel’s mental strength to this level, imagine what kind of fleet could be formed if these chips get mass produced? Luckily as of now, whether it’s the Union or pirates, we have not seen any trace of these superhuman fleets existing. The ‘opium’ from the Freedom Corps can only be used as a drug right now and is only a shabby copy of the original. I’m guessing that the real data of how to produce these biochips was lost, but it’s clear that both the Freedom Corps and AUS are looking for it, so we have to be prepared.”

A sudden thought flashed across Lu Bixing’s mind as he spoke. The Nuwa Project’s slogan was ‘human evolution’, and if he was the original planner of the project Doctor Hardin, he would most likely put the focus of the research on ‘psychological evolution’. The carbon-based human body had its limits, and in order to fully maximize strength, mechanicalization of the body would be the only option.

As for Laura Gordon’s biochip, despite being lost to history, it still had a modern-day copy by the name of opium. With the research abilities of the sponsored pirates, were they really still not able to solve this problem after 50 years?

Then perhaps the problem wasn’t the chip itself, but the physical body that the chip is injected into.

Therefore, it is very likely that the biochip and Nuwa Project were actually the same project. In other words, the Nuwa Project’s goal was to raise a human that could fully absorb this biochip. After Laura Gordon was forced to self-destruct, both the AUS and Freedom Corps lost the most important piece of their research and ended up going down different paths in their research.

Yet as Lu Bixing scanned through all the anxious faces in the room, he quietly kept this theory to himself.

He didn’t know if these victims that were stuck with the trauma of the Rainbow Virus would hold out their hand in temptation if a force powerful enough to turn the tables of the warfare were to be presented in front of them right now. Thinking about it carefully, a simple chip injection could turn a newbie who had just learned how to pilot a mech into a super soldier more powerful than the Silver Ten; even Lu Bixing himself found that temptation quite irresistible.

They were already walking on lava, that fragile light of humanity within each soul couldn’t possibly handle another moral challenge right now.

Lu Bixing poured another bowl of chicken soup without a word and diluted this dangerous topic. He then concluded in place of the Prime Minister who had run off in anger. “I don’t believe that we can really conquer anything with the help of outside forces or influences. Back when our last generations stood up to fight against the Cayley rule, even commoners were brave enough to stand up and form the Independent Navy. Today, we have a new government and our own military forces, what do we need to be afraid of? As long as our anger for the Rainbow Virus exists, the spirit of the Independent Navy is still alive. I am fearless; what about everyone else?”

The newly formed council of the government didn’t respond.

Everyone here was grown adults and not naive students of the Starry Sea Academy. In the face of challenging times, Headmaster Lu’s words were hard to digest. The group slowly left the room while repeating the word ‘fearless’ in their minds to brainwash themselves into staying optimistic.

Lu Bixing let out a breath of air and thought about how much he missed Lin Jingheng despite already seeing him a few hours ago.

He pressed his hand on his personal device and wanted to contact him. However, a long-distance connection could only be established when both sides agreed on a location, and if he didn't know the other party’s exact coordinates, he could only pray for the commander to manually scan for a signal when they reached the nearest portal.

Lu Bixing thought about it for a moment and sent a message to the long-distance network: “Are you okay? Please respond if you can.”

The text message was recorded into an electromagnetic signal and was sent out of the atmosphere after being password protected. The recorded message sailed through the network and went out into the galaxy, yet Lin Jingheng didn’t respond immediately.

Lu Bixing let out another sigh and turned to look at the empty long-distance communication screen. For some reason, he felt that person’s weakness through the black and silent screen.

For a long time, he always thought Lin Jingheng was handsome and strong, the kindness the commander showed like a wildflower growing in the cracks of a rock. It was both warm and almost playful at times, and Lu Bixing never associated ‘weakness’ with Lin Jingheng. Even when the commander was sick and fell out of the medical capsule in his sleep, those eyes clouded by fever still maintained a strength that could pierce through his weak body.

He couldn’t imagine how Lin Jingheng felt right now; the commander would never express his feelings to the world no matter what it was. All Lu Bixing knew right now was that his heart was heavy and restless, perhaps unable to find a peace of mind until he could touch that person with his own hands.

“What?” Suddenly, Turan raised her voice beside him, “what are you fools all doing?”

Lu Bixing pulled his thoughts back and turned towards her.

“Hope went missing.” Turan glanced at him quickly, carrying a hint of coldness in her eyes. “We have a whole team of guards watching him, and yet he still managed to escape. Did the security in this damn base turn into a broken fishnet right before my eyes? Inform everyone to gather up immediately!

That last line was directed towards her personal device.

Turan’s personality was naturally bright and cheerful, but her attitude towards anyone regardless of status was quite bossy. Sometimes people would forget what kind of person this Captain of the Ninth Squadron was really like.

Lu Bixing wanted to say something, but nothing came out of his mouth as he watched Turan walk out like a storm. The captain was in charge of the Ninth Squadron and had her own way of handling things, but Lu Bixing wasn’t part of the military, so he wasn’t in a position to make comments. A sense of helplessness filled his heart; he remembered when Lin was laying in his arms with a high fever, when Hope helped him fool the eyes of the pursuers from the AUS to bring back the vaccine and saved the entire planet. He remembered when Hope worked restlessly to build the Eighth Galaxy’s agricultural base, how the man even told him upon returning that the robots were already programmed with the proper codes, that as long they had supplies and a supervisor, more agricultural bases like that could be produced on demand.

That’s right, Hope even promised to give him two bottles of wine.

Lu Bixing thought that misunderstanding between people came from distancing; if people were lucky enough to share a journey together, they could smooth out the rough edges on each other. It wasn’t until now that he realized that some people were meant to walk different paths.

Turan didn’t bother nitpicking responsibility on the training grounds because nobody could explain how Hope got away, so the result was everyone had to suffer the punishment. The newly enlisted members of the Self-Defense Squad faced the cruel discipline of the Ninth Squadron’s military law.

Saturday lowered his head as he walked with the soldiers. His expression was blank, but his heart was quite rebellious.

What could Hope do? He was just a poor soul that got bullied out of the AUS, and after being captured he had been very cooperative with the military. He had also helped save the planet, to the point where even Lin Jingheng himself couldn’t lock him up and treat him like a hostage. Hope had worked so hard for the Eighth Galaxy and the base, yet he could still be pulled out for another interrogation at a single command. Saturday watched coldly on the sidelines as he felt Hope was wronged.

He admired the world that Hope described, filled with light and the chirps of early birds to the point where he learned to grow a sympathetic heart.

Even if Professor Lu knew, he wouldn’t say anything; Saturday thought quietly.

At this time, Hope’s small mech had already escaped from surveillance and mingled into the public terminal. After disguising the ship, they flew out of the Qiming base.

The Eighth Galaxy’s public terminals had already begun construction and could be used as emergency tracks and terminals during certain times. However, due to lack of military forces, the security inspection system was still under construction so sneaking past security wasn’t that hard.

Hope took a few of his followers into the disguised merchant ship. Most of them were original AUS members that had been stuck in the Qiming base, but quite a few new faces could also be seen among them--if Lu Bixing was here, he would recognize that a few quieter researchers from his team also ran away with Hope.

When they passed by another merchant ship, Hope received a communication request. His followers stood on their toes in anxiety as they watched Hope accept the signal without hesitation.

A clear whistling sound rang from the other side, followed by a rough man’s voice: “I have an emergency, my friend, can I borrow some fuel?”

Hope answered with a warm smile: “What happened?”

“I went to deliver some stuff for Base 4 and just came back, but I ran into some accident and used up all my energy. I’m afraid I can’t sail back with the remaining energy, can you help?”

Hope quickly took out a small portion of his fuel from his own mech’s backup energy and sent it over under the anxious faces of his followers: “This should be enough for you to return to Qiming.”

The passerby didn’t expect Hope to hand over fuel so quickly, and after thanking him the other merchant ship happily sailed away.

“Prophet.” A former researcher from Qiming spoke up after the man left, “those people are all scammers that used to smuggle weapons and illegal stock. They keep a few of their old merchant ships and roam around while people are still too afraid to sail in space to claim all the running starships to earn money. They’re making almost as much as our engineering team selling and buying starships, and to save fuel costs they sail around to scam for fuel from unsuspecting people.”

Hope was quite shocked: “They’re scammers?”

“Yes. If merchant ships get damaged or malfunction, they can call for emergency backup from the guards on the military terminals. Do they look like they dare use the same story to scam soldiers?”

Hope didn’t know whether to cry or laugh at the liveliness of the Eighth Galaxy; even scammers are now out doing their jobs.

They passed by a transfer portal and the mech sent out a small alert: “Long-distance communication key matchup; please choose whether to accept the signal.”

Hope turned to look at the screen, the smile in his eyes disappearing. After a few moments, he nodded and said: “Okay, send our coordinates and area code.”

The communication channel was set up almost instantaneously as the signals passed through numerous galaxies. Over 20 hours later, the person on the other end finally appeared. However, the screen remained dark as the person refused to show their face and only released a clearly altered voice through a voice changer.

“The message for the long-distance communication has been there for months,” the voice said, “why did you only respond now? Are you really planning on giving the organization to those madmen?”

Pirate forces outside the Union had a complicated relationship among themselves; even within the AUS itself, there were many different voices and opposing opinions. Some people supported violence and using all available methods during warfare, even going as far as allowing weapons of mass-destruction and biowarfare under necessary circumstances. These were the Mania Factions. Others also believed that the AUS shouldn’t go against their doctrine and should use this time period of unrest to further their missionary goals to spread their teachings; these were the Conventional Factions and Hope clearly belonged to the latter.

Yet during a chaotic time like this, it was obvious the cries of mania were much louder. Before the outbreak of the pirate invasion into the Union, the AUS had already experienced an internal battle among the factions. Hope had utilized his power of words to gather up his followers and hid under the Cayley Pirates’ forces to escape the storm temporarily.

“The Glory Troops severed their own connections and openly betrayed their comrades. The organization is now stuck within the seven galaxies and are being chased down by forces of the central militia post everywhere, right?” Hope said, “What now, are those people that were desperate to centralize all the armed forces outside the Union finally hearing voices of concern from the organization?”

“These short-sighted barbarians spent too much time with the Glory Troops and wasted their efforts on a plan doomed to fail,” the voice from the other side said. The distance between the two was too far apart and had a few hours of delay even through the long-distance networks, so this was clearly not a response to Hope’s question earlier. “Get out of the slums already and take back control of this organization, I’ll supply you with armed forces.”

Hope closed his eyes and followed the expansion of the mental network to see the unimpressive public terminal.

After a short while, the third message from the mystery person finally arrived: “I did hear about a rumor recently, they said that one of the Squadrons of the Silver Ten is in the Eighth Galaxy and annihilated that Von whatever. And the head of the Squadron is suspected to be...Lin Jingheng?”

Hope opened his eyes and responded with a blank expression: “Isn’t he dead?”

There was a long pause after, and it seemed as if the other side finally received the message and said: “Right, but he’s still her son. We haven’t been able to find the ‘forbidden fruit’ after so many years, so I’m wondering if it really ended up in his hands? You’ve been spending a lot of time in the Eighth Galaxy, what are you doing in a place like that?”

Hope’s followers immediately turned to him. Hope lifted a finger up and gestured for them to keep quiet, then said: “Lin Jingheng had always been under your watch. He’s just a child that you saw growing up, how can you not know what he’s like? I don’t know whether or not the Silver Ten is here, but I believe a small portion of them went to become mercenaries after the Union fell, so it’s likely that some of them ended up in the Eighth Galaxy--as for Prince Cayley, Ares Von, he set himself up for his own failure. He blew up three planets and angered those old followers of Lu Xin; those big names in the galaxy utilized the underground tunnels and assassinated him. Also, that old Executive Minister didn’t die and is now rebuilding a new government with his elderly team. He’s leading the people around right now to feed the poor; the new currency here is nutrient syringes, and I was the one that rebuilt the agricultural bases for them.”

The mysterious voice let out a sigh of defeat as they received the message and said: “How unfortunate, I thought....ah. Well, it does sound like something you would do. Anyway, now that we’ve reached this point, you should also stop wandering about and come back, I’ll send someone out to escort you.”

Hope didn’t respond nor did he wait for another message. The disguised mech passed through the transfer portal and sailed quietly towards a wider, crueler world.

Lin Jingheng blocked off his long-distance connection, the guarding ships around him, and let the newly retrieved base float around freely as he made his way towards the former Beijing-β.

He suddenly said: “Land on Planet Beijing-β.”

“Sir, are you sure?” Zhanlu asked, “The atmosphere of Beijing-β suffered fatal damage during its annihilation, the current land environment isn’t at a condition that can support humans to walk on without protection. There are no mech tracks on land and we will need to use force landing to get near it.”

Lin Jingheng hesitated a little.

Zhanlu didn’t bother him anymore and carefully controlled the mobile base to sail around the dead planet. As they felt the natural gravitation of the planet and passed through the toxic remnants of the atmosphere, the mech closed in on land.

When they were 5,000 kilometers away from land, Lin Jingheng could utilize Zhanlu’s mental network to clearly see the planet that he’d stayed on for five years.

It was like the background of a horror movie; the remnants of the streets and buildings remained, ashes from the nuclear bombs covered the ground like a layer of snow as the temperature on land dropped to -160 Celsius and froze everything. A gust of poisonous wind blasted through the land of the dead and slashed through the ashes to reveal the corpses underneath like a ghost of the past.

Lin Jingheng remembered that old bar he lived in; the lost young people that drank alone in the middle of the night in this quiet place.

Everything had perished into ashes.

“Forget it,” Lin Jingheng broke the silence. “I’m not going down. Accelerate past the gravitational field, we’re leaving.”

The massive space station revved up its internal engine.

“Clean up all the inventory on the station,” Lin Jingheng ordered, “I need a fully compiled list before we reach Qiming. Watch the director of the space station and send a team to find out where he came from...we’re going back.”

By the time Lin Jingheng returned to Qiming, it was already hours before dawn. He didn’t want to talk to anyone and even left Zhanlu on the Model 3 as he quietly made his way through the night back into his small ‘closet’. He hit something the moment he opened the door and alerted the automated lights in the room. Lin Jingheng looked down in shock to find Lu Bixing sitting on the ground near the door, rubbing his eyes half-awake as he got hit on the head by the door.

## Ch 100 - Can I?

The hours before dawn were the toughest times for people to wake up. Lu Bixing walked around the whole day with a heavy heart, and because he didn’t know when Lin Jingheng would return, he fell into a deep slumber while waiting. It took him a while after being knocked on the head by the door to fully wake up.

Lin Jingheng noticed this unexpected ‘package’ leaning on the door and quickly pushed the door back slightly. Lu Bixing slid down to the ground and frantically tried to crawl back up; his eyelids were still heavy even after numerous attempts to wake up. He stayed on the ground for a while, his shirt wrinkled from the shoulder down to the waist in a sloppy fashion. The fashionable Headmaster Lu seemed to always find himself losing all his scholarly demeanor and image whenever he stepped into Lin Jingheng’s little ‘closet’ room.

Lin Jingheng asked: “Why are you always sitting on the ground when you come in?”

The part of Lu Bixing’s brain that could process language seemed to still be asleep. He stood up and squinted at Lin Jingheng with a hint of confusion as if he didn’t understand the words that were being said.

When Lin Jingheng landed on Qiming, he was immediately informed of Hope’s escape and Turan’s tantrum over the incident. Every step he took from the launching dock to the command post was filled with unease, but the moment he laid his eye on little Mister Lu here, all the anxiety and frustration in his mind was cleared like a gust of wind blowing away the fog.

“Aren’t you cold? Doesn’t your neck hurt like that?” Lin Jingheng sighed, carefully grabbed Lu Bixing’s arm and took the young scientist beside the bed. “Sleep here, it’s still a while before the sun rises.”

Lu Bixing fell onto the bed without a word like a log, forcefully creating an imprint of his figure on Lin Jingheng’s bed.

Lin Jingheng looked at him for a while. The eyes that were clouded by fog before dawn regained some warmth and light as he looked at the young man in resignation.

Lin Jingheng quickly took off all the small equipment and protection gear as he headed towards the closet on the side. As he turned back around to take his clothes off, Lu Bixing jumped out of the bed like a zombie with his eyes still closed and searched his way towards Lin Jingheng.

The commander went back towards the door to take his shoes off, and this little zombie scientist followed him over as if he was sleep walking. When Lin Jingheng opened up the closet to pull some clothes out, he also followed over; then once again followed the commander to the bathroom...except this time the poor scientist was locked outside the door.

Lu Bixing stared at the bathroom door for a few seconds and yawned. He finally woke up, stretched his stiff muscles from sleeping on the floor too long and finally responded to Lin Jingheng’s question almost a whole year later: “Where do I sit if I don’t sit on the floor? Your little room only has a bed and no chair.”

Lin Jingheng’s voice, along with the sound of water flowing, passed through the door: “I never said you can’t sit on the bed. What, are you afraid I’m going to take advantage of you?”

He’d never responded to Lu Bixing’s long-distance message. The fleet would pass by multiple transfer portals on their way back and mechs would automatically scan for matching long-distance signals and send a notification to the pilot. Yet this person still chose to not look or give any attention; it was as if he had to put on a hard shell on himself when he faced the world and even Lu Bixing. If he found any cracks or broken parts on the shell, he would lock himself away and fix it behind closed doors.

He would rather strip down naked than let anyone see his wounds, including Lu Bixing.

Lu Bixing waited over 20 hours for him without a word or response. His heart had raced in concern during those hours and was already exhausted; he had even had a nightmare that the commander left him without a goodbye.

Even though he knew that Lin was this kind of person and couldn’t find a reason to scold the latter, Lu Bixing still felt frustrated at this thought. The way Lu Bixing decided to express his frustration was to pull at and adjust his shirt collar, then banged on the bathroom door as he called out obnoxiously: “You want to take advantage of me? Good, open the door, come at me!”

The door to the bathroom opened unexpectedly. Lu Bixing was caught off guard and slapped his hand onto Lin Jingheng’s body. The warm droplets of water fell from the tips of his hair and rolled down along his collarbone past his chest, then down onto his clean abs. It was as if Lu Bixing touched an electric current and quickly pulled back his hand, took a step back, and crashed his back onto the closet door behind him.

Lin Jingheng had the intention to tease him; the edge of his lips trembled slightly as he held back laughter, then spoke emotionlessly: “move, don’t mess around.”

Lu Bixing first gave into his upright-gentleman instincts and moved his gaze away subconsciously, then immediately realized as he thought: *you’re the one that exposed yourself, and you think I’m too scared to look?*

He then slowly relaxed his shoulders and legs then leaned onto the closet door, gathered up his courage and blew a whistle as he turned his gaze onto Lin Jingheng provocatively. Perhaps it was because Milky Way City had recently entered its dry season, the temperature difference between night and day was more dramatic than before. He spent half a night sleeping on the cold floor of the room but still felt his body heating up, and his nose began to itch.

Five seconds later, the proper scholar still proved to be too inexperienced compared to a real thug; Lu Bixing puffed up his face in an attempt to be intimidating, only to have his act broken by his visibly reddening face from his neck up to his face. He then pulled back his obnoxious crab legs and readjusted his shirt, then quickly shot a strange glance down as if he was checking something.

A vague smile lifted by the corner of Lin Jingheng’s corner of his eyes as he walked back in and closed the bathroom door.

Lu Bixing didn’t seem very confident about himself and pressed his finger below his nose to make sure no strange liquid rolled down and said: “Nice body, Commander, but that towel’s in the way.”

Lin Jingheng ignored his suggestive comments.

Lu Bixing stood silently by the door for a moment then mumbled to himself: “there’s a noise cancellation system by the bed, I wouldn’t be able to catch the door opening if I fell asleep on it.”

His voice was low but still passed through the slightly opened door into Lin Jingheng’s ears. Lin Jingheng lifted his eyes slightly and stood in the middle of the steam.

“You…” Lu Bixing’s gaze fell onto the small crack of the door where the light peeked out.

He thought about it and concluded that Lin Jingheng clearly didn’t need any consolation, otherwise he wouldn’t have cut off all connections and hid himself from the rest of the world.

Aside from madmen that have lost their sanity, every human being needed care and love like how everyone needed food to survive. For those people that are mentally healthy and easy to get along with, it was as if they had a healthy digestive system that could absorb anything they ate. No matter what kind of trouble they’ve gone through, all they needed was a kind pat on the back, regardless of how insignificant it was to get back on their feet and be able to absorb the kindness.

But Lin Jingheng was clearly the type without a healthy digestive system; even though he was sensitive and careful about all the feelings other people gave him, he was still quite uncomfortable receiving any kind of affection from most people.

Lu Bixing pondered for a few moments about how he wanted to approach the commander and then said after careful thoughts: “I had a dream earlier that you left without a word.”

Lin Jingheng: “Where did I go?”

“I don’t know, but it’s not the first time you left without saying anything.” Lu Bixing said, “back then on Beijing-β, you accepted the invitation to one of the bases of the Freedom Corps. The communication network of the eight galaxies were still intact, so you contacted the Ninth Squadron to standby outside the Union--the truth is you didn’t plan on returning from that trip, right?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t respond but his heart fell.

If Lu Bixing hadn’t followed his students out and ended up in the base, he probably would have never seen this person again.

What would have happened after that?

Lin Jingheng felt that he would’ve gone out and robbed the supplies of those refugees in the underground terminals because he knew his blood was cold. Perhaps he’d even pride himself in punishing those scum that decided to turn a blind eye at the tragedy awaiting the rest of the galaxy.

Then he wouldn’t even care about the rest of these people and would have quickly reconnected with the Ninth Squadron, taking down the Cayley fleet like a hero and making his grand entrance back to the seven galaxies. He would then carry his hatred and empty soul onto the battlefield and fight until he died. Perhaps he would continue to fight for the Union reluctantly, perhaps he would enter as a third-party force; or perhaps he would bring in another storm to stir up the already chaotic battlegrounds and push the world down to a deeper abyss until he turned into another sacrifice of the abyss.

“I dreamed that I sent you a message every second thinking that you would pass by a portal any day, hoping that those notifications would annoy you to death. But you still didn’t respond. I thought maybe you went out to a portal outside the network or even left the Eighth Galaxy altogether.”

*I’m worried about you.*

Lu Bixing only wanted to mess with him for a bit but realized that his heart also started aching as he said this. He paused for a little and then said quietly: “Am I not strong enough to keep you? Because you can go anywhere whenever you want, nobody can make you stay, right?”

*You have my heart and everything I have, but how much of you are you willing to give me?*

Lu Bixing had always been a sensitive and sharp individual and this question wasn’t supposed to be difficult to answer. Yet he began to grow doubts the more he spoke because he did have experiences in the past where he’d gotten a little too ahead of himself.

“I was just thinking, if you got tired of the Eighth Galaxy and me…,” he said.

The sound of running water stopped while he was lost in thought. The door of the bathroom opened again and Lin Jingheng walked out with a bathrobe.

“I don’t have the habit of telling people things before I make my decision.” Lin Jingheng responded, “unless someone reminded me ahead of time and I felt that it was necessary. But under most circumstances, you know…”

Lu Bixing let out a difficult laugh: “I know, I’ve heard of all those gossips. Commander Lin is that infamous aloof man who looks down on everyone.”

“Two years ago, I wouldn’t have told you anything if I wanted to leave.” Lin Jingheng paused and lowered his eyebrow as if his next words were difficult to say. He pondered for a few seconds before he finally spoke up, “now, as long as you’re here, I won’t leave.”

Lu Bixing looked at him in disbelief.

Lin Jingheng looked at him and added: “Even if I had a reason to leave for a while, I’ll come back as long as you’re still here.”

Lu Bixing was dumbstruck by this sudden surprise and forgot that he was trying really hard to give a roundabout expression of his worry. He slowly held in his breath and asked: “What’s the difference between two years ago and now?”

“We were only friends two years ago.”

Lu Bixing almost wanted to ask, “*is that how you treat your friends*”, but then remembered that this same man also admitted personally that he considered Monoeyed Hawk a friend. It looked like if a normal treatment to a “friend” was on the same level as his own father, the commander was considerably more lenient towards him.

He followed up immediately: “What about now? Hey Commander, do you always talk like squeezing a half-used tube of toothpaste in the Silver Fortress too?”

Lin Jingheng smiled and didn’t respond to this clear provocation, then turned his head: “I woke you up earlier, you can go back to sleep now.”

Yet with Lu Bixing’s vitality, he could regain his spirit with even the slightest hint of sunlight. He was now fully recharged; the young man took a step forward and gave the commander a hug from behind: “So if we go above friends, we’re like ‘special friends’, right?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t complain and let Lu Bixing cling onto him without a word. *No, that’s not it*, he thought.

Whether it was normal friends or close friends, these relationships could still go in both directions; on one hand, the relationship could escalate to the point where both parties become completely enamored with each other. They would be willing to live and die for one another. At the same time, the relationship could also fall apart due to a clash in personalities or even turn both parties into mortal enemies.

*But I won’t let it happen*, Lin Jingheng thought. For Lu Bixing, he would never go down the latter route because his feelings for the young man were limitless.

Even if one day Lu Bixing woke up from this sweet dream to see the true despicable nature of him, Lin Jingheng could still walk away and protect the boy he cared about from afar.

There was only an hour left before the sun rose. Lin Jingheng looked at the time, took out a set of clean clothes and made himself a cup of coffee with no intention of sleeping: “I suspect that Hope isn’t just a victim of the internal conflict in the AUS if he chose to leave now. Where would he go? It’s likely that he also has his own supporters in the Union who still have connections with the pirates outside. If that’s the case, the Eighth Galaxy’s armed forces may be at risk of being exposed to the enemy; we should prepare for the worst. You should sleep a bit more; I’ll discuss this with Turan.”

“Hope won’t do that.” Lu Bixing stole a sip of the commander’s coffee and forcefully pulled his daydreaming mind back to reality. He rubbed his temples and said, “you know, I really hate your habit of changing the topic in the middle of a heartfelt confession. If you don’t know what to say, why can’t you find some books to read and learn how a real confession works?”

Lin Jinghend nodded cooperatively: “Sure.”

Lu Bixing: “......”

He didn’t want to admit that was a little cute.

Lu Bixing cleared his throat and sat back down on the bed: “Hope...he is definitely a scheming character, but he isn’t crazy. He wouldn’t have risked betraying his organization to help us if he was; he also spent a lot of time and effort on the agricultural bases, I can tell from how beautiful the farms looked. He has his own sets of morals and things he holds strong opinions on, but he truly is someone that wants to fill the wilderness with flowers. If he didn’t have such strong ideals, he wouldn’t be able to sway so many people and build such a strong following.”

Lin Jingheng looked at him in slight surprise: “You sure have quite a high opinion of him.”

“It’s just my instincts, it might be wrong.” Lu Bixing said, “Though if it’s really like you said and Hope still kept in contact with his sponsor, he could’ve left at any time; why did he stay for so long to do volunteer work then? If he could delete the second half of that list, he would’ve had the chance to destroy the entire file--I feel like he left it on purpose for us to see. It’s his way of explaining all this chaos to us so that we don’t dive in like clueless clowns and making sure we still put the protection of the newly built Eighth Galaxy as first priority. It’s likely that we’ll still remain enemies in the future, but for now I don’t think he will expose us and will instead actively protect us. I want to assume that with his age, he might have joined the AUS before...Doctor Laura or even Doctor Hardin were active in the organization. I want to believe that the early rebels of Eden still have an unbending ideal in their hearts.”

He shot a meek glance at Lin Jingheng when he mentioned Laura, but the latter didn’t have any reaction.

Lu Bixing then continued: “you know, it’s quite strange--those people that really changed the world in history are often ones that unintentionally walked down a path in their life until they reached the eye of the storm. They were selected by history and coincidentally became those key figures in times of crisis. And those people that had strong ideals since the start, the ones that actively reached out to challenge the world are instead pushed into an unknown direction by the currents of fate. It’s like humans were never given the wisdom to choose their own paths, right? The world that Doctor Laura wanted to see was not a world like this.”

Lin Jingheng finally understood that Lu Bixing’s strange behavior tonight was an attempt to carefully console him. The young man was even careful to not refer to Laura by her last name out of consideration for Lin Jingheng’s detest towards the committee, like an anxious little puppy slowly walking over to rub against his leg.

Lin Jingheng felt as if a small needle poked at his heart: “.... yeah.”

Lu Bixing held his hand out towards him and said: “So can you relax a little sometimes? Get some sleep.”

Lin Jingheng reached out and held his hand, and gently brushed his fingers across his hand. He looked up and gazed at Lu Bixing deeply: “How can I sleep when you’re here?”

Lu Bixing’s instinct was that Lin Jingheng wasn’t complaining about the bed being stolen nor shooing him away; his throat rolled slightly.

Lin Jingheng leaned down as he closed the distance between himself and Lu Bixing: “Can I?”

Lu Bixing felt that even if Lin Jingheng asked for his life right now, he would gladly hand it over to him without hesitation.

Within the blink of an eye, the young scientist that lacked actual experimental research quickly ran through the content of all the adult books he’d read in his mind. His instincts told him that even though impulse was often the start of everything behind the curtains, it still required some skill to accomplish. He wasn’t prepared, and with Commander Lin’s ‘skills’, he was afraid he might not be able to stroll out without a scratch tonight.

When the two’s bare skin touched, Lu Bixing’s head was filled with excitement and thought: *who cares? I have Lin Jingheng now, I might as well just roll with it.*

But despite being prepared mentally, it was still difficult to force himself to relax when it got to that point.

Lu Bixing held in the pain and didn’t make a sound, but his arm around Lin Jingheng’s waist gripped tighter by the minute. His gaze also flew towards the side of the bed--there was an emergency first aid kit from the drawer within arm’s reach.

Lin Jingheng suddenly stopped and asked: “Does it hurt?”

Lu Bixing took in a deep breath and forced a smile onto his face: “No.”

Lin Jingheng held his chin and gently pressed his lips to the corner of Lu Bixing’s mouth. He reached his hand over and wiped off the thin layer of cold sweat from Lu Bixing’s forehead and slowly let the young man go.

Lu Bixing: “Huh? What are you doing?”

Lin Jingheng: “You can do it.”

Lu Bixing didn’t catch what he meant and stared at the commander in confusion.

Lin Jingheng pinched his nose lightly, then reached his arm over to pull the first aid drawer out. A full pack of medication and medical equipment was neatly stacked in the drawer; Lin Jingheng turned his gaze back to Lu Bixing and said: “I said you can do it; do you want me?”

Lu Bixing felt his brain short-circuit for a moment as if he was still dreaming, then stuttered as he opened his mouth: “I...I...c-c-can I really?”

1. 桃李春风一杯酒，江湖夜雨十年灯 - Excerpt of a poem by Song Dynasty Poet Huang Tingjian that refers to the longing of reuniting with a close friend that was separated for 10 years. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The original phrase is “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” from Animal Farm, George Orwell. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)