Can Ci Pin | The Defective

Author: Priest

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

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# Book 6 - Heart of the Rose

## Ch 143 - Half a Year Later

Planet Qiming, half an independent year later.

What could one accomplish within 200 days?

Zhanlu’s chameleon didn’t even have the chance to finish circling the house, and poor Popcorn was still as timid as before, still trembling in fear whenever he saw the grim expression on his new roommate’s face at home.

Yet only two seasons had passed on planet Qiming.

Lin Jingheng was officially appointed the Grand Marshal of the Eighth Galaxy; while it sounded like he received a promotion and was about to step into the peak of his life, in reality it was far from anything like that. In terms of territorial control, when Commander Lin was still the top commander of the Silver Fortress overseeing all the stationed military within the Union’s eight galaxies, every word from his mouth could be interpreted and analyzed a million times across all eight galaxies. This time, the ‘eight galaxies’ turned into ‘The Eighth Galaxy’--his rank actually fell from the top commander down to a security supervisor for a rural team out on the edges of the galaxy. He could even take public transportation to and from work everyday without having a crowd of people surrounding him like a zoo animal.

Of course, half a year’s worth of time was still tight for all the work that needed to be completed. Human Resources needed to be reassigned and new jobs were still in transition; everyone had barely settled in their new departments.

The reorganized Silver Fourth Squadron still didn’t pass Commander Lin’s strict standards and tests; they were unsurprisingly the punching bags of their colleagues in the annual ‘tournament’ within the Silver Ten. Anakin was personally dragged out by Lin Jingheng to be scolded, which earned him the spotlight, complete with a full audience that laughed at their misfortune. The Captain of the Sixth Squadron watched in admiration--their squad was often skipped over during the Marshal’s weekly scolding of the troops because he simply forgot about them, making poor Captain Liu of the Sixth Squadron feel that he wasn’t given enough attention by his boss.

Half a year ago, the Eighth Galaxy saw a resurgence of a ‘Lu Xin hype’ that resulted in three whole television dramas about Commander Lu Xin’s life being aired within a few months that were still going strong to this day. Meanwhile, Lu Bixing’s habit of waking up in the middle of the night hadn’t seen much improvement; after an episode of panic in the middle of the night, he would regain consciousness, pretend nothing happened and fix Lin Jingheng’s blanket. Then, he would cling onto the commander like a koala and physically wake Lin Jingheng with his body heat, followed by shoving the blanket aside. It started off with him waking up two or three times in one night, but now the frequency has been reduced to waking up once every two or three days. Time was like drops of water hitting a rock: while it may not have created a dent immediately, over time hundreds and thousands of drops could even pierce through a hard rock. Perhaps in another few months, the Prime Minister would need Commander Lin’s personal wake-up service to ensure he wasn’t late to work everyday.

Changes in people and mundane everyday life were smooth and rhythmic, but technological advancement was like moss on a moist rock.

When the Eighth Galaxy first discovered the natural wormhole zone, half of the Expedition Team that ventured in did not return. Many years later, they could now stabilize the dangerous passage with massive scientific theories and data as their foundation, making even greater leaps in the field of research each day.

When Lu Bixing personally escorted the Silver Ten back to the Eighth Galaxy, Turan was still agonizing over the unstable connection between the two parties. Today, it took less than 200 days for the Engineering Team to build a stable space station and communication channel mimicking the design and principal functions of a transfer portal--

The mechanical experiment had already been completed successfully. By the end of the 12th Independent Year, with Mint leading, three volunteers from the Expedition Team connected their individual mental networks and prepared to sail a standard starship fleet through the natural wormhole.

The entire fleet was made up of 24 standard-sized starships filled with experimental plants and animals. Each starship weighed sixteen times that of a fully loaded superdimensional heavy mech.

Intergalactic transfer portals often had weight limits with standard values of 16, 18, or 24, which indicated the amount of fully loaded starships that could successfully pass through all at once. Of course, these numbers meant nothing during wartime when people were frantically emergency warping away from a bunch of flying missiles.

But these public terminals were not designed for war. Twenty-four fully loaded starships was the limit of human-made transfer portals so far; once this experiment succeeded, it would mean that the Heart of the Rose had been fully conquered by mankind.

“Mint, come here!”

Mint turned her head away from her final preparation work and noticed the crowd by the door, then immediately realized who had come. She rolled her eyes, made a helpless expression, and passed through the crowd with a stern expression: “Minister Lu.”

Ever since the first successful passage through the wormhole, the Expectation Team had seen a dramatic transformation overnight and became a popular department for fearless new interns. These new faces were all freshly out of their cages and curiously surrounded the Prime Minister that dropped by to visit like a crowd of tourists around a zoo animal.

Lu Bixing dealt with the crowd of kids that came up for a handshake and turned his head towards Mint: “You still have two hours until you all depart, do you have ten minutes to spare for me?”

Mint gestured at the team captain to shoo away all the spectators and took Lu Bixing into a break room.

Mint complained to him: “*Dad*, if you keep visiting, people will think we’re relatives or something and won’t take me out on expeditions next time.”

“They shouldn’t be letting you out in the first place; there used to be a universal rule within the top research institutes in the Union that all experiments potentially dangerous to human researchers must be conducted by experienced people over the age of 40.” Lu Bixing sighed, “I always thought that Jingshu’s personality was more rash but also meticulous; White has an endlessly curious heart that often gets him into trouble, but your dreams were the most normal and understandable out of them all. Even if you wanted to start a business, you were always the more dependable child in my eyes. Who knew that you would end up taking up the most dangerous job?”

“Who can one-up me in experience? I may be young but I’ve got a loaded resume; I’m one of the foundational members of the Expedition Team and passed through the wormhole twice already.” Mint lifted her eyebrow rebelliously. “You’re already talking like an old dad at a young age, aren’t you afraid that Commander Lin would scorn you?”

Lu Bixing’s hands subconsciously slid into his pockets as he heard the young girl mention her other stringent ‘father’ only to remember there was nothing there--two days earlier Zhanlu had ratted out the incident where Lu Bixing once extinguished the fire of a cigarette on his skin, which Lu Bixing, who had already forgotten such an event, refuted absolutely. However, Lin Jingheng clearly believed the words of a chatty AI to be more reliable and took away Lu Bixing’s pack of smokes, then refused to talk to him for a whole day out of fury.

Lu Bixing responded dryly: “......I’d like to believe he would have no reason to be mad at me on this particular aspect.”

He paused for a moment before he suddenly said: “The last person who spoke to me like this was Saturday.”

Mint fell silent.

Saturday was a name that very few in the Eighth Galaxy would bring up. As the offspring of a smuggler, he was one of the first people to open his eyes from that nightmarish reality and attempt to break out of the ignominious ‘fate of the Eighth Galaxy.’ He was one of the first to be accepted into the Silver Ninth Squadron, proving that even ‘trash’ can become proper individuals of value. He had been a hero on numerous occasions and ended his short life as one; his name should have been engraved in history with honor, but he missed his chance because one thoughtless mistake cost the lives of thousands and almost pushed the Eighth Galaxy into ruins.

Mint had once talked back to Lin Jingheng for him and hadn’t been able to walk out of that quick communication exchange for sixteen years.

“Teach……”

“Hm?”

“Do you hate him? Do you hate Saturday?”

“I don’t want to pretend to be benevolent.” Mint’s eyes dimmed as Lu Bixing answered. He then paused for a few moments before continuing, “But…a mistake made in a moment of weakness cannot be condemned sometimes, because it wasn’t planned. You also can’t be sure that if you were in his position at the time that you could really make the most unbiased judgement…at least I don’t think I could have.”

He had once heard the story of how when he was young, Saturday had witnessed the little girl beside him float into space inside an ecopod. He didn’t take it to heart after he heard it and sympathized briefly, thinking that there were plenty more tragic stories in the world.

Until he personally experienced that same loss once.

“By the way, Teach,” Mint said, “we still have the footage of the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy battle that year from the military recorder off the mech we found during our first wormhole travel. Didn’t you ask me to analyze all the data from it last time?”

Lu Bixing: “Hm?”

“It’s odd,” Mint said. “Zhanlu’s records said that the AUS hadn't left by the time his core body was destroyed, but the footage we discovered showed that there weren't any signs of other armed forces present at the time. I don’t think the Freedom Corps would suddenly appear before the AUS unprompted, right? From the time Zhanlu was destroyed to the time the AUS fully retreated, at least over half an hour had passed...but a portion of the AUS fleet was also dragged into the explosion at the time it happened. You wouldn’t be able to tell if you didn’t pay attention. Do you think this had something to do with how Commander Lin managed to survive?”

Lin Jingheng had only lightly glossed over what happened after the AUS ambush at the transfer portal that year, mentioning that his ecopod had been captured by the Freedom Corps. As for how they captured it and how long it had taken, he refused to give any detailed explanation and only said, “I was inside the ecopod, how would I know?”

Regarding this, Doctor Hardin also kept his mouth shut.

Lu Bixing had gone from reluctance and fear of asking in the beginning to growing more curious by the day. By the end of it, his morbid curiosity got the best of him and began tugging his heartstrings until his scientist soul was unleashed from his flesh. He began to theorize about various scenarios and attempted to recreate the scene from back then; when his hypotheses failed, he would bother Lin Jingheng. If his curiosity didn’t get quenched, at least his body could be satisfied.

In the beginning, Lin Jingheng was simply too lazy to describe the course of events in detail, with no intention of hiding the truth. However, as he discovered that Lu Bixing had eventually learned to actively seek answers and bury himself in numerous calculations without letting the pain in his heart consume him, the commander silently decided to go with the flow and kept it a secret on purpose.

“Huh, that sure is a new discovery.” Lu Bixing rubbed his chin in deep thought. Within the blink of an eye, he came up with a new way to trick Doctor Hardin and got ready to probe the poor old doctor. “Have a safe trip.”

When the experimental starship began its journey through the wormhole, Wolto also captured the abnormal energy waves coming from the forbidden zone on the clock.

Chief Commander Woolf signed the Union’s official 306th Decree regarding the Eighth Galaxy.

“Mister Secretary General---”

“Good morning, Secretary General.”

Wang Ailun walked quickly through the hallways of the Union Parliament building wearing a very slim-fitting black long coat. He didn’t respond verbally but glanced at everyone that greeted him as minimum courtesy.

This new Secretary General from the Military Council retained the military’s tradition of keeping up a good public image regardless of the occasion. Despite being 218 years old already, he still looked to be in good health; his stature was still tall and straight, footsteps fast-paced and full of energy like a young man. Every part of his body, down to a strand of hair, exemplified discipline and dignity.

Wang Ailun’s character was much more humble and quiet, but he was surprisingly skilled in all aspects. Compared to the noble and fragile young masters who claimed this seat back when the Eden Committee still held the Union’s political power, he was almost a gem amongst these plain rocks.

A swarm of reporters flooded the press room before the media coverage team could walk back into the conference room after setting up the room: “Secretary General Wang!”

“Mister Secretary General, is it true that Chief Woolf was sent to emergency treatment last night?”

“Mister Wang, some sources have claimed that the old Chief is starting to experience DNA deterioration, is this true?”

“The Chief signed the 306th Decree of the Union’s Military Council yesterday, was he still conscious at the moment of signing this decree?”

“Secretary General, some people have said that the Chief had already fallen into a disoriented state six months ago and someone has been using him as a puppet to give out orders, what do you think about this?”

“Secretary General…”

A few guards walked up and pushed off some of the media robots that got a bit too close to the Secretary General in fear they would run into the man. Wang Ailun walked past the crowd of robots expressionlessly and kindly asked the human reporters to make way for him.

He walked straight toward the podium and gave a cordial smile to the audience.

His eyebrows were clean and thin, giving off a strange air of surprising androgyny on his otherwise average face. When he smiled, his expression would give off a unique kind of friendliness, as if the person behind the smile was a kind and gentle soul that would never speak a lie.

The press room that sounded like a farmer’s market gradually quieted down.

“The old Chief has been swamped with conflict and unrest for his whole life. Many people hiding in the shadows have wished to see this immovable guardian of the Union fall, but--” Wang Ailun paused, scanned the audience beneath him and continued, “Unfortunately for them, he has not fallen yet.”

“You mean the old Chief is still very healthy and alive right now? Then why doesn’t Chief Woolf attend this press conference himself?”

“Greetings, friend from the Wolto Daily; I’m unsure what your standard of ‘healthy’ is, but the old Chief is still conscious and clear-minded. His DNA has not been hit by the pop reaction, but he is a man of almost 320 years old; he can’t possibly be playing rugby at his age.” Wang Ailun responded calmly, “Besides, the 306th Decree the old Chief signed was an important bill that affected the Central Militia of all seven galaxies. You all should know that the official procedure requires the central government, Parliament, Legislative Council, and representatives of all Central Militia within the seven galaxies to be present as witnesses. The witness list is already public on the official Union Government website; everyone can access and check it. Perhaps some conspiracy theorists would assume that everyone present could be controlled secretly by someone, but if that was the case, the core members of the Union’s Military Council would have completely fallen apart by now. Someone would have already stepped up and announced a new generation of leaders by this point, then what would be the purpose of gathering everyone here today to discuss these rumors?”

The endless chatter that filled the room started to be muffled as the people sitting inside the conference room also began chuckling in agreement with the Secretary General. The entire press conference ended with a livestream speech from Chief Woolf himself; the old Chief still maintained his familiar demeanor and tone of voice when he spoke, showing no signs of aging or growing senile, as if he could live on for another hundred years.

The representative from the Wolto Daily was a middle-aged woman who followed the crowd out after packing up her reporting robot. She kindly declined all offers to share a ride and walked to a private vehicle that took her directly to a rural area outside of the valley. She skillfully connected to a secret underground network with anti-tracking protection to contact a certain individual.

“The witness list of the 306th Decree signing is out; Wang Ailun can’t possibly control every single person in this list. There’s also no way the representatives of the Central Militia would mistake their top military commander, and Woolf even showed up at the conference earlier through a stream. We’ve asked numerous questions regarding the 306th Decree during the conference but none of the answers given were out of line.”

The figure of a certain individual appeared on her personal device--it was Prophet Harris of the AUS: “The 306th Decree drastically changed the structure of the entire Union’s military stationing system on a fundamental organizational level. It adjusted the terminals of sixteen military fortresses and stationed heavy troops near the Heart of the Rose while cutting down defense near the borders and outskirts of the galaxies. What does that mean? Do they see the Eighth Galaxy as a bigger threat than the anti-government organizations hiding in the shadows? This decision doesn’t seem like something Woolf would do.”

“I don’t know,” the reporter said, “but I’ve heard that the Eighth Galaxy made a breakthrough in the area of wormhole research and can already send stable signals through the wormhole. Perhaps this has something to do with the decree?”

Harris--formerly Hope, shook his head: “Woolf has been the Chief Commander of the Union for two centuries. Since the founding of the Interstellar Union, the most respected and powerful military leaders have been raised by him; even if he does think this way, he would never make such an obvious move. Some of the Central Military have already voiced their concerns regarding this decree. Besides, I haven’t been able to contact him in over six months--can you find a way to meet him in person?”

## Ch 144 - The Starship Ambush

“The starship fleet is about to leave the active wormhole zone; energy level is within normal threshold.”

“Detecting communication signals.”

“Communication signals are stable, currently decoding signal message---”

In the Eighth Galaxy, the Galactic Expedition Team’s lab received a stable audio message from the other side of the wormhole. Sixteen days had passed since the experimental starship sailed out, and the starship was expected to arrive at the Heart of the Rose today.

The entire Eighth Galaxy tuned in to this livestream of the experiment; the amount of people online increased continuously, reaching a baffling four billion all watching at the same time. Four billion people across the galaxy were holding their breath as they listened to the noise coming out of the distorted time-space.

“That’s unbelievable,” Thomas applauded. “These folks in the Eighth Galaxy are so unified to learn more; there are so many people watching this boring academic channel, you can’t underestimate these people’s potentials!”

Poisson responded coldly: “Are you stupid?”

“Bro.” Thomas forced a smile onto his face as he lowered his voice to speak. “I know that your birth was a buy-one-get-one-free tragedy, and I understand that you suffered from poor development in childhood that led to you having speech dysfunction--but don’t you think you use the same words a little too often?”

Poisson glanced at him from the corner of his eyes: “Back when the Seventh Galaxy was attacked by the AUS, Commander Lin let eight billion refugees into the Eighth Galaxy. The transfer portals were promptly cleared up after and forcefully created a vast sea between the Eighth Galaxy and the Union; many people didn’t believe they would have the chance to go back home in this lifetime -- do you get it now? There are only four billion people online right now because it’s a workday today; not everyone is free to watch the stream.”

Thomas stood dumbfounded.

At that moment, the Expedition Team’s tech support on land decoded the message from the starship as the noise from earlier was slowed down to 1,500 times its original speed. The original message became much clearer--it was the Eight Galaxy’s Anthem of the Independent Navy. The muffled chorus had already reached its end and stopped on a high note as it passed the distorted time-space. After traveling through numerous warps in space, the song sounded almost ethereal over the broadcast, like voices from another world. A short pause followed the end of the song before it switched to a simple ballad from the Union. It was a song about first love that was popular within the Union back in the day, and soon became a well-known tune that everyone knew of.

At that moment, even someone as dense as Thomas Young could feel the inseparable love-hate relationship between the Eighth Galaxy and the Interstellar Union.

“Outside the Heart of the Rose is the First Galaxy. They never sailed deep into the forbidden territory in the past and didn’t know, but the Prime Minister and Expedition Team’s sudden appearance in the Heart of the Rose last time shocked the Union. They certainly wouldn’t sail around that place unprepared this time.” Turan and Lin Jingheng walked into the lab a few minutes late as Turan whispered quietly to her boss, “I still think the experimental starship should’ve carried a few mechs…”

“What are you planning to do, mixing in a few mechs into a scientific research team? You could get away with it in the past saying you didn’t know what was on the other side of the wormhole, but now we all know who our neighbors are. Why would you do the same thing now?” Lin Jingheng asked, “Do you want to show them that we’re foolishly insecure?”

Turan asked: “But what if they turn their backs on us?”

“Maintain the stability of the communication signals.” Lin Jingheng glanced at her quickly before gesturing to have the communication tool that connected to the experimental starship passed over to him. “Expedition Team, can you all hear me?”

There was a bit of a delay between the two sides; a long while passed before the other side of the wormhole responded: “Yes, Commander Lin.”

“If you run into the Union Navy or Central Militia when you all arrive at the Heart of the Rose, greet their Chief Commander Woolf on behalf of me. Tell them that I’m praying for the old man’s health and sending best wishes to him from the other side of the wormhole.” Lin Jingheng waved off the small microphone floating in midair after finishing and turned his head back to Turan. “They have no reason to turn their backs on us; even if they did, they won’t dare to do so, don’t worry.”

Turan: “......”

The Grand Marshal was certainly a man that would always piss off the world when given the opportunity, and still piss off the world even when nobody asked for it.

Lu Bixing had been waiting inside the lab for a while and was assigning tasks to the director of the lab on the second floor. His attention was suddenly grabbed by this line as he lowered his head to see the certain individual who walked in to gift this provocation. Lin Jingheng lifted his eyes and shot a glance at the Prime Minister, lightly nodding without making a sound in a public place like this.

The director of the Expedition Team noticed the abrupt pause from the Prime Minister and asked curiously, “Prime Minister?”

Lu Bixing subconsciously loosened his shirt collar, and gave an abstruse smile while completely forgetting what he had said earlier.

“Calculating from the current orbital period, there should be no more than four military fortresses between the Heart of the Rose to Wolto. Aside from General Duke stationed at the border of the First Galaxy, there isn’t anyone else in particular that we need to be aware of. A fully armed superdimensional heavy mech fleet can pass through a transfer portal with a 24 standard weight limit; if I want to, it would only take six hours for me to sail from the Heart of the Rose to Wolto. Unless they also blow up the Union’s First Galaxy into another isolated land or re-station all their border troops within the Heart of the Rose, I don’t see that as a problem.” Lin Jingheng said to Turan airily, “Would they really re-station their troops for an unarmed research fleet of three people? Woolf is a Chief Commander, not a madman with an entire galaxy of soldiers. Besides, the Central Militia in the other galaxies have much more autonomy than the past and won’t listen to him all the time.”

Turan fell silent for a moment: “Do you still believe that Woolf isn’t a madman?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t answer.

He remembered that the old Chief would often visit them when Lin Wei was still alive; he was still ‘Grandpa Woolf’ at the time.

In his memories, this Grandpa Woolf never looked like a kind and warm elderly man. Especially as he grew older, the old man’s sharp features and thin skin revealed deep wrinkles that proved he was not a man who smiled much in life. He was quiet near the young kids and sometimes didn’t even know how to communicate with them, so he would only bring some childish toys as gifts and ask if they liked them.

But his hands were strong and warm; when those hands gently brushed through the children’s soft hair, the stern expression on his face would always soften up a little with a hint of kindness behind that silence.

Lin Jingheng wasn’t sure how Lin Wei died. The official sources said it was illness, but because he was too young to investigate the truth at the time, he had believed in what he was told.

He still remembered that day had been overcast and gloomy. The Union had purposely tweaked with the climate of Wolto to fit the mood on that day. Because General Lin Wei’s funeral was a grandiose event, many famous politicians in the government had attended. The house was filled with the chatter of a lot of strangers walking around; there were even loud reporting drones flying above their heads. Little Lin Jingheng had held his sister’s hand and escaped the noise as they stuck together, accidentally overhearing some of the conversation among the strangers in their house.

“.....I actually have some underground sources here that I’m sure none of you have heard before, but it’s suspected that General Lin Wei committed suicide.”

“I sort of guessed that,” another person said. “The average lifespan on Wolto is around 300 years old, there’s never been a case of being diagnosed with the pop reaction under the age of 200. With his status and access to medical resources, how could he possibly die of illness?”

Children born from Eden had never heard of the word ‘suicide’ and couldn’t even comprehend the concept. The young ten-year-old boy listened in confusion but subconsciously caught the cruelty in those words and quickly covered up his sister’s ears.

“Laura Gordon was a member of the White Tower, and the White Tower can access the core of the Eden system. If I have to say, having these people rebel against the Union would be like turning our houses into haunted mansions. Perhaps she did something to General Lin and Eden behind their backs and destroyed him psychologically.”

“But I’ve heard that their relationship wasn’t particularly bad…”

“How could they have any real feelings in a political marriage? Even voluntary marriages nowadays don’t last for over three years--don’t all of these public faces tell this to the world all the time?”

“Laura Gordon’s issue is quite vague, but I’ve heard that there were feelings between those two. Of course, that little bit of feelings between them might not even be genuine; rumors have it that Laura secretly manipulated the data inside Eden back then...you know, controlling dopamine levels or something. If you know how to control it, it can even make you fall in love with a dog.”

“You’re the one that falls in love with a dog!”

This chatter grew louder and livelier, like a murder of crows talking above rotten flesh, boiling the blood of the young boy listening in. Lin Jingheng accidentally gripped his hand tighter as Lin Jingshu struggled in discomfort.

Suddenly, the group of people collectively closed their mouths and lowered their voices as they awkwardly stood in a row--Chief Woolf had walked into the house. It seemed as if his hair had grown all white overnight, his cheeks sunken in even more. Yet he was still tall like a tree as his hawk-like gaze shot fiercely across the room with a word while the secretary behind him waved at the twins hiding in the corner.

The two kids quickly ran up while Secretary Wang’s words fell into little Lin Jingheng’s ears as he whispered to the old Chief: “......I’m afraid we can’t decline the Committee’s request, we can only keep one.”

Woolf didn’t turn his head to look at the kids as if another glance would hurt his eyes: “Then let Lu Xin handle it, I’ve already spoken to him.”

Lin Jingheng carefully lifted his head.

Secretary Wang said: “I thought you would personally take care of them.”

Woolf’s footsteps stopped for a moment. For a split second, Lin Jingheng felt as if the old Chief was about to turn his head to look at them, but didn’t in the end.

After a while, the old Chief finally responded hoarsely: “.....I can’t take care of them, I’m getting old. I can’t handle this…this…take them away, it’s heartbreaking to see them.”

It was heartbreaking to look, so he didn’t look. Perhaps that was why many years later he was able to drop the guillotine without hesitation.

Lin Jingshu sensed something at the time and struggled a little anxiously in her brother’s hands. A layer of sweat covered the palms of the two small hands holding onto each other; there was still the warmth of mutual dependency back then.

Lin Jingheng held onto her hands tightly and thought, *I’m still here, I’ll protect you.*

However…

He never fulfilled that promise.

He hadn’t returned to Wolto in twenty years, hadn’t seen her with his own eyes in twenty years, and hadn’t even attended her wedding. The closest they had been together all these years was on the small planet, separated by the cover of the ecopod. But he couldn't move at the time and had to treat her like the most dangerous enemy in his life. His tightened heartstrings were shielded in fear; he didn’t dare to express any true feelings, nor did he have room to keep any lingering affections in his heart.

The replicated robotic arm Lu Bixing made for Zhanlu seemed off because he had never seen the young girl in the school uniform back then.

Lin Jingheng pulled himself back from his wandering thoughts and said expressionlessly to Turan: “Compared to the Union, the Freedom Corps pirates would be more troublesome to deal with. They just caused some commotion in the Heart of the Rose not too long ago, so the Union would supposedly be on guard against them. But the opium is everywhere around us so we still need to be careful; let the Expedition Team check if the signal disruption system is still functional.”

Human researchers only controlled a small portion of the experimental starship fleet. In order to fully observe the effects of the wormhole on human mental networks, most of the piloting was conducted by AIs that could withstand network hacking. In case they ran into an enemy attack, the unmanned starships could form a barricade on the outside and automatically send out disruption signals. These signal disruptions were completed with the help of Doctor Hardin himself and could intercept the mental state of first generation opium chip carriers, giving enough time for people inside the starships to make an escape.

“Make sure the experimental starships don’t leave the Heart of the Rose,” Lin Jingheng said. “Set up the communication post over there and retreat immediately.”

“Experimental starships are about to leave the wormhole---”

The entire lab was speechless. Due to the delay, by the time this message was sent back to Qiming, the starships had already arrived at the Heart of the Rose. Everyone in the lab held their breaths and waited eagerly for the message to be received.

The next moment, noises that indicated there were communication signals rang out while the AIs and supercomputers automatically began decoding the message. Shortly after, a violin tune flowed out of the speakers as the silent lab riled up within an instant.

They succeeded!

They successfully created a stable terminal to the border of the First Galaxy!

The Eighth Galaxy had been isolated from the rest of the universe like a lone island for almost seventeen years and finally rebuilt the bridge to the outside world. Everyone who still had lingering nostalgia was given a beacon of hope that they would be able to return back to their homeland. At the same time, the same technology could also be used to explore the ever-expanding universe, open up new frontiers, and continue spreading the blueprint of human civilization. Perhaps they could even open up a bigger and more developed new Age of Exploration.

Lin Jingheng lifted his head to see that Lu Bixing had his eyes locked on him the whole time from the second floor. After finally catching the eye of the commander, Lu Bixing meekly scanned his surroundings to make sure nobody was looking at him. Then, he gave the commander a very un-Prime Minister-like and unprofessional thumbs up, then pointed at his chest, every little gesture proudly telling his commander wordlessly, “See, I told you I could do it.”

When the team director beside him turned his head around, his face red in excitement, Lu Bixing immediately took his hand back and changed his facial expression. He fixed his shirt as if nothing had happened and nodded his head back in acknowledgement.

Lin Jingheng: “......”

Then, the stable signal sound suddenly grew sharp as the violin music stopped. Turan stood up abruptly--

Mint was checking the data on all the experimental starships when she heard a loud sound from the communication channel, her fingers slipping in shock before she could send out her report.

A teammate shouted inside the channel: “The starship has been attacked!”

Mint quickly calmed herself down and pulled up live reports on the target starship, then saw the direction of the ambush through the camera. The enemy wasn’t far from the target and could be seen with a low power telescope; it was a small fleet of mechs that sailed out like a ghost ship, with no marks on their mech bodies. It seemed as if they had been waiting patiently for a while and didn’t hesitate to shoot out a missile the moment they saw the Eighth Galaxy fleet appear.

Thanks to the strange gravitational field within the Heart of the Rose, the missile was pulled off-course and only scraped the tail of one of the starships in front of the team. The starship instantly sent out a disruption signal, as programmed in its AI, and saw an immediate reaction; a few of the small mechs within the fleet suddenly changed course and flew out of line and into the distorted gravitational field.

“Don’t worry.” Mint disconnected the damaged part of the mech and hid her team behind the autopiloted starships that lined up like an iron wall before them. “It’s the pirates, they only have a few mechs with them right now, we’ll have to retreat immediately.”

“Wait, Mint, starship three is on stand direction 017!”

As the line finished, a high-energy alert rang up inside the starship. An armed mech fleet closed in on them swiftly as Mint’s eyes widened, then saw the fleet open fire at their starships.

The experimental starships all opened up their shields to the maximum within a matter of seconds on the command of the researchers. The next moment, a row of high-energy particle beams passed through the team from behind and shot through the ambushing pirate ships. Another fleet of mechs then sailed past the team to chase down the pirate fleet.

The small pirate fleet would have been versatile enough to escape, but after taking on the signal disruption head-on earlier, they were still disoriented and barely regained control of their mental networks. Before they could return on their route to retreat, the mysterious mech fleet blocked off the road and swiftly shot down the pirates. The surviving pirate ships frantically sailed out only to have their shields melted by the high-energy waves, armory knocked off the mech body, and captured by the mech fleet.

Mint finally let out a breath of relief and turned on the unarmed signal on their starships to show that they were simply a research fleet.

The mech fleet sent a communication request, in which a young man dressed in a Union military uniform appeared on the screen. With her limited knowledge of military rankings, Mint vaguely made out that the emblem on his uniform seemed to indicate that he was a colonel. The colonel on screen saluted her courteously in response.

“I’m the representative of the Union Government’s First Galaxy Border Station, my name is Lorde. A few weeks ago, the First Galaxy captured an abnormal energy wave from the Heart of the Rose and knew that perhaps our friends from the other side would arrive. We were fearful of a pirate invasion and reinforced our patrols in the area, but little did we know that we still missed a few flies. Hopefully that didn’t scare you all.” The colonel named Lorde said, “General Duke sent me over to ask if our friends from the Eighth Galaxy needed any help from us -- we’ve been looking forward to hearing back from you all for a while now.”

Mint had been spending all her time doing galactic explorations and research with the team and didn’t really know how to deal with formal diplomatic situations; for some time, she thought about whether or not she should bring up Lin Jingheng’s ‘greeting’ from earlier.

Then, the colonel continued: “I hope Commander Lin is doing well. I don’t know if I’m fortunate enough to be remembered by him--I used to be his Vice Admiral back in the Silver Fortress.”

## Ch 145 - The Events in the Past Were Not Forgotten

Wolto.

The reporter from the Wolto Daily carefully studied the old man in front of her. Despite trusting the words of the Prophet, she couldn’t help but hold some reservations at this situation. Woolf didn’t appear as sickly as rumors from the outside, nor had he turned into a puppet; his aged face was still pinkish under the light with his eyes still bright and full of life, as if something exciting was about to happen. He greeted the reporter and asked her kindly to have a seat.

The reception room was filled with a unique kind of floral scent that the reporter praised: “The scent inside this room is very unique, what is it?”

“Black tulips, also called the Night Empress.” Woolf smiled, “I still have a lot of seeds with me, you can take some home if you like them.”

The reporter noticed that his smile wasn’t the typical diplomatic expression and was taken aback for a moment; the old man’s eyes were relaxed but glistened in the light as if there was a heartbeat inside. It was like his dream of many years was finally being realized as a joyous feeling filled his heart, the smile on his face reflecting his excitement that was almost contagious to the people around him.

The reporter suddenly asked a question that wasn’t part of the plan: “Chief, did anything good happen lately? You seem to be in a good mood today.”

Woolf smiled wordlessly and skillfully changed the topic of the conversation. After a short moment of small talk, the reporter’s gaze scanned her wrist quickly as a green light flashed across her hand. There was a new genetic scanner installed on her personal device that could pass through the Chief’s security check. This scanner had been scanning the old man’s genes quietly since the moment the two sat down in the room--this was indeed Chief Woolf sitting before her eyes.

He wasn’t a fake nor did he have any fatal genetic disease.

“Chief, let’s talk about the 306th Decree. I’ve heard that many people have been questioning your decision regarding this; especially the Central Militia, who have been delaying their dispatch to fight against the decree. Some people have even mocked you and said that you’re an experienced man who simply wanted to get through the day. That you knew our rural neighbors are scarier than any thieves so you decided to leave the pirates alone, to instead defend the frontlines in the Heart of the Rose at any sign of abnormalities.”

Woolf answered calmly: “If you noticed, the stationed troops near the Heart of the Rose have been steadily increasing, but it’s not forever ongoing. We’re simply meeting the standards of the border guards due to the accidental terminal within the Heart of the Rose, which turned it into an undeniable border territory of the First Galaxy. This is a fact we all have to admit, correct? The Heart of the Rose and directions outside of the First Galaxy are all part of the galaxy’s borders; we are simply treating both sides the same.”

“In other words, you’ve essentially acknowledged the sovereignty of the Eighth Galaxy.”

“There are still debates within the Parliament,” Woolf answered carefully, “but the Eighth Galaxy has already developed a physical moat between themselves and the Union, making it difficult for us to control. In addition, they’ve also been out of contact with the Union for sixteen years and have developed into an independent society. In terms of internal affairs, they have a fully functional government, military, and their own legal system that separates them from pirate organizations. They’ve even taken in large amounts of refugees before and are objectively just up to the point where even Lin Jingheng willingly acknowledges their existence. According to the Pledge of Freedom, the Eighth Galaxy had the right to back out of the Interstellar Union as long as the people had the will. We are simply acting out of self defense; there are reasons why we must treat the Heart of the Rose as a border territory outside of the First Galaxy…”

Wang Ailun removed his gaze from the surveillance camera and spoke to the person on his personal device: “The Night Empress is impressive; not only did it first confuse the individual’s memories, but it also eventually made the target delirious as they stepped deeper and deeper into a lucid dream until they became a puppet for you to control. The key point is that the target can still maintain enough cognitive ability to function like a conscious human being, able to reason away their abnormal behavior. This is even more discreet than biochips detectable by AIs and machines; even puppets are all automated in this great NSC era.”

The mystery person on his personal device took off the hood that covered their head to reveal Lin Jingshu’s face: “We are only successful because we have someone who had been serving beside him for almost two centuries and knew him well enough to make it happen.”

Her gaze turned as she spoke, then her mouth lifted in an eerie smile: “Though, the Night Empress can paint the dream of being a king, let some people be as rich as a galaxy, or even let them avenge their loved ones...but to remember his first love? What kind of silly joke is this? I can’t even relate such a foolish thing to the Chief Commander, this is some nasty black humor that I can laugh over for a whole six months.”

“My lady,” Wang Ailun tried to put on a strict face, “if you believe that authority, wealth, and blood can all be taken for granted but true love is simply a silly joke, I will have to question the political correctness of your statement.”

The two stared at each other through the screen for a short while before bursting out into laughter at the same time.

Lin Jingshu wiped off a tear that rolled down her eyes from laughter: “Be careful of that woman from the Wolto Daily, she’s more than just a reporter.”

“I know, she’s only a small lackey under Harris from the AUS.” Wang Ailun responded nonchalantly, “Since Harris had been exiled to the Eighth Galaxy until today, when he steps back on to the stage, I’ve been the main messenger between him and the Chief. He’s as easy to read as a book to me, he can’t possibly threaten us.”

“If the Secretary General says so, I’ll take your word for it.” Lin Jingshu said in a gentle tone, “But...don’t forget that an unreliable business partner would be tossed aside.”

Wang Ailun felt as if he had been licked by a venomous snake and almost broke the smile that still lingered on his face.

“This is just a reminder, don’t take it too personally.” Lin Jingshu once again switched to her proper demeanor. “The wormhole that’s been emitting abnormal energy waves for two weeks finally released a few insects, they should be chatting with Duke’s men right now. This old fox hasn’t reported to the Military Council yet, has he?”

Wang Ailun’s neck stiffened up.

He knew that those Central Militias looked down on him; he didn’t have any military feats or honor, never led troops, never fought a battle. Even if he became the Union Parliament’s Secretary General, which earned him superficial acknowledgement from the soldiers, these veterans still treated him as Woolf’s lackey behind his back.

Wang Ailun had been Woolf’s personal secretary since he graduated and worked almost two whole centuries as an AI beside the old chief, taking care of every little aspect of the chief’s life. Yet even that simple-minded Lu Xin knew to promote people that worked around him, pave the paths for their career, and provide opportunities; how could Woolf not know to do this as well?

It had been so many years, the old chief really thought he was no different than those AIs!

The Union Parliament would mean nothing if Woolf died now -- there would be nobody who could hold down the Central Militias, not even the current Secretary General. Wang Ailun finally understood why the Eden Committee had been so insistent on not granting military autonomy to the eight galaxies back then.

Wang Ailun spoke carefully: “I’ll let them know that Woolf is old, and even if they rebuild Lu Xin’s memorial, it’s still simply a piece of rock. I’ll make sure they know who this era belongs to now.”

“Sure, Uncle Ailun, I’ll be looking forward to it,” Lin Jingshu said. “Thankfully, some of my men are also in the First Galaxy’s border guards, so I’ve already sent some people to rile up things for you. You’re welcome.”

The interview was reaching its end and Woolf had failed to expose any weaknesses. The reporter from the Wolto Daily also didn’t seem to notice anything wrong with the chief. Wang Ailun whispered an order to his men: “Keep an eye on her from day to night. If she does anything fishy, silence her immediately.”

The Eighth Galaxy, Planet Qiming.

“I don’t trust them. What ex-subordinates of Commander Lu Xin--I honestly don’t think even Commander Lu himself had a good eye for people.” Turan was the first to comment, “Didn’t we already have a case with Ankur before? What a coincidence, we haven’t even left the Heart of the Rose and already got ambushed by pirates? What are those border patrols doing, they said they increased their defense but still let these pirates in? Is Duke stupid or did he do it on purpose? He even sent out that pretty boy Lorde to get onto our good side. Marshal, look carefully with your own two eyes -- that silly boy here looks like a monkey, can he compare to the million-dollar handsome face of our Prime Minister?”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

*Whose* Prime Minister?

Lu Bixing cleared his throat immediately and followed up: “If it was other pirate organizations that snuck in, it would be almost impossible. But if it’s the Freedom Corps, there might be a chance; opium users are all hidden in the dark and are scattered everywhere. Remember that day the Glory Troops surrendered, the dwarf planet got held hostage right before the eyes of the Union...Lin, can we trust this Lorde person?”

“Lorde?” Lin Jingheng slowly furrowed his brows as he spoke cautiously, “He was indeed my Vice Admiral in the past.”

Lu Bixing asked: “What exactly is the role of a Vice Admiral?”

Lu Bixing had learned a little about what a Vice Admiral was from Zhanlu, but this position was currently non-existent in the Eighth Galaxy.

If Lin Jingheng sailed out with a mech, he would always only bring soldiers from the Silver Ten without even batting an eye at other people. However, the entire Defense Department of the Eighth Galaxy had gone through a massive overhaul since the addition of the Silver Ten. Lin Jingheng hadn’t had much free time during the rebuilding of the military, and when he was finally given time to rest, he simply spent it all at home with Lu Bixing. The independent residential areas for Eighth Galaxy government officials were all fully protected with strict guards, so there was no need to hire a team of personal bodyguards at this point.

Thomas quickly answered the question: “Oh, a Vice Admiral? That’s just a position for show. The Central Government of the Union would equip every Union General with a bunch of people with pointless jobs. You know, like bodyguards, secretaries, and even more subordinates under them...I’ve heard rumors that the Commander Lee who took over the Silver Fortress after we left had eighteen vice-officers with him.”

“Isn’t it? It was like he was traveling with his whole family,” Turan sneered and licked the corner of her lips, “But thankfully the prey became big enough for an easy kill.”

The group collectively shivered in fear, only Captain Bayer of the Tenth Squadron glared at her in jealousy and frustration while carrying a grudge toward Turan for stealing his ‘business.’

“Lorde is a Vice Admiral by name, but his actual duties were simply managing the public mailbox of the Silver Fortress and occasionally speaking on behalf of the fortress. Sometimes he would also go back to Wolto for an errand; these noble-born soldiers like him all have very complicated family backgrounds and are like walking landmines if you aren’t careful around them, so Marshal didn’t like using them.” Poisson said, “Thomas and I followed our orders to stay in the City of Angels with Woolf, so we’re the ones that stayed in the First Galaxy the longest. From what I understand, Vice Admiral Lorde voluntarily resigned his position after our Marshal left the Silver Fortress and went back to Wolto, where he joined the Capital planet’s personal navy as an officer. He later fled to the City of Angels along with the navy when the war broke out.”

“That’s rather strange,” Lin Jingheng said, “I’m not fond of using them, but Ares Lee never said he didn’t like these delicate flowers. Lorde was an honorary graduate from the Black Orchid Academy and the son of the current principal of the academy; would an ass-kisser like Lee really send him off to a lower position like that?”

Since Lin Jingheng faked his death and escaped the Union, the Silver Ten had left the Union, the Silver Fortress suffered through an earthquake, and the temporary Commander of the Silver Fortress Ares Lee didn’t have the power to hold down the Fortress by himself. Naturally, the central government would have promoted someone within the Silver Fortress, raising them for a while before finally replacing this person with Commander Lee. With Lorde’s status and experiences as the former Vice Admiral, he was the uncontested popular candidate for this position; he would have had a much better future by staying in the Silver Fortress.

To resign and return to Wolto to become a little security guard didn’t seem like a decision anyone in their right might would make.

“When Poisson and I first heard this news, we pitied him. I even said that the Vice Admiral’s obsessive admiration for our boss was almost turning into madness, that maybe he planned on going back to Wolto to start his own ‘Commander Lin religion’,” Thomas pulled back his playful attitude and spoke concernedly. “But who knew that things would turn out like this five years later; the Silver Fortress got invaded, the entire First Galaxy fell into the hands of the pirates, and only the navy on Wolto was one of the first to escort the politicians to the City of Angels---hey, do you think maybe this luck...was actually secretly blessed by our Marshal here?”

It was common knowledge that practicing any other religion on the planet would perhaps yield some spiritual enlightenment.

But praying to Commander Lin would perhaps grant you a bloodbath.

So, was the Vice Admiral really a miracle survivor or was someone else behind him?

“Tell the Expedition team to set up a temporary communication port over there,” Lin Jingheng said, “I’ll speak to them.”

Temporary communication ports were easy to set up, all it needed was a simple signal transfer device to connect both ends of the tunnel. Mint swiftly ordered the AIs on the starship to finish the installation of the port. The signal wasn’t good enough to maintain real-time communication, so Lin Jingheng waited patiently for a few moments.

The moment his face appeared on screen, Lorde held his breath as complicated feelings flashed within his eyes. A while later, he finally spoke up in a slightly trembling and hoarse voice: “Commander...it’s been a while. I wish I could once again pour you a glass of un-iced rum.”

Lin Jingheng’s eyebrows pressed down as the Young twins exchanged a quick glance.

Lu Bixing noticed this discreet code-like exchange and asked: “What is it?”

Thomas lowered his voice to explain to Lu Bixing: “Commander never drinks his rum without ice, you should know, right, Prime Minister?”

Lu Bixing: “......”

He didn’t know.

Lin Jingheng had always been a role model adult in his eyes: he was always clean, organized, and disciplined. Even though he did drink and smoke, he did everything in moderation and maintained a strict standard for himself. In addition, he was never a picky eater--though he never drank beer in the past, he grew to not be nitpicky about it ever since he came back this time.

He wasn’t like this since he was born…. Lu Bixing’s mind flew out momentarily as he vaguely recalled when he once verbally planned out his life with Lin Jingheng many years ago. One of the things on the bucket list was that he wanted to go to Wolto with the commander one day--to see the place Lin Jingheng grew up.

That night when Lu Bixing confessed in the hotel inside Milky Way City that he ‘could no longer return that person he’d kind of liked back again,’ Lin Jingheng had seemed to realize something and slowly stopped mentioning how they used to be in the past. Gradually, he began to readjust and learn how to deal with their new relationship every day.

The last few months had been calm and harmonious, but for some reason those events in the past that seemed like a different lifetime weren’t forgotten nor did they disappear. Recently, they had turned into grassroots that had been blessed by the spring breeze, quietly sprouting from the grounds and tickling Lu Bixing’s heartstrings at certain times.

“That was only back when he was in the Silver Fortress,” Poisson added a line as the sole standard of IQ and EQ of the Silver Third Squadron. “Here, the story is that whenever the Marshal had something he didn’t want Lorde to hear, he'd order the Vice Admiral to find some ice for him. After a while, it turned into ‘Commander won’t drink without ice’---but that’s not the point, the point is that Lorde is purposely saying the wrong thing, is he trying to hint at something?”

Bayer shrugged: “Looks like Lorde hasn’t grown up at all over these years either and still only knows how to make up these childish codes. He’s like those dumb minors who think it’s cool to join a shady cult.”

The member of the ‘shady cult’ and former Vice Admiral carefully said to Lin Jingheng through the screen: “Chief Woolf is still healthy and well, he even goes out for morning runs everyday. Two days ago when he showed up for a press conference he mentioned that he still wishes you well.”

If every word he was speaking was the opposite of its meaning, then it would mean that Woolf was nearing his end, was barely making public appearances, and was being kept under watch.

Lin Jingheng asked, unfazed: “Thanks for the wishes. The chief’s getting old and doesn’t even have family around him, so who’s taking care of him?”

Lorde said: “That would be Secretary General Wang AIlun.”

Wang Ailun had become the Union Parliament’s Secretary General and was keeping Woolf under house arrest.

Lin Jingheng’s gaze fell slightly: “The old chief’s almost 320 already, he still hasn’t retired?”

“He no longer deals with trivial matters and only signs important orders,” Lorde continued to communicate between the lines. “The Union’s internal affairs are only beginning to settle lately and the Central Militia are all stationed at their posts; we can’t survive without him.”

In other words, the Central Militia were being held down by Chief Commander Woolf right now. If they knew that Woolf had essentially stepped down from his throne, the Union would be in chaos.

Lorde was currently Duke’s subordinate; if everything he said was true, these were words that his colleagues and boss should never hear, which meant that he could only communicate through this method.

The wormhole delayed the conversation between the two sides; it took a long time for one side’s message to reach the other. Below the screen’s view, a layer of thin cold sweat covered the palm of Lorde’s hands.

## Ch 146 - All the Smarter People Have Failed in the Past

Many years ago, the head of the house used the excuse, “The Silver Fortress is doomed to become the eye of the storm” to forcefully send Lorde back to Wolto by pulling strings with his mother, who was the principal of the Black Orchid Academy at the time. The young Lorde thought everyone was being unreasonable and hateful towards the Silver Fortress.

He didn’t understand why he couldn’t be like the Silver Ten and leave without a word and use his own actions to demand an explanation for their Commander’s death. He didn’t understand why he couldn’t persist on finding out the truth, nor did he understand why he had to escape like a coward. He didn’t know why he couldn’t stay with his other comrades and uphold their own territory and pride even after their commander was gone.

Lorde sometimes felt as if nobody treated him as a person; it was like his family and social circle had to control his every move down to what he ate every day, even when he was a legal adult. He felt like a pet that only needed to learn how to sit and shake hands to live a good life. Yet he couldn’t disobey the requests because he knew that his life in the future and even his status as an honorary graduate of the Black Orchid Academy would mean nothing if he left the family. Even the fact that he once stood beside Commander Lin was a privilege given to him by his family.

There were many people like him on Wolto; they all looked flawless on the outside and were given the most elite education. They appeared to be well-mannered and presentable people who carried the desire to be celebrated by the billions of citizens in the Union across the boundless galaxy. They would quietly drink their milk and do their jobs as society wanted them to while carrying this heavy melancholic burden in their hearts.

This heart-wrenching pain haunted Lorde for many years until the invasion of the Silver Fortress and the fall of Wolto. Chief Woolf had personally directed the escape from the capital planet and because Lorde was a family acquaintance, he was reassigned to the safest position--the bodyguard of Chief Woolf. He slowly grew familiar with this Chief of the Union and would hear the old Chief talk about the past and future of the Union that reignited the fire inside his heart.

Six months ago, after the Glory Troops surrendered, the Union reestablished the Wolto navy once the capital planet was reclaimed. Despite not making a name for himself over these years, Lorde still had built some reputation in the time he spent around government officials in the City of Angels that increased his value as a human resource. He was promoted to colonel and assigned to be under General Duke near the border of the First Galaxy as a ‘dowry’ between the Union troops and the Central Militia forces.

Out of courtesy, Lorde paid the old Chief Woolf a visit with his mother after receiving his promotion, thanking the chief for taking care of him all these years.

Woolf had caught a cold during the time of the visit and stayed home, so he invited the guests into his mansion and asked Lorde to take him out for a walk in the mountains. The old chief suddenly spoke up during the middle of the walk and said to Lorde: “People in my generation are all gone now, and I don’t know how far I’ll be able to walk down the road with the Union. Do you think there will be people in the future who will walk down the same path that my generation paved the way for?”

He fell into silence after this line and clenched Lorde’s hand tightly as he continued: “I hope for the Union to wake up from the nightmare called Eden. I hope that the Union will be able to maintain a balance with the Central Militias by keeping each other in check, even if they...even if these galaxies want independence. I hope that chapter of human history that keeps rewinding and replaying will end with our generation. The rest of you all---as the ‘survivors’ of this world, can discover your own paths to take....if one day I betray this ideal, then it wouldn’t be out of my own will. My child, I need you to do something for me.”

Lorde asked in confusion: “What can I help you with?”

“Go to the Eighth Galaxy and find Lin Jingheng.”

Lorde’s mind went blank momentarily; it had already been two decades since he left the Silver Fortress, which was longer than he had spent running around in the fortress. Even during times of war, the lives of many military officials were not all consumed by the flames of violence and were instead victims of the turbulent storms. Some people who were less fortunate were swallowed by the raging tides and died only to contribute to the number of casualties on the frontlines. Others followed the right teams and were fortunate enough to play the role of the belated hero that arrived at an empty battlefield, silently collecting some experiences and living a dreadful life only to contribute more statistical data.

The frontlines, conspiracies, Lin Jingheng, breath-taking battles, and death...were all too far away from Lorde now. He had grown so numb over the years that even those legendary tales of his superiors surviving the battlefield that once boiled his blood were like tales of the past that no longer had anything to do with him. The young heart that had wanted to risk everything to follow that man also vanished over time; the most important thing to him now was how to get along with his new colleagues in the Central Militia.

Lorde almost thought he was hallucinating when he heard Woolf’s sudden and strange request, then asked: “What was that? You want me to look for who?”

“Remember my words.” Woolf’s grip clenched harder, as if he wanted Lorde to engrave these words into his heart. “If the day really comes, regardless of what you see or what you hear, don’t trust anyone around you and find a way to contact Lin Jingheng.”

“C-contact Commander Lin? But how?” Lorde asked confusedly, “I...what should I say to him then?”

“You don’t need to know, but you will certainly get your opportunity when the time comes. And I’m sure that day is not too far away.” Chief Woolf said, “When you see him, ask him….’does he remember the ‘A’ I gave him that year in the Black Orchid Academy’?”

“Commander,” Lorde said carefully to the communication screen that looked almost as if it had frozen up, “Chief Woolf once chatted with me in private and said that back in the Black Orchid Academy, he once gave you an ‘A’ in class, do you remember that?”

This line that passed through the long distance between timespace and arrived at the Milky Way City of the Eighth Galaxy was like roaring thunder that slashed the ground.

The thump shook Lin Jingheng’s heart.

Yet this slight tremble vanished through the tunnel of the wormhole.

Lorde looked at Lin Jingheng’s almost ethereal and expressionless face, suddenly remembering that this was the man he had once obsessively admired and loved when he was young. This sudden realization also made him aware that he had once been so close to the eye of the storm in this turbulent era, so close where he almost got swallowed up by the hurricanes of time. Yet these strange circumstances kept him away for two decades while the flood of fate pushed him out thousands of lightyears away from where he had once been. That young man pained with a burden gradually changed to the face of an austere young man.

Lorde let out a big sigh of relief after relaying the message that Woolf wanted him to say; it was both a relief that he had completed his mission, but also one for the fact that he suddenly became grateful for those ‘unfortunate circumstances’ that led him astray.

He almost became someone who was just another name on the list of heroic sacrifices.

In contrast, perhaps being a normal colonel in his life wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

Lorde utilized his title as the former Vice Admiral of Lin Jingheng to chat a little bit longer with his former superior but was careful to not use up so much time that he caused suspicion. He wasn’t sure if he fully conveyed the message correctly; he didn’t have the power to contact Woolf after this with his status and couldn’t tell if Lin Jingheng had understood and would trust him...because the harsh reality was that all the colleagues who shared his naive dream back in the Silver Fortress had virtually all sacrificed their lives in the name of the Pledge of Freedom.

But there were countless ears around him, so Lorde could only wipe the sweat off his palm and pass on the greeting to the Eighth Galaxy from his current boss, General Duke. It was a long and formal letter of interstellar diplomatic speech but with some interesting comments in between the words; the translation into colloquial phrases would be something like:

I, General Duke, am sending my warmest greetings to my old boss’s stone statue in the Eighth Galaxy, his legendary son, and ungrateful little bastard adopted son. I am also sending my greetings to my brothers that also fought alongside Commander Lu in the Eighth Galaxy. Woolf is old and senile, he insisted on increasing troops and patrols near the Heart of the Rose and even forcefully emphasized that he wasn’t targeting the Eighth Galaxy. As part of the ‘increased troops’ near the border, I personally fucking think that he and his damn boot-licker dog are all absolute idiots. But don’t worry, the Eighth Galaxy still has the face of Commander Lu so I will swear upon his name that I will not open fire unless you all do first. Feel free to set up a communication port near the border area so we can contact each other more often. We can even share Commander Lu’s embarrassing and heroic deeds in the past, listen to that immortal evil bastard child Lin-what’s-his-name shit-talk the Union, peace out to this world.

“Lin, do you think we can trust this person?” Lu Bixing asked after this short communication cut off. “What does ‘giving you an A’ mean?”

Lin Jingheng shook his head with a heavy heart: “He’s Woolf’s man.”

“Is the Marshal scared that people would change so much after two decades?” Captain Anakin of the Fourth Squadron asked, “I feel like his words were a little too forceful and awkward; if it was all an act it would be worthy of an award.”

Lin Jingheng shook his head again.

“Boss, you’re not scared of whether he changed, you’re afraid that Colonel Lorde himself doesn’t even realize he’s being used by someone,” Lee deduced from his superior’s expression. “With Woolf’s controlling personality, it would be normal for him to arrange a few spies inside the Silver Fortress. He understands you and wouldn’t purposely plant a spy or elaborate conspiracy beside you to make you suspect him. Someone with a clean background, slightly inexperienced, and with an idealistic character would be the best pawns for him to use against you.”

Lu Bixing’s eyes dimmed slightly as he heard the words ‘slightly inexperienced with an idealistic character.’

Yet this time, Lin Jineheng didn’t notice and only waved his hand: “Let’s play it by ear for now, at least we still have the wormhole as a natural barrier on our side.”

The Expedition Team’s mission this time was worrisome but not dangerous, even rather successful. They not only completed the test within the wormhole, but they also even built a two-way communication port near the edge of the First Galaxy with the help of the patrols that could connect directly to the base in the Milky Way City headquarters.

As the leader of the Central Militia, Duke was still a brave man even under the pressure of Woolf in Wolto. He openly welcomed private diplomacy with the Eighth Galaxy during a time where the Union government’s attitude was questionably hostile, even boldly shared the public network of the First Galaxy with their neighbors. Even though the signal was still unstable, it was enough for the Eighth Galaxy to check the headlines of the Wolto Daily every day.

Soon after, an exclusive article featuring Chief Woolf’s comments on the 306th Decree came out in the Wolto Daily and silenced the heated discussion after sharing interview footage of the chief speaking clearly on the topic.

Whether it was the Eighth Galaxy or the Union, a temporary time of peace finally settled in as the Freedom Corps seemed to also cut down their activities.

In these rare harmonious days, the humid air once again graced the lands as rain clouds took the stage in the skies, sending an air of a new rainy season across the planet.

Doctor Hardin needed to check up on Lu Bixing once every two months to collect data.

The doctor was extremely cautious about these checkups; even as the founder of the original Nuwa Project, Lu Bixing’s situation was still too unique even for him to comprehend.

It had been years since the last time Lu Bixing took out his chip, so the specialized biochip had already merged perfectly into his body. Everything from his body’s metabolism down to the cellular division process had changed with the biochip; nobody could predict what would happen if the chip was taken out--it could be completely fine today, but nobody could guarantee that there wouldn’t be any lingering side effects decades down the road.

Doctor Hardin pulled back a special gripping device, glanced at the number on it and commented: “Your control of your body and force is very precise.”

“I also started off with a learning curve.” Lu Bixing helped him put away the testing equipment. “It does take some time to get used to it.”

“You sacrificed the interactivity between biochips for your own safety, it’s certainly a smart move. That way, you won’t be affected by disruption signals as well. Prime Minister Lu, have you tested how much pressure you can withstand yet?”

“No, because this was a secret experiment, so I didn’t dare to push myself to test my limits. It would be a problem if I accidentally died in the process.” Lu Bixing openly admitted, “But if it is only getting shot by a laser gun through my chest, I can control my body enough to not bleed for at least three minutes. If there was a medical capsule nearby, that would be enough time to save myself. Also, I can stay up and awake without sleep for 23 days maximum. Even though I will still get tired, it is still within reasonable levels that I can control; I didn’t suffer a mental breakdown. I could also still maintain my focus with no visible side effects later.”

“Is this abnormal level of stamina also one of the reasons why you destroyed your research data but chose not to remove the chip?”

Lu Bixing waved his hand: “I don’t have enough power, I have to make it up with stamina. I was under a lot of pressure during that time, I had no choice.”

“I would suggest you not do this anymore, Prime Minister Lu. We don’t have a sample to reference from, so I could only draw out data and conclusions from your own data. Your lifestyle has been much more disciplined lately so your numbers were much better than before; if this is considered normal statistics, that would mean you have been stuck in an unhealthy state for an extended period of time before this. Nobody knows what will happen if you continue to live like that.” Doctor Hardin said, “I’ll follow Commander Lin’s request and send your physical report to his personal device later, do you have any problems with that?”

“Uh….” Lu Bixing paused awkwardly as he lowered the tone of his voice timidly, “Just tell him about the improvement, can you keep the abnormal health part in the past a secret?”

Doctor Hardin didn’t respond immediately and said after a few moments, “Someone once told me that about half of the population in the Eighth Galaxy were vaccuocerebrals. That these people all dreamed of curing their disease one day, even at the cost of their own lives. Prime Minister Lu, I’ve had the honor to speak with you over these months and I believe that your research over the last nine years has scientific value for further research, so why didn’t you continue? You should know that if you succeeded, your Eighth Galaxy would become a superhuman galaxy; any average citizen here would be as powerful as a properly trained soldier from the Union. You could then use your power to overtake the Union.”

“Are vaccuocerebrals not human?” Lu Bixing gave him a smile. “Eden’s already gone, so why are you all still looking down on vaccuocerebrals? Piloting mechs isn’t the only job in this world, and it isn’t like these people can never pilot mechs, they just have a bigger learning curve. Who gave you these ridiculous ideas?”

Doctor Hardin: “......”

Lu Bixing watched the old doctor’s complicated expression and immediately understood that this was a poor old man who had once been threatened by Commander Lin and was left with a scarring trauma in his heart. He couldn’t help but let out a laugh at this thought, then with a mix of pity and guilt poured out another cup of tea for old Hardin as he asked, “Do you know how I felt when I first really looked into Zhanlu’s database?”

Doctor Hardin: “Hm?”

“Absolutely dumbstruck,” Lu Bixing said, “I discovered many technologies and sciences I never thought existed in this world inside his database. I’ve found a small portion to be delusional ideas I came up with when I was young, but the majority were far beyond my imagination at the time; there’s even a portion today that I can’t fully understand. I thought to myself back then, there sure are so many people who are smarter than me in this world-- it was almost unimaginable. But those are all research topics that will never see the light of the day; even if records remain, they came with long danger warnings and official calls to halt the project from the beginning.”

“I was involved in over 60 projects back when I was in the White Tower, and over 90% of them never made it past the safety check. Everything else left was harmless research,” Doctor Hardin let out a sigh and spoke in a lower tone, “Those magical beans would reach the sky overnight, and the man-eating giants hiding in the clouds would descend to earth[[1]](#footnote-1). Every tiny step we make could fundamentally change the face of the world.”

“It wasn’t until I finally took the throne for myself that I realized this was a question the Union had already pondered over hundreds of years before I was born...no, perhaps it even started before the Interstellar Union was established in the old Sideral Era. The people that stood at the top of civilization had already recognized this problem longer before I had,” Lu Bixing said. “After the great Age of Exploration, human civilization had been steadily falling back. It wasn’t because humans are devolving as a species, it was simply because we were forced to put the shackles on ourselves.”

“Even as careful as we were, the Union still stepped on a landmine. Even the safest entertainment services were filled with danger,” Doctor Hardin said. “Who would have thought that Eden would turn into this kind of monster?”

“Right, and that was the second time I became awestruck in my life. The first time was when I dreamed about building a mech specifically for vaccuocerebrals, thinking I had solved the long-time problem of society, only to find out that my theory had already been proven wrong by someone else in the past.” Lu Bixing continued, “You will start to discover as you get older that all of your naive dreams you thought would change the face of humanity are all ideas people in the past have already thought of. Every single one of those ‘original’ ideas you came up with has already been proven wrong by your predecessors. And the reason why this world is in such a turbulent state right now is that those people who were all smarter than you failed in the past.”

Doctor Hardin, who had been exiled for hundreds of years due to the Nuwa Project understood this better than anyone else as goosebumps appeared on the old man’s skin.

“This is horrifying, doctor; I had thousands of ideas for the world’s future when I was little. When I built my first school in my younger days, I spent all day bluffing in front of my students, but now that I finally have the power to realize all my dreams from the past, I’ve discovered that I’ve grown to be fearful of even mentioning them.” Lu Bixing lowered his voice as he spoke, “After so many years, my leadership of the Eighth Galaxy’s Engineering department has all been driven by circumstances beyond our control--if we couldn’t make this invention or develop that new technology, we would all die; this was something that we would talk over multiple times over meetings before getting to work. In contrast, a biochip that can change the structure of society and even the biological makeup of a living being is far too dangerous.”

Lu Bixing paused slightly, continuing on with the conversation while the doctor’s mind was wavering in these ethical questions: “I’m sure even Miss Lin of the Freedom Corps understood the dangers of the chip; when Lin was in a completely vulnerable state at the time floating under cosmic rays for over 30 minutes, did she not think about using the chip on him?”

Doctor Hardin didn’t even realize he was being led on by the young man before him and nodded his head honestly: “Indeed, we were all under the assumption that his brain had suffered irreversible damage at the time with no chance of recovery. Someone had suggested the use of biochips on him, but Jingshu forcefully shot the idea down.”

## Ch 147 - Please Don’t Tell Him

Zhanlu returned home with Lin Jingheng.

The Eighth Galaxy was filled with ass-kissers. In the past, nobody dared to touch this sensitive part of the Prime Minister, but ever since Commander Lin returned, ‘repairing the Union’s number 1 mech’ naturally became a task with higher priority on the list for these suck-ups. The job focused on how to retain Zhanlu’s original functions while cutting down on production costs and quickly became a carnival for the top engineers of the department.

Today was the functional testing for specimen number 4; the body was still built to Zhanlu’s human image of a soldier with short blonde hair that followed behind Lin Jingheng. Aside from an unstable mental network on ‘Number 4,’ everything from the appearance down to the details of his actions were almost identical to the past.

The two decided to return home a little earlier today because on the Wolto Calendar, today was Lu Xin’s death anniversary. Lin Jingheng excused himself a few hours early and rounded his way to the central plaza to sit beneath the stone statue for about ten minutes.

As the main city of the Eighth Galaxy, Milky Way City had already grown used to public figures and politicians walking around daily. In addition, Lin Jingheng was infamously hard to talk to, so nobody even bothered to speak to him as he sat quietly. The streets were busy and crowded as usual, filled with pedestrians and cars running back and forth. Lin Jingheng realized that nobody here knew what today was.

On one hand, the government of the Eighth Galaxy never openly advertised it. On the other hand, the Woltorian and Independent calendars were so vastly different from each other that ever since the Eighth Galaxy cut off connections with the Union, the Woltorian calendar had been made completely obsolete by the Eighth Galaxy. After a decade, none of the residents here could properly calculate Woltorian time anymore. Perhaps some of the old veteran soldiers who had followed Lu Xin would remember, but these people were all spread out within the galaxy as core members of the defense forces or other government agencies and would not have been able to make it to Milky Way City for a memorial service.

Lin Jingheng still found it difficult to get used to the Independent calendar. When he first returned, he still needed his personal device to remind him of the time; dates and years were even more complicated for him. When people mentioned an exact date using the Independent calendar, he could still mentally calculate it into Woltorian time in his mind, but ‘last year’ or ‘X number of years ago’ were his biggest fears that would disrupt his train of thought.

…...If anyone dared to ask for his age, the Grand Marshal would likely respond with a gunshot to their head.

It wasn’t hard to promote a new calendar system to local residents because people who lived on natural planets were already using two sets of time--the official calendar and the calendar based on their resident planet’s orbit and rotation.

The former was simply a reference like a common language; people still used the latter to schedule their daily lives like the colloquial language they spoke to each other with.

Only people that stayed in space for extended periods of time would need to follow the official calendars.

Lin Jingheng’s personal device always kept two calendars available, and even until today, his first reaction was always Woltorian time.

Choosing which calendar to use was like choosing which foot to put on your shoe first, it was a personal preference that didn’t affect the qualities of life. However, whatever else was hidden behind this seemingly mundane task was much more complicated than having two calendars on hand.

Lin Jingheng never told Lu Bixing about the Woltorian calendar; at first it was because he didn’t want the latter to think too much of it, but he eventually grew to fear that it would become a burden to Lu Bixing’s job as the Prime Minister.

The Eighth Galaxy and Union were separated by a natural barrier, and Lin Jingheng thought that both sides would remain in a balanced situation for the foreseeable future where everyone lived without conflict.

He didn’t expect things to change so quickly, so quickly that he didn’t have time to let Lu Bixing grow used to staying by his side again nor have the time to annihilate the demon that lingered in that person’s nightmares.

Suddenly, all the issues he had been purposely avoiding facing piled together before his own eyes.

*What kind of relationship would the Eighth Galaxy and the Union have from now on?*

*How should he and the Silver Ten face the Union?*

*What did those eight billion refugees in the Eighth Galaxy think of the Union?*

*How did the locals of the Eighth Galaxy see the Union?*

*If a conflict of interests occurred one day, who should be the one to mediate?*

*Would the Union and Eighth Galaxy exchange fire one day...holding up their swords to protect their own people and beliefs and fight until their deaths?*

*What would happen to the people like them who still secretly used the Woltorian calendar?*

Lin Jingheng lit up a cigarette and stared blankly into the sky for a while. By the time he collected his thoughts, the end of the cigarette had already been burnt off.

Thanks to the Prime Minister’s silent approval, the multimedia screen right across from the central plaza was still playing Lu Xin’s documentary films that were almost laughable to anyone that knew the real story. Lin Jingheng looked up at Lu Xin’s large stone statue and almost felt as if the man himself was standing there like the Eighth Galaxy Star, bathed in the chorus of the people and the halos of the heavens where only very few could step close to him.

What terrified him the most was the fact that Lu Bixing had never once mentioned Lu Xin. Even when the name was brought up in conversation, the young Prime Minister would skillfully change the topic. It seemed as if Lu Bixing had some personal reasons for not wanting to accept Lu Xin as his father; his attitude towards his biological father was as cold as how he treated the Union. Perhaps the time he mentioned it in the Heart of the Rose was simply to step down from the stage.

Lin Jingheng tossed the butt of the cigarette into the cleaning robot on the side and made his way back home. With a strange sense of loneliness, he fell silent the whole way home.

“Sir,” Zhanlu reminded him as they were steps away from the front door, “Doctor Hardin is here.”

Lin Jingheng already knew and gave a soft response without turning his head.

Zhanlu added: “Headmaster Lu and Doctor Hardin are chatting in the guest room right now, but the guest room temporarily blocked me off.”

Despite being the digital butler of the house, Zhanlu was too high-functioning and involved in people’s lives so he would sometimes be blocked off in certain areas of the house from time to time...especially during nighttime.

But to block off Zhanlu in the middle of the day from the guest room?

Was Prime Minister Lu planning on serving guests the tea himself?

Besides, they only ever greeted friends and personal guests at home, nobody would be discussing top secret military strategies. Why would anyone need to block off Zhanlu?

If the guest today wasn’t old man Hardin, Lin Jingheng would almost suspect that something else was going on behind his back.

Lin Jingheng’s hand hesitated for a moment at the door as he ordered Zhanlu: “Don’t tell him I’m home.”

Soon after, the almighty mister Grand Marshal of the Eighth Galaxy walked around his house for a while before finding a shaded side of the building to climb up towards the window. He grabbed onto the railings of the window and effortlessly climbed up to the second-floor balcony as if he was walking on flat land on the vertical walls.

Who knew that he was such an experienced trespasser!

Zhanlu: “Very elegant, sir.”

Lin Jingheng: “Shut up, open the door for me.”

The human-formed Zhanlu pressed his hand gently on the wall and quickly disappeared as he merged his whole body with the wall of the house. Very soon after, the lock from inside the balcony clicked and opened up automatically, letting Lin Jingheng in the house quietly. Popcorn was sunbathing on the side as it was suddenly greeted by them, then almost scared itself away as it wiggled on the floor to escape. A robotic arm reached out from the floor and grabbed the poor snake, trapping it on the ground.

To save space, the stairs in the house were designed with sharp turns behind walls that could hide a person.

Right beneath that area on the staircase was the guest room.

It wasn’t hard to block off an AI; as long as permission was given, a simple command from his owner would guarantee that Zhanlu would not listen in. However, being physically at the site of the conversation across a staircase and a door would only require a volume amplifier on a personal device to listen into the conversation inside.

The moment Lin Jingheng sat down, he heard Doctor Hardin’s “....Someone had suggested the use of biochips on him, but Jingshu forcefully shot the idea down.”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

If Lu Bixing wanted to find out about things for himself, Doctor Hardin certainly wasn’t someone that could keep secrets. What he didn’t expect was that this ‘Hardin brand answering machine’ would spill the beans so easily.

Even though he already had some suspicions, Lu Bixing’s mind still blanked out after hearing that “irreversible damage” line.

Doctor Hardin saw the change of expression on his face and thought that the young man didn’t know how to comment on Lin Jingshu’s character, so added: “I don’t think she was thinking the same thing as you are right now, Prime Minister. She wasn’t hesitant to use the chip on Jingheng because of the dangers it may pose, she simply couldn’t decide which generation chip she should use on him. She didn’t know how to face him and would rather have Jingheng remain vegetative and sleep forever. Jingshu was...I believe she acknowledged that she no longer understands her twin brother, so she was scared. The relationship between the twins was always a bit more complicated than normal siblings; not to mention they were the only family they had for each other. Sometimes I think she took Jingheng as another personality of herself; he can die or become a soulless display, but he can’t deny her nor their past.”

Lu Bixing felt his ear buzz as Doctor Hardin spoke these words, as if they were words echoing from a faraway land.

When they occasionally talked about the Freedom Corps, Lin Jingheng never purposely hid anything important as they were now the Union’s number one terrorist group and a potential threat to the Eighth Galaxy. But his words were always emotionless and cold, objective and reserved; the most he ever talked about was the opium chip’s hierarchy and the organization’s method of expansion.

The Silver Ten that knew the full story collectively kept their mouths shut to the point where most people’s impression was simply that ‘the dictator of the Freedom Corps was an old acquaintance of the Marshal.’

Lin Jingheng never liked talking about his past, but he would mention it when asked. Lu Bixing vaguely remembered that Lin had once talked about his sister, saying she was quiet and well-mannered, not very expressive of her feelings, liked to secretly give presents to her brother and would be too embarrassed to admit it.

Since when...did he start purposely avoiding those topics?

Lu Bixing struggled to pull his voice from his throat: “Zhanlu…. uh, all of the data on Lin inside Zhanlu were events after he had been adopted.”

“Right,” Doctor Hardin sighed, “I’ve heard that you all managed to catch Laura Gordon’s message she left for the AUS and sort of understood her relationship with her husband. Little...Lin Wei never knew how to face his two children. I don’t know if you can understand since you don’t have this experience, but the couple was in a political marriage and lived separately most of the time. Their kids were bred in labs by collecting the couple’s DNA like seeds fallen off a tree...most breeding centers require parents to visit the center periodically to develop relationships with the children through various activities, and parents that don’t fulfill the requirements will risk losing custody of their child. However, with those two...one of them was a Military Council General, another was the director of the White Tower, so the breeding center couldn’t force them to comply. One would send his soldiers to check up, the other would send their research colleagues; it was almost as if they purposely avoided each other.”

Lu Bixing felt his heart get pinched by tweezers that pulled a bit off of the surface; then as if that wasn’t enough, the tweezers pulled harder on the piece of his heart--

“Thankfully, Wolto had a trend of twins in the breeding center that time so at least the two of them still had each other growing up. If it was only one of them, I couldn’t imagine how they would grow up to be.” Doctor Hardin let out another sigh, “Laura was my best student, but I still think that wasn’t right or fair for the children.”

The chameleon slowly stepped down the staircase and crawled beside Lin Jingheng.

Lin Jingheng gave it a cold eye to hint for it to go away, but the silly creature didn’t know how to read the room and instead grabbed onto the Marshal’s leg, changing the color of its skin to match the trousers. Lin Jingheng grabbed onto its neck and pulled it aside; the poor chameleon laid down pouting on the staircase and silently changed its color to the wooden flooring.

“......This is Lin Wei.” Doctor Hardin finally managed to pull up a photo from his personal device with his old eyes. Lu Bixing lowered his gaze to look at the photo: Lin Wei was young in it, and in contrast to his cold son, he looked much more amiable and gentler. His expression was calm, with an air of serenity in his eyes; he almost didn’t look like Lin Jingheng at first glance, only the rare smile on the commander’s face holding any resemblance to his father. “The Committee and Military Council secretly came to an agreement to hide the White Tower director Laura Gordon’s betrayal of the Union. The condition was that General Lin Wei had to personally dispatch his troops and chase the traitors down...he once forcefully disconnected from the mental network during a battle and suffered serious injuries. Since then, he blocked off Eden, abusing drugs and other antidepressants; perhaps he did die an early heroic death.”

Lu Bixing asked gently: “Aren’t political marriages all said to not bear any real feelings?”

“The political marriage itself was proposed by the Committee, but Lin Wei was the one that specifically asked for Laura back then. Laura...Laura was too deeply influenced by me and was quite radical in some respects. Perhaps she thought that marrying him was one of the negotiations by the Committee and didn’t even realize that Lin Wei’s feelings for her were genuine and deep. Now that I think about it, Lin Wei’s death certainly changed many things.

“Cold and distant protection was still protection. After the twins were forcefully separated after their father’s death, one held a sharp blade without direction, the other held the hand of the devil. The old Chief Woolf lost his last hope and heir right before retirement and broke off connections with the Committee henceforth. Lu Xin was later dragged in due to the forbidden fruit but refused to play it safe and back down even with failed precedents before, thus forcing the Union to collapse from the inside-out...they were chained together one by one with fate, finally creating a wave large enough to consume the entire eight galaxies.”

The two both sat wordlessly for a while before Lu Bixing broke the silence: “So... she locked you two up on a planet like a galactic prison...Doctor, are you saying that she planned on killing her own brother since the beginning?”

Doctor Hardin opened his mouth and finally remembered that Lin Jingheng had asked him to keep it secret, then forcefully changed the topic: “Commander Lin won’t let me talk about this, uh...since he’s back in the Eighth Galaxy now, perhaps you should ask him yourself.”

Lu Bixing’s face had grown pale during the conversation. He smiled faintly and then patiently changed the topic: “Alright, then let’s not talk about this---I’ve read the books from ancient times. These ancient Earthlings are quite interesting; these people that lived on the same planet could differentiate each other’s ethnical group and background based on appearance and the language they spoke. It was easy to determine who was an ally and who was an enemy back then. Protecting your allies and fighting against the common enemy was considered justice, so matter-of-factly that it was like this concept was engraved in human genes...to be honest, I’m quite jealous of that. Doctor, you’ve lived for three centuries already and have been chasing for an answer all your life, are you willing to share and tell me if you’ve found the answer? Where should I take the Eighth Galaxy to? The number of viewers peaked at 7.6 billion people on the day we experimented in the wormhole; where should I take these 7.6 billion people from here on out?”

The Union today was built on the ruins of humanity’s biggest lie; the Freedom Corps were built on massive burial mounds filled with corpses.

But what about the Eighth Galaxy?

What should it be built on?

An unreachable lone stone statue and an even more unreachable Pledge of Freedom?

Doctor Hardin didn’t respond.

“Don’t tell me to unify the Interstellar Union, I don’t have that kind of empathy nor the power to do so. I’m already having trouble managing this Eighth Galaxy...besides, we’ve seen what happened to the unification of the Union. Even if I was lucky enough to accomplish it, how could I guarantee that we won’t go down the same path in the future?” Lu Bixing said, “Also the communication we set up with the First Galaxy’s border patrol through the Heart of the Rose. To be quite honest, I’ve been constantly thinking about having someone destroy this port in secret over the last few days. I’m even thinking about finding ways to blow up the wormhole area like we blew up transfer portals.”

Doctor Hardin let out a deep sigh.

Lu Bixing lowered his voice and added: “......please keep these words a secret for me, don’t tell Jingheng.”

Lin Jingheng, who already heard everything on the staircase, quietly clenched his fist.

## Ch 148 - The Door Opened Before He Could Finish

Lin Jingheng gently rested his finger on his personal device. He had been fearless and unstoppable his whole life, but at that very moment, he wasn’t even thinking about barging in the room and instead just wanted to quietly turn off the listening device. He wanted to erase Zhanlu’s memories and jump out the window, pretending he had never heard anything.

Lu Bixing continued in a soft and gentle voice: “I don’t want to let him think that it’s because he makes me feel insecure...”

Lin Jingheng’s breathing stopped momentarily.

“.....He’s accommodating to my needs too much already and carries too much pressure,” Lu Bixing said. “He’s also very reserved and would never open up to place the burden anywhere else, no matter how heavy it is.”

Doctor Hardin: “......”

The old man remembered what Lin Jingheng had done on the small planet and felt a chill down his spine, wondering if the person that he knew was completely different from the person Lu Bixing knew.

Lu Bixing noticed the timid expression on the doctor’s face and knew that this poor old man perhaps suffered some mental trauma from Lin Jingheng and was secretly complaining to him at this moment.

Of course, there seemed to be nothing wrong with these complaints.

Lu Bixing could only give another apologetic grin back at him as a feeling of bitterness arose from within-- everyone in the world thought that the bastard Lin Jingheng was like a cockroach and could still turn the whole world upside down with one last breath of air left. Even if he was pierced through the chest by a remnant of an ecopod, he could still come back in full health in the blink of an eye; like he had no sense of pain, would not fear anything, and was not a mortal body.

“I’ve always wanted to run away, Doctor Hardin,” Lu Bixing said. “I’ve always enjoyed being the happy mediator in the past, throwing all the decision-making to other people and dreaming of chiming in with ideas to create a happy ending for everyone. I would never make any kind of decisions that could possibly harm others and forever be the good guy...then I realized this wasn’t the true spirit of humanism, I was simply pushing away responsibilities onto someone else. Closing off the Eighth Galaxy was only talk on a whim; we can’t even stabilize our communication signals with our technology right now, so how could we possibly artificially destroy the natural wormhole zone?”

Doctor Hardin let out a sigh of relief: “Right, and you’re also Commander Lu Xin’s….”

“I’m the son of the Eighth Galaxy and I only have one parent; he’s in the cemetery,” Lu Bixing interrupted the old man with a point in fact, then as if he noticed the stiffness in his tone, turned and put on another smile. “I personally admire Lu Xin and his Pledge of Freedom, but you should know that even if I maintained a bit of his genes in me, we’re still not as deeply blood-related as you think we are--let alone being similar in our ideals. In regard to this, we can keep it as a card up our sleeves to use, nothing more.”

Lin Jingheng looked in disbelief at the direction of the guest room, his gaze almost piercing through the heavy staircase and door to the room.

He hadn’t decided how he wanted to discuss Lu Xin with Lin Bixing even after all these years. The last time they spoke about him was on the mech when they were trapped by the Rainbow Virus, on a long journey toward the AUS headquarters. They didn’t have any restraints at the time and talked about the past; they even listened to this man’s ‘masterpiece’ of a song he left on Zhanlu.

Lin Jingheng had thought about the issue a lot and even worried that Lu Bixing would hold a grudge against him for keeping the secret for so long, or even worry that their encounter and relationship built in the past were all actually a conspiracy.

But Lu Bixing didn’t; he maintained the same attitude after he injected the number 6 relaxant, distant and objective.

So his uncaring attitude wasn’t because he had a big heart and didn’t dwell on the details?

Lu Bixing gave another courteous bow to the old Doctor Hardin: “I apologize for bothering you with these personal issues.”

“No,” Doctor Hardin shook his head, “If Jingshu would be as willing as you are to sit down and talk with me rather than force me to give her research data, perhaps…”

“I don’t think Miss Lin would act without baseless reasoning,” Lu Bxing said, “If the world turns into a blueprint of her ideals, at the very least we wouldn’t make the same mistake of Eden in the future.”

“Prime Minister Lu,” Doctor Hardin’s voice grew stern as his bitter melon-like face showed a hint of seriousness past the cages of his flesh, “the truth is that regardless of how hard you try, how much effort you put in to finding a path for the future, regardless of what kind of new relationship the Union and the Eighth Galaxy will develop in the future, the new structure of civilization will eventually follow the footsteps of the Union. They will all once again walk into destruction. This is fate--this is the only thing I can tell you after my three-century long life filled with countless mistakes and walking down the wrong path in life.”

Lu Bixing was dumbfounded.

“The Eden Committee controlled the world from the heavens at the time. I, Laura, Woolf, Lin Jingshu...and even Lin Jingheng himself, have all contributed to pushing the Union down this path to different extents. From the outside, it seemed as if our internal conflicts were what caused the downfall of the Union,” Doctor Hardin said, “But the truth is that according to the last intergalactic census we had before the war broke out, at least within the Union territory, vaccuocerebral birth rates have been steadily increasing at the speed of 0.4% every year. At the same time, the usage of drugs controlling mental health and emotional stability has also been steadily increasing in environments under Eden’s control. This means that it was inevitable that within the next generation, the Union would certainly face an inevitable revolution, so we’ve only really accelerated the process. I don’t know if Prime Minister Lu had heard of a famous thought experiment from ancient Earth--someone asked, ‘Will mankind’s future fall into the hands of Orwell or Huxley[[2]](#footnote-2)?”

“Huh, I’ve heard a bit of it before. The 20th Century A.D. in ancient times,” Lu Bixing said. “That was the start of the galactic era. Historians have considered that to be the start of the ‘countdown towards the end of the Earthly Era’.”

“Correct. These two famous prophets of their times described two different types of dystopias: one painted a fictional world that was haunted by an absolute totalitarian regime that ruled human society with endless fear and hatred. The other created a world where humans walked willingly into a puppet society of brainwashing and endless entertainment. One was a world that reached eternity through endless warfare, the other was a world where warfare was fully eradicated at the cost of mankind falling into a lucid dream of peace.” Doctor Hardin spoke with a slightly hoarse but calm voice, “But four big Eras have passed, and the reality is that we’re a pendulum swinging between these two prophecies--for example, the old Sideral Era the Union overthrew and now the dangerous monster called Eden…”

Lu Bixing asked: “And the Freedom Corps?”

“The Freedom Corps... the Freedom Corps are bolder. Lin Jingshu’s ambitions have a destructive force to them; she’s attempting to merge these two opposing traps into one. The biochips she’s selling rose from the ashes of Eden in an attempt to lure the pained and weak-minded people into its trap to accept biological modifications. She uses technology to infiltrate social structure from the inside out, which is reflective of Huxley’s world--then, she would instill fear and terror with the hierarchy of the biochips to control her empire, which is Orwell’s world.” Doctor Hardin let out a difficult laugh. “Her method is fast and effective; a single swing of her blade was powerful enough to pave a bloodied road towards her ultimate goal.”

Lu Bixing thought about it for a moment and said: “In certain ways, that is indeed an impressive plan. Our perspective right now may see her as cruel and unethical, but what if she really succeeds? What if many years later when people read about the messy Union Era in history books, would they feel as if we were the barbarians? Because in their society, everyone had their own role and jobs with a stable career path; nobody would be lost in life, and they would all be content. They wouldn’t have wars nor face oppression--the chip inside their bodies would control their minds and make them follow orders from their hearts, so they wouldn’t feel the pressure, nor would they feel the need to rebel and break the status quo……”

“This world would no longer have ‘survivors’,” Doctor Hardin added, “because they would never face calamities anymore. If she doesn’t succeed, she will be a drug-dealing and murderous space pirate; if she succeeds, she will be the saint of the future.”

Lu Bixing looked at him half-jokingly and said: “You’re almost successful in convincing me. Hey, Doctor, are you sure you aren’t a spy from the pirates?”

Doctor Hardin ignored the joke and continued: “However, I disagree with her. Since the ancient Earth Era to the New Sidereal Era today, we’ve passed through four large Eras of human civilization across almost hundreds of thousands of years. We’ve never reached a point of societal stability that these two prophets have predicted. Aside from the great and short Age of Galactic Exploration, we’ve always faced inevitable societal issues after short periods of peace, gradually walking into chaos and war until the survivors of the war are left behind to walk down the next loop--it’s a vicious and cursed cycle of civilization.”

The smile on Lu Bixing’s face vanished. After a long silence, he carefully asked: “Are you saying this is the price of freedom? Do you still believe in the Pledge of Freedom?”

“This is the price we pay for chasing after freedom,” Doctor Hardin corrected. “Since the beginning of time, regardless of the elite or common class, nobody has ever truly achieved ‘freedom’ in its rawest form. Did you know, Prime Minister? Some people have even said that ‘people do not need freedom,’ because the greater the freedom is, the responsibilities that come with it also grow heavier until it becomes too heavy for anyone to carry. When that time comes, people would willingly draw their own boundaries and cage themselves up. Even you have admitted to me that you’ve always wanted to let others handle the decision-making and turn yourself into someone that had no choice but to follow orders, so imagine how the rest of the average citizens like us feel.”

Lu Bixing could emphasize and felt his heart sink even more.

“We’ve paid such a hefty price only to realize it was all just talk because nobody knows what freedom truly is; the Pledge of Freedom sounds even more like a joke now,” Doctor Hardin said. “Then why don’t we simply choose between Orwell or Huxley and continue on that path for the rest of time?”

Lu Bixing’s expression changed slightly as he lowered his head and looked into Doctor Hardin’s old and muddied eyes.

“Some people have said that the worlds Orwell and Huxley have painted are complete opposites of each other, but the truth is they’re both describing the same thing,” Doctor Hardin continued. “No, I am not simply talking about the political satire here--they’re both painting human society’s claustrophobia.”

“We’re like the legendary legless birds[[3]](#footnote-3) that could never stop flying; we cannot stop because we will die and fall into destruction. We need to expand and continuously open up new worlds. The concept of being closed in would also widen as our activity zone expands. I remember having this conversation with Jingheng on the small planet; billions of people lived on a small planet back on ancient earth and nobody felt like they were trapped. A natural planet with abundant natural resources to sustain a species would satisfy the needs of humanity. But now, when you mention how you want to cut off the connection with the Union, your word choice here was still ‘close off’.”

Laura once said that anger, anxiety, pain, and foolishness were all mankind’s free will.

“The Pledge of Freedom is grandiose and awesome, but the reason why it was able to stand even without any real logic or scientific reasoning behind it was because it spoke to human nature. Prime Minister, human nature doesn’t necessarily have to be logical; otherwise, why would young people like yourself be drowned in the senseless and painful process of love and romance on top of human desire for reproduction?” Doctor Hardin ordered the robot to carry the equipment and gestured to make his exit. “Unless one day this part of human nature disappears...but perhaps ‘humans’ at that time would be a completely different species as us. Prime Minister Lu, since you single-handedly gave up the path to human evolution, you should prepare yourself for the future.”

Lu Bixing picked up the old man’s jacket for him.

“Prepare myself,” Lu Bixing said in a low tone,” Right. Now that I think about it, we were the ones that opened the wormhole terminal; we sure dug our own grave. But I still need to thank you on behalf of our Expedition Team, I’ve heard that they learned and received a lot of your support in building the communication channel through the wormhole. As a specialist on human-mech technology, you sure are well-versed in communication technology as well. It seemed as if you trained yourself well during the time you were in the galactic prison.”

Doctor Hardin let out another difficult laugh without any reserve: “Certainly, we only had tools of the ancients in our hands at the time to fight against the most advanced galactic prison technology. Over a decade...it wasn’t only me, even that violent student that often skips class self-taught himself to become half an expert on the subject.”

Lu Bixing answered nonchalantly: “He told me he doesn’t even remember how many times he failed.”

Doctor Hardin naturally assumed that Lin Jingheng had already mentioned this part and responded: “Well I still remember it was over 2,000 times. If it was someone else who was less stubborn and patient, they’d probably already have gone mad.”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

This was...the live stream of how an old, wise, and well-respected scientist of different fields fell into the trap of a direct marketing scam.

It was almost too embarrassing to watch.

Lu Bixing’s hands trembled slightly as they held onto the old man’s wheelchair when he heard this comment.

Over...2,000 times.

Did that mean he would climb up to the roof all by himself whenever he received a failed message to gaze at the stars?

Didn’t that mean he lived days of endless darkness?

But he was no longer that naive young man who would drag his commander to the market streets and beg for a smile with an orange in hand. He could no longer promise “I will follow you no matter where you go” without hesitation.

“Doctor,” Lu Bixing suddenly spoke up without a second thought, “If you realize that you can no longer make your partner happy in a relationship, and are instead forcing him to do what he doesn’t want to do, pulling him down, does that mean we should…”

Before he could finish, the door to the guest room slammed open violently from the outside and crashed into the wall, creating a loud sound in the otherwise quiet room.

The old Doctor Hardin couldn’t handle this kind of surprise and almost fell off his wheelchair in shock.

Zhanlu’s robotic arm quickly slid over from the ceiling and said: “The door shaft is damaged, there’s a visible dent in the wall; please open up automatic housing repair function--Sir, I have to remind you that this is a very unsophisticated act of violence…”

Lin Jingheng: “Go away.”

Zhanlu shut his mouth and slid down to turn himself into his human form. He quickly took over Doctor Hardin’s wheelchair and said: “Allow me to take you home.”

Doctor Hardin, who was standing on high ground in philosophical debate earlier discussing history and mankind’s future, didn’t even dare to make a sound and ran off with Zhanlu.

Lin Jingheng froze on the spot as his fiery gaze locked onto Lu Bixing.

He didn’t want to cause a commotion in front of guests, so Lin Jingheng waited until he heard the front door close, making sure Doctor Hardin left before grabbing onto Lu Bixing’s collar and pressing him against the wall: “Get over here, let’s talk.”

Lu Bixing was still completely out of the loop and panicked, asking: “You...when did you come home? How come Zhanlu didn’t….”

Lin Jingheng interrupted him and forced out a sentence through his clenched teeth: “What did you say to that old man earlier? Repeat it to my face.”

Lu Bixing, who had also been standing on the same pedestal as Doctor Hardin earlier on humanity and didn’t manage to have time to step down the ladder, did not have the guts to answer. He wished he could time travel back a minute earlier and force that line he’d spoken as if bewitched back down his throat. He could almost feel his legs falling asleep.

Lin Jingheng didn’t let him off the hook and continued: “Does that mean we should *what*?”

Lu Bixing opened his mouth: “I……”

Lin Jingheng felt a whole bowl of boiling oil pouring onto his burning heart as he saw Lu Bixing’s panicked expression, exploding his fury like an erupting volcano that boiled his whole body. Lin Jingheng had never felt this furious in his life; he remembered that potentially dangerous chip inside Lu Bixing’s body and Zhanlu’s medical reports about the young man. His knuckles cracked in his tight grip...Lin Jingheng almost wanted to beat this man before him into a ball, throw him on a ground and whip him into a spinning top.

Of course, Scrooge would never dare to destroy his treasure no matter how upset he got. Lin Jingheng experienced what felt like three nuclear explosions inside his heart until everything in his chest was empty, and still couldn’t manage to hurt even a single strand of Lu Bixing’s hair. He stood frozen for a few moments before fiercely punching the wall and turning away. He was about to leave to find a place to calm himself down when Lu Bixing suddenly grabbed his waist from behind.

“You said you weren’t hurt, that you were only locked up by the Freedom Corps for a few years; what’s this about brain damage? What does it mean that ‘Lin Jingshu wants to keep you in a vegetative state forever’?” Lu Bixing’s voice felt as if it was stuck in his throat as he pulled at the bottom of Lin Jingheng’s shirt. Lin Jingheng stiffened up at the gesture but couldn’t break out of the grip--this little bastard had a cheat called a biochip. Lu Bixing’s hand reached inside his shirt and pressed on the scar left on his waist. “And how did this happen?”

## Ch 149 - Am I Not Allowed To Take It Just Because I Dislike It?

“Piss off!” Lin Jingheng elbowed him back in rage. “Let go!”

But this elbow felt like it landed on a brick wall. Lu Bixing didn’t even bat an eye at the sudden gesture.

Lu Bixing felt a vein in his head about to pop and instinctively grabbed onto Lin Jingheng tighter before he could think. He then buried his own face in the commander’s shoulders and felt the warmth of the body heat through the thin cotton shirt.

The weak scent of the man’s warm body flowed into his nose and filled his head like a tiny needle pricked right into his brain.

Lu Bixing’s foot lost balance during the struggle and knocked over the small tea set resting on the little coffee table, spilling hot tea onto the whole floor. The two then fell onto the armchair together.

It was certainly an indecent position; Lin Jingheng couldn’t break out of Lu Bixing’s grip and was almost choking from the Prime Minister’s tight hold on his waist. He sneered in response and finally spoke up without any reservations: “This? An injury from the jailbreak; it sure was a fucking mistake of a blow. If only it was a little bit higher, both you and Jingshu could rest in…”

Lu Bixing’s expression darkened as his voice cracked in horror: “What kind of nonsense are you saying!?”

Lin Jingheng: “I don’t know what I came back for!”

When Lu Bixing had spoken earlier, his tone was so calm, as if he were ready to fully let go of that hand without any regrets. Now, the hands holding that hand were nothing but gentle and willing: “I never asked you back in the Heart of the Rose; I was the one that barged in the middle and took you back. I was the one that purposely ignored the fact that you urgently ordered the Silver Ten to support the Union’s citizens back then and almost locked yourself out of the Eighth Galaxy forever! I’m the one that doesn’t want to give you back to the Union, I’m the one that’s been doing everything my way this whole time; I’m the one that’s been trapping you here, is that enough!?”

Lin Jingheng lowered his head and skillfully turned Lu Bixing’s wrist in a certain way, forcing those fingers grappling him to loosen up. Those hands subconsciously turned to grab onto his jacket with no luck--Lin Jingheng quickly took his jacket off and tossed it in Lu Bixing’s face. Those hard metal buttons on the jacket kissed the bridge of the Prime Minister’s nose without a word.

The biochip strengthened his body enough to not feel any pain; he only felt the cold metal of the button, as if it was covered in a layer of frost that could only be found on planet Beijing-β.

Lin Jingheng’s dress shirt underneath the jacket was pulled out halfway by this young man, wrinkled up like Doctor Hardin’s face. A few of the buttons on the shirt fell off as he stood up a few steps away in the most disheveled fashion he’d ever been in as of late.

He stood in silence for a while while controlling his breathing, his chest heaving, only to find that he couldn’t let out the breath stuck in his throat. He finally lifted his head slightly as his neck stiffened up, while those rugged markings on his skin peeked out from behind the fabric. He was more than furious.

Lu Bixing held tightly onto that jacket and bit his lips to calm himself down, then lowered his head and admitted defeat: “Lin...I... sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Lin Jingheng looked at him from above, his voice still tight in his throat: “Then what do you mean?”

Lu Bixing pressed his lips down harder as he began fiddling with his fingers over his knees.

Sharp features weren’t uncommon on the face shapes of many adult men, but Lu Bixing’s facial structure in the past had seemed to be covered in an extra thin layer of skin. It wasn’t baby fat, but a healthy level of extra flesh; it wasn’t a lingering adolescent look from puberty but looked like an extra layer of paint that softened his face. The young man’s eyebrows were also naturally stretched out from his glowing eyes, and the natural curl at the corner of his lips gave him an extra friendly and gentle appearance.

Perhaps the biochip affected his metabolism or perhaps he was simply too overworked, but that extra layer of fat on his cheeks had sunk in. The corners of his face were no longer as rounded as before, and his features had grown sharper with more distinct angles. When he didn’t smile, it almost created a strange air of intimidation around the young man.

Lin Jingheng took another step back to lean against the wall and closed his eyes.

Lu Bixing had been much more relaxed in front of him lately and had even begun to display rare signs of curiosity as he attempted to probe more information out of old Doctor Hardin. The day when the Expedition Team successfully passed through the Heart of the Rose and the on-land support was celebrating in a frenzy, he had seen Lu Bixing hiding amongst the crowd and secretly gave him a thumbs up in midst of chaos…. that instant, he almost thought he was slowly but successfully rebuilding the bridge to the past.

But before he could have time to nourish this small joy in his heart, that vague shadow of a bridge was crushed by the voice from the Union.

The Union was a lone ship sailing in a vast sea surrounded by danger; the Eighth Galaxy yearned to become independent from the Union.

How great would it be if Lin Jingheng was an average man; how natural and easy would it be to keep him if that was the case. But he represented the Silver Ten. The Silver Ten that could still turn the tables of the war even after becoming a fleet of broken mechs after a decade of conflict with the Freedom Corps. His alliance and status meant a lot of things for many people; but where did personal feelings rank in his list of priorities?

Now that they thought about it, the problem between them had existed since the beginning, perhaps even as early as the time they were in the Old Fart’s space station---

Lin Jingheng had needed to repair the Model 3 at the time, so under strategy theory he negotiated three months grace for Lu Bixing. Those three months were gone within a blink of an eye, but the station was still filled with hopeless garbage; Lin was ready to summon the Silver Ninth Squadron waiting on standby outside and give up on these people in the station. The young Professor Lu was caught in a dilemma, wavering on the night of New Year’s Eve, unsure where he should stand.

Luckily, the Cayley Pirates discovered the station due to Primal Alien’s death and charged in at the right time to save them from choosing one evil for another.

The second time was the outbreak of the mutated Rainbow Virus---if they hadn’t had Hope’s help at the time, they would never have been able to obtain the vaccine for the mutated virus. Would Lin Jingheng have ordered Turan to leave the plagued Eighth Galaxy with the Ninth Squadron at the very end? He had once answered “yes” very clearly: it was Lu Bixing himself that stubbornly refused to believe those words...and another fortunate turn of events once again turned them away before Death could witness their answer to this fateful decision.

The third time was when Lin Jingheng’s identity was exposed. The Eighth Galaxy was put under the spotlight. Lu Bixing suggested blowing up the transfer portals and closing off the Eighth Galaxy. Lu Bixing should’ve known already that even though Lin was the ‘Commander of the Eighth Galaxy Defense Forces’ in name, he was still Commander Lin of the Silver Fortress and did not agree to blowing up the portals. He didn’t want to truly betray the Union. Even when he received messages from the Silver Ten, his first order was for them to uphold the Pledge of Freedom and not to protect their own boss...Lin Jingheng never openly opposed the closing of the Eighth Galaxy at the time, perhaps because he only had so many troops in hand and the whole world was putting pressure on him.

Facts had proven that even when the world was against him, he had still almost died for the Union.

Recalling everything now, Lu Bixing suddenly felt a sense of guilt. If he would have been more sensitive, thought about the situation a bit more back then, would he have been able to foresee the eventual deep fracture in that vague line of fate between the two of them?

Fate had been generous to him and had given this peace-loving people-pleasing man two valuable chances to run. But perhaps the third time was not the charm; he never took these two coincidences as warnings and even foolishly took it as his own charismatic ability to satisfy all parties. Thus, Fate gave him a good slap in the face and piled up all these unavoidable problems right before his face.

The two sat and stood wordlessly for a long while before they almost felt the warm temperature of the room cool down, like a fire that had passed by, leaving trails of ashes on the ground.

The digital clock on the wall of the guest room ticked by the second; those few seconds of time felt like a painful eternity.

Lu Bixing finally opened up his mouth and said with a slightly hoarse voice: “Can we stop fighting? Let me say something real quick.”

Lin Jingheng responded in silent approval as he gazed down at him.

“Doctor Hardin said that you tried over 2,000 times to break the signal barrier when you were locked in the galactic prison,” Lu Bixing said. He had already managed to piece together a good half of the puzzle from the little information he probed out of the old doctor. “I’ve calculated it before, there were at least 30 minutes of time from the moment Zhanlu’s mental network disappeared to the time the Freedom Corps captured you. People can’t survive for that long under cosmic rays, so I’m guessing that you used some method...to create a protection layer over your broken ecopod and suffered severe brain damage during this process. Doctor Hardin and his team didn’t think you’d survive this injury...so just how bad was it? How long were you unconscious?”

“Two years,” Lin Jingheng answered frankly, then as if he wanted to emphasize something, added, “It’s not as long as you think, I meant in Woltorian time.”

The words ‘Woltorian time’ pierced through Lu Bixing’s ears as he pressed his hands together tighter.

A guess was still a guess and could never match up to the harsh truth spoken by the man himself. Lu Bixing felt his throat drying up as he asked: “Two years...the Doctor said that the person who saved you didn’t attempt to help you out of the coma, she wanted to keep you in that vegetative state.”

“That’s incorrect, she did attempt to help out,” Lin Jingheng said, “She wanted to turn me into a living corpse.”

Lu Bixing’s knuckles cracked with a clear sound.

Lin Jingheng leaned his head against the wall as he looked up and stared at the ceiling for a short while. The pattern on the ceiling was clean and simple, nothing too extravagant or excessive like a standard guest room for the Prime Minister.

“In the past, I’ve always thought that there was someone that I must see and a place I must return to even if I had only a breath of air left. There was a promise I had to keep at all costs, so I was fearful of death. I needed to grab onto every bit of hope for survival I could through the cracks of fate, not even daring to let the last bit of my consciousness glued to that mental network perish. I needed to wake myself up with the help of that little disturbance from the rare solar storm. I needed to pretend I lost my memories, pretend to be a clueless lost lamb, pretend to have a kind heart only to win over some breathing space from the hands of those pirates...I couldn’t even bear to think that this pirate I was trying to hide from was my own little sister.”

Lin Jingheng stopped abruptly as he felt the words that would follow were too hurtful and shouldn’t be said. But those words were like the awful taste of acid rolling up his throat as if he was ready to vomit, and it took Lin Jingheng all his might to keep the rest of those words down his throat. Yet before he could digest them, Lu Bixing suddenly added: “You used to think that way ‘in the past,’ but what about now? You think that everything is meaningless now, right--I can tell that’s what you want to say.”

He was too good at reading the room and pulled those words out of Lin Jingheng’s mouth and laid them out on the ground.

“I’m not worth it.” Lu Bixing continued calmly, “I also don’t know what I should do to not make all of your efforts in these last sixteen years end in vain; so can you tell me? Jingheng, I...I really can’t carry such a….such heavy expectation. That person you once loved no longer exists; I really want to return him to you, but I can only give you a wretched version of your desires.”

Lin Jingheng turned his head as if he wanted to speak, only to have Lu Bixing interrupt him once again.

Lu Bixing’s voice was calm and gentle like how he spoke with his students patiently in the past. He said: “Can you be completely honest with me, and not tell me that you’ll love me no matter who I become?”

“Let’s both be honest here, Jingheng. I’ve known you...looking back now, I don’t even know how to calculate based on either calendar anymore--let’s just say at least twenty years? We were acquaintances back on Planet Beijing, then I started harassing you after the war broke out...then, you left. So I pulled out everything Zhanlu had about you on his database and rewatched them countless times. I’ve one-sidedly walked beside you since you were a little boy up until you became the Top Commander of the Union for...just a few hundred times. I know and understand you, more so than you think.”

“Do I sometimes remind you of the Chief in the Union and that person in the Freedom Corps? Then you’re right, I used to think they’re both psychopaths, but now I’m starting to empathize with them.”

“The man you love was ‘him,’ and you’re scared to look back at him in front of me, but you still love him. I know; you don’t like someone who’s constantly calculating in their minds, always tiring you with worries, and could potentially become someone like them in the future, someone who would force you down a path you never wished to take, right?”

Lu Bixing lifted his head. There was something frightening hiding in his eyes, like a silent storm in the depths of darkness.

The suffocating silence once again filled the room.

Moments later, Lin Jingheng finally confessed.

He said, “Yes.”

This single word finally ripped through the harmonious facade between them.

Lin Jingheng said: “I don’t like to guess what you’re thinking everyday, nor do I like having to weigh in and choose what I should or shouldn't say to you. I hate personal relationships that feel like walking on a steel wire, nor do I have the patience to do something like repairing a Model 3 all by myself; I’m too tired.”

The blade of the guillotine dropped mercilessly and sliced through the fragile neck of the punished.

Lu Bixing wanted to give him an understanding smile but failed. His throat rolled up and down several times and couldn’t even make a sound; he felt his heart freezing up as if he was walking closer and closer to death.

Lin Jingheng opened the door of the guest room and walked outside. The little repair robot waiting outside rolled in and began checking up on the damaged door and wall, creating some noise in the quiet space.

Lu Bixing closed his eyes. That man’s footsteps were clear and audible in the darkness; he wanted to run and cling onto him like grabbing onto the last ray of hope in life, but he had no more strength left. The cold river water poured from the top of his head and devoured his whole body, pulling him deeper into suffocation as he watched himself drown.

“But what can I do?”

Lu Bixing opened his eyes suddenly and pulled himself back to reality.

Lin Jingheng hadn’t left the house and instead walked up the staircase. He was standing halfway up the stairs when he suddenly turned his head around and howled back at the young man: “This is the only bit of meaning I have left in my life, am I not allowed to take it just because I dislike it!?”

Lu Bixing was completely dumbfounded. He didn’t know when he stood up, but by the time his mind returned to reality, he was greeted by the sound of Lin Jingheng slamming the door to the study. Before Lu Bixing could manage to think of how to deal with the situation, Lin Jingheng walked out of the study with a cold expression--he remembered that as the Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy, Lu Bixing often needed to use the room to call up remote meetings for work. He didn’t want to risk his chances and, under Lu Bixing’s hesitant gaze, walked up to the attic and locked the door.

The large fish tank in the living room glistened under the light as a colorful tropical fish blew out a bubble under the water; thus began a cold war in the household.

## Ch 150 - I Only Have You

Mail from the Beijing-β Anti-Missile Lab was always labeled as urgent when received. Lu Bixing stared at this “urgent message” for five minutes but couldn’t process its meaning. He then turned down the temperature inside the room five degrees lower in frustration, thinking about how he wanted to drag these directors of the lab over for a scolding and show them how a proper report should be sent to their superiors.

“Zhanlu,” Lu Bixing said, “It’s been a while since anyone went up the attic, how’s the room up there? Give me a detailed data reference.”

The robotic arm hung from the ceiling like a little poltergeist and answered: “Headmaster Lu, all the rooms in the house including the basement are all being managed by myself. If anything is wrong, I will report and request for repair.”

Lu Buxing’s hands carrying the teacup stopped in midair as he slowly turned around and adjusted the room temperature back up.

“......has he eaten yet?”

This was their little household tradition--Lin Jingheng would only switch his diet to condensed nutrients for long business trips outside the planet, but they would always eat proper meals when they were on the capital planet. It wasn’t because they had a preference of taste, but the act of sharing a dining table together had a sense of ceremonial significance; even if they didn’t speak and simply split the last sausage in half to share between the two of them, it would feel as if they truly spent the day together with each other.

Zhanlu’s robotic arm disappeared from the ceiling. One minute later, it reappeared as the AI reported back: “The dinner I left was only half eaten. He said he’s done and asked me to take away the rest.”

Lu Bixing nodded his head hurriedly and blanked out for a few moments before suddenly asking Zhanlu as if he had just woken up from a dream: “By the way, where does he sleep?”

He added before Zhanlu could respond: “Bring my pillow into the study, let him sleep in that room.”

Zhanlu snailed away immediately. Moments later, the little robotic arm carried a pillow in its hand and rounded the study like a lost lamb before finally reporting: “Master Lin said ‘don’t bother me, get out.’”

Lu Bixing picked up his pillow and sighed: “Then go clean up the attic for him and send a blanket up there...also his clothes for tomorrow.”

As a mech core under repair, if there was any bit of pride as a galactic weapon left within Zhanlu, this would’ve been a great time for this AI to offer a middle finger to this nosy master.

Thankfully, Zhanlu had no dignity.

He obediently transformed into his human form, cleaned up the clothes and prepared the blankets to deliver up to the attic.

Lu Bixing asked after he returned: “How was it?”

Zhanlu responded in his usual deadpan tone: “He ignored me and blocked me off from the attic. Sorry, Headmaster Lu, I’ve been banned from going upstairs, would you like to try hacking into the household system?”

Lu Bixing: “......”

“Oh,” Zhanlu suddenly spoke up, “I can go up now.”

Lu Bixing lifted his head slightly, a little spark of light appearing in his eyes.

Zhanlu said: “The Command Post sent in an important message to the military, grade 3S; the priority of the report surpasses the household blockade permission.”

The sparks of light in Lu Bixing’s eyes instantly dimmed down like two tiny stars that were wiped away by a violent storm.

Zhanlu: “Message shared to the Prime Minister simultaneously.”

Lu Bixing lowered his head hopelessly and said: “Oh, sure.”

“The second wave of dispatched troops from the Union arrived in the outer layers of the Heart of the Rose. Initial report stated that it was a large fleet of over 300 superdimensional heavy mechs carrying an enormous artificial space station with a mid-sized fortress body. They are currently preparing to dispatch all of them into the Heart of the Rose. General Duke sent a message and said that the dispatch of the fortress in question has not been approved by the First Galaxy’s Central Militia. He brought up his concerns to the higher-ups, but the central government used the Border Defense Law to shoot him down; he said he is sending his apologies and explained that the current arrangement of troops do not reflect the Central Militia’s attitude towards the Eighth Galaxy.”

Lu Bixing’s already soulless gaze darkened even more as he forcefully pulled his floating consciousness above his head back into place, asking in a deep tone: “It’s been six days since we sent out our request to speak with the Union, and there’s still no answer?”

“No.”

Lu Bixing continued slowly: “And we can’t determine whether it’s the Union central government who were refusing to talk or if the ‘border patrols’ in the First Galaxy were the ones that intercepted the message.”

From the perspective of the top executive representative of the Eighth Galaxy, Lu Bixing felt that the Union’s refusal to speak to the Eighth Galaxy was abnormal--especially negotiation under the table. The Eighth Galaxy was no match to the Union in sheer size and population; the most pressing concern for the Union right now could not be this little galaxy.

Following this logic, the purpose of the 306th Decree was quite a plate full of food for thought.

Most of the information they had received as of now were one-sided reports from Duke. While Duke seemed to be actively engaged in maintaining a relationship with the Eighth Galaxy and had very strong emotional ties with Lu Xin...Ankur had once shed tears in front of Lu Xin’s stone statue as well.

“You can go off now,” Lu Bixing told Zhanlu. “And tell him that I will call up a meeting tomorrow regarding this situation, remind our Marshal to arrive on time for the meeting.”

Zhanlu was about to pass through the wall when Lu Bixing called him up again: “Oh, wait....”

“......He drinks a glass of water before bed, make sure to not give him cold water.”

The First Galaxy.

A starship sailed out from Wolto and landed on a supply station near the edge of the First Galaxy. The moment the starship landed, the passengers all swarmed out and walked into the restaurant in the station.

A woman looked around the restaurant for a few moments before deciding to walk into a small private room. There was already someone sitting inside the room; she bent down and exchanged a few words with the individual inside before sitting down to share the table. She then closed up the little divider beside her seat.

“This is the footage of the interview I had with Chief Woolf,” the woman scanned her surroundings a bit before connecting both of their personal devices. The data transfer lasted only one second. “First-hand sources recorded while I was interviewing him. It’s raw footage.”

The man sitting in front of her asked: “Are you sure it’s him? And that he was conscious the whole time? You’re sure that he wasn’t threatened by anyone during the process?”

“At least... I didn’t notice anything wrong when I visited the chief’s mansion.”

The woman was the reporter from Wolto Daily.

The Wolto Daily had always been a loyal spokesperson for the Union government. Before the war, the Eden Committee in the central government were the ones that controlled the media and public opinion. Now that the Council had taken over, the Wolto Daily had become walking propaganda for the military.

As one of the pillar supporters of the Wolto Daily, it didn’t take much for the female reporter to obtain the exclusive interview rights with Chief Woolf, allowing them to write up an interesting report in regard to the controversial 306th Decree. Chief Woolf spoke clearly and sternly in the interview footage and did not show any visible health concern. His expression was as calm and collected as usual, settling the ‘Woolf turned into a puppet’ rumor the moment the interview was made public.

Thus, people’s attention naturally went towards the 306th Decree itself.

“The 306th Decree is clearly targeting the Eighth Galaxy. There are many guesses and theories arising about the purpose of this particular order from the Military Council; some have said that the Eighth Galaxy’s declaration of independence itself put a bad image on the Central Militia throughout the galaxies. If the Union government silently acknowledged the sovereignty of the Eighth Galaxy, it could potentially be the starting line of a chain effect of other galaxies claiming independence, which will become difficult to handle. Others have said that the transfer portals to the Eighth Galaxy had been completely shut down for years, so they’re not the Union’s primary concern right now. 306 looked like an order targeting the Heart of the Rose on the outside but is actually the Union government pointing their guns at the Central Militia; this whole thing is another giant gamble in the long-term power struggle between the central government and the Central Militia forces. Woolf wants to reconsolidate power and strip military autonomy from them and is using 306 as a warning.”

“These are all baseless guesses,” the man said. “Even though it makes sense to cast aside a tool that’s served its purpose, have they really used all their tools to their extent yet? The Freedom Corps is still watching from the shadows and the drug market is still seeping deep into the Union, so how could Woolf toss aside the Central Militia that he spent so long gathering up?”

The reporter hesitated: “There’s another rumor that said Woolf was forced to make this decision because the Eighth Galaxy already conquered the natural wormhole. The Eighth Galaxy had built a powerful military state outside of the Union these years and was eyeing the Union as they prepared to expand their reach.”

The man frowned slightly.

“But this theory was immediately shot down by other conspiracy theorists the moment it was mentioned.”

“Hm, why is that?”

“The Silver Ten, did you forget?” The reporter let out a sigh and lowered her voice, “A great portion of our main troops fell at the hands of Lin Jingheng because we got misled by people who calculated behind our backs. If it wasn’t for Prophet Harris, perhaps our organization would...those foolish followers today praised Lin Jingheng like a god because of this. Ironically, they were also the same ones who used to believe he was the mastermind that conspired the fall of the Interstellar Union. Also, during those most chaotic years when the Freedom Corps were using violence and force to promote their opium chips to the people, I’ve heard that the Silver Ten were the ones that took care of fighting off the pirates in areas that the Union troops couldn’t reach. Even though they didn’t follow direct orders from the Union, they were still an undeniably powerful force fighting against the spread of opium. The day the Eighth Galaxy announced their Independence, the Silver Ten appeared and followed Lin Jingheng back to the Eighth Galaxy. That mysterious Prime Minister of theirs even slyly placed Lu Xin’s statue at their front door to create a natural layer of protection. I don’t know if the Eighth Galaxy really is looking at the Union with hostility, but those fools that had their lives saved and are being protected by them sure don’t believe our neighbors are our allies.”

The man asked: “What else is there?”

“There’s another piece of important information. Underground sources said that it’s very likely the Nuwa Project succeeded in the Eighth Galaxy, and they’ve already organized a real superhuman military fleet.” The reporter said, “We can’t prove whose son this Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy is, but it’s confirmed that he is immune to the Rainbow Virus.”

“Where did this information come from?”

“I have a friend that works alongside a higher-up official in the Military Council who overheard this during a meeting,” the reporter answered. “The exact sources of this information are unknown, but it’s a conversation being discussed by the higher-ups. Go back and inform Prophet Harris, tell him to prepare himself and he will know what to do.”

The two finished their quick exchange as the dining table displayed a notification message that showed all the numbers of the starships that were ready to take off, asking all passengers to board.

“I’m leaving.” The man looked intensely at his comrade, “For life and nature.”

“Life and nature.”

The man quickly left the restaurant and didn’t notice that a plain-looking shorty had stood up from the private room next door and quietly trailed behind him.

Wolto.

Wang Ailun poured a glass of red wine and toasted to himself in mid-air: “That woman already sent the information to Harris. Lu Bixing’s immunity to the Rainbow Virus was even a piece of information we probed from the prophet himself, so he’ll understand the moment he hears it. Harris is afraid of war and has always been biased toward the Eighth Galaxy, so he’ll find a way to get in contact with the Eighth Galaxy. I’ll simply cooperate with him for a little at the time, just a little; are you sure the Eighth Galaxy will cut off communication and close off the wormhole area? What if they feel threatened and decide to take the initiative to attack?”

Lin Jingshu’s figure appeared above his wrist like a virtual human figure, carefully sculpted like fine art.

“No, the Silver Ten cannot possibly do something like pointing their cannons at the Union. I’m sure this isn’t the first day you’ve known the fool Lin Jingheng, who always acts at the wrong time.” She said coldly, “Besides, with a gem of a predecessor like Ankur, would they even dare to trust the Central Militia? One side is the hostility from the Union government, the other is a snake called the Central Militia sharing a bed with the Union. A decade and a few years is not long enough to change the ideologies of a generation of people. The Eighth Galaxy has a large population of Union refugees; as long as their Prime Minister still has some brains left, they would know how to avoid getting themselves involved in the mess inside the Union.”

“I’ll take your words as a blessing,” Wang Ailun said. “The best-case scenario is that their useless technology can advance to a point where they can blow up the wormhole area. Without this variable called the Eighth Galaxy, I’m sure our future endeavors will be much smoother---cheers.”

Milky Way City, the Home of Commander Lin and Engineer 001.

Lu Bixing curled up on a small couch in the corner of the study, unable to sleep. The couch was too small for him to stretch his legs out, so he was left with dangling his feet off the couch or curling up on it. It was rather strange, to be honest; before Lin Jingheng came back, he slept in the study every day and had never cared about the issue of having his limbs dangle off the small couch at night. He didn’t even mind not having enough room to roll around because by the time he rolled off, it normally meant it was time to wake up. It had only been half a year since he moved back to his actual bedroom to sleep, but he already felt the adjustment take a toll.

Starlight gently peeked through the windows and cast a thin layer of glow inside the study, the clock inside the room already passed the midnight mark into the deep night. The night felt like a whole year of time as Lu Bixing sat on the couch like a drug user with no food to satisfy his sudden episode, perhaps only able to catch a breath until the next morning’s meeting.

Lu Bixing laid back down on the couch and struggled to find a comfortable position a few times before he concluded that insomnia had hit. He opened his personal device and pulled out a photo album.

A life-sized 3D projection appeared in midair. Lin Jingheng was laying on his side, blanket covering only up to his waist, half of his face buried in the pillow with a hand resting on the side--it was a photo Lu Bixing had snuck in the middle of the night during another episode of insomnia.

Lu Bixing stared at the projection from his personal device and reached out a hand; there was also a hand reaching out in the projection that overlapped perfectly with his own as he reached to touch the palm of Lin Jingheng’s hand. The palm was one of the warmest exposed parts of the body; the commander’s warmth was always hiding under a layer of rough blisters that gave off a strange sense of deep love every time Lu Bixing touched it. The Lin Jingheng in the projection suddenly clenched his fist and grabbed the harasser sneaking up on him in the middle of the night, pulling the other hand in the projection into his embrace and placing a gentle kiss upon it. Without opening his eyes, the commander whispered: “Stay put.”

Lu Bixing grabbed onto the jacket in his arms that had been thrown at him earlier in the day as he carefully embraced this virtual projection. He lifted the corner of his lips up instinctively, but the smile vanished almost as soon as it appeared. He closed his eyes, pressed his nose into the jacket and took in a deep breath, wondering: “What should I tell him in the meeting tomorrow?”

The Union, Eighth Galaxy, the 306th Decree increasing more troops, the mysterious position the Central Militia played in all of this....

The album inside his personal device followed its default settings and returned to the first image after reaching the last.

Lu Bixing didn’t mind it and let the album play through the footage and photos automatically. He saw a little boy walk into the house with his head looking down, the features on his face were still the same as they were today, just a bit grimmer and closed-off. He was like a little animal that was upset by someone as he unenthusiastically opened the door to his room. Then, a small click rang out; the little boy was startled and backed up towards the door. Soon after, an adult-sized toy mech floated out of the room like a giant egg that was even decorated with cartoon features on the outside. The bright green replica mental network spread out of the ‘egg’ and covered the little boy in glowing lights. A a man’s voice suddenly rang out: “Surprise! Happy Birthday!”

The little boy gradually grew up into a young teenager that sat on the sofa with his legs crossed, reading a book as he spoke to the person off-screen nonchalantly: “By the way, the Black Orchid Academy asked me to report in early next month...what are you doing? Are all of you adults so excitable all the time….no, I just filled out the application because I saw the new student recruitment. It’s not even that important, am I supposed to report everything to the world? Didn’t you see that I forgot about it too...they asked me to go so I might as well, right? Get a random military rank or something while I’m at it, I get paid for it anyway……”

The young boy dressed in the Black Orchid Academy’s uniform turned with an annoyed expression: “I don’t need you to send me off, that’s embarrassing!”

The teenager clipped the pin that had been sent to him along with his scholarship in between his fingers and flung it up the air. A small clicking sound of the metal rang as the pin flew up; teenager Lin Jingheng let out a slightly mischievous smile as he placed a hand near his lips, making a little gesture of pulling a zipper by his mouth.

Lu Bixing smiled subconsciously in response.

After that, the video recording that followed the growth of this young boy suddenly stopped. The next photo in the album was dated about two or three years later; the teenager seemed to have hit a growth spurt during these years and had grown significantly taller. Those small and thin shoulders expanded into the shape of a young adult as the school uniform turned into a proper military uniform at the graduation ceremony of the Black Orchid Academy. As the honorary graduate of the class, his expression was blank and distant; those grey eyes squinted slightly as he saluted the audience, showing a hint of coldness behind those pupils.

His life was constantly in a storm of blood and violence as he gradually made his way up the military ladder, walked into the Silver Fortress with a grey history…

Lu Bixing didn’t know when he fell asleep. Perhaps he had been watching the footage before he slept; his dreams were all over the place while he was half-unconscious on the couch. The first dream was that bright smile on the young boy’s face, the next was those frosty grey eyes in adulthood, then he would be following the commander in the lonesome galactic patrol in the empty universe, then it would return to the graduation ceremony in the Black Orchid Academy...Lu Bixing would be chasing him from behind, calling his name until he was out of breath before he could reach that young officer’s shoulders.

The Lin Jingheng in his dreams turned his head and grabbed onto his wrist tightly. With a familiar and nostalgic tone, he said: “I only have you now.”

Lu Bixing’s leg fell from the small couch and hit the floor. He was suddenly woken up from his dream as the jacket he held in his arms fell to the ground.

The clock on his personal device indicated that it was only half an hour before sunrise; the horizon of Milky Way City already showed the hints of glowing light.

Lu Bixing sat dumbly for two seconds on the couch before he pulled himself up as if still sleepwalking, dragged his legs that were still asleep and ran out of the study toward the attic.

The locked attic turned him away, but the locks at home were not hard to break into; any IT student could hack into it within five minutes and unlock the door. Yet mister Engineer 001 felt as if he forgot to pack his brain and broke through the attic door with force without even thinking.

The digital butler’s voice sounded almost tired and helpless as the warning came up: “Headmaster Lu, this is also an act of vi….”

Lin Jingheng was sitting by the window in the attic with a cigarette in his mouth; separated by all the old junk inside the room, he turned his head in shock.

The door cracked as the digital lock was completely rendered useless. The door wobbled weakly before it fell to the ground. The next moment, Lin Jingheng was pulled down from the window.

## Ch 151 - You Sound Like A Whiny Bum

Lin Jingheng wouldn’t normally have been pulled down so easily, but he seemed to be frantically shoving something aside as Lu Bixing suddenly barged into the room. The sudden shock of the uninvited guest made the commander lose his balance as he crashed right onto Lu Bixing’s body.

Lu Bixing took this collision head-on and almost fell onto the floor unsteadily on his still-asleep legs. Yet he still grabbed tightly onto Lin Jingheng and stared right past the commander’s shoulders to see the object that was being hidden away earlier--it was that large crystal ball.

Lu Bixing was dumbstruck as he stared at the familiar object; he almost couldn’t remember where it came from.

A few moments later, his memories that had been in hibernation for years gradually awakened as he remembered-- it was from the time the Eighth Galaxy was still barely getting back onto its feet.

Prime Minister Edward was still alive at the time. They were traveling around the Eighth Galaxy together; the old Prime Minister carried all the worries in his heart as he walked around with a perpetually vexed expression. Lu Bixing oversaw carrying the luggage and exploring the galaxy as if he were on a vacation in the guise of a business trip.

There was still a roof above his head that could protect him even if the heavens fell, so he was filled with naive optimism. He took his four students along joyfully as they followed the footsteps of the old Prime Minister; he picked up unique minerals from each planet they landed on, then used these minerals to sculpt the glowing lights of peace in his dreams for the Eighth Galaxy. He then used epoxy to create an artificial starry night and brought it over to win the heart of his difficult crush like a jolly puppy wagging its tail upon seeing its loved ones.

…. He later locked away this crystal ball along with Lin Jingheng’s old belongings into this mini forbidden zone in the house. The crystal ball that had once glistened in starlight had already lost many of its colors over time, such that even the starry sky dimmed down significantly.

That old Prime Minister who didn’t understand the language of romance and only knew how to comment,*”if only one day the Eighth Galaxy could become like your beautiful sculpture”* was gone. He had passed on the tiring and heavy burden that vexed his expression to this young man.

Everything seemed like a past life.

Lin Jingheng was almost dumbstruck by the sudden ‘assault’ and only managed to pull himself back to his senses at this moment. His chin rested on Lu Bixing’s shoulder and he almost bit down on his own tongue at the attack. Then he pushed the young man away and scolded: “What are you doing, did you get bit by a mad dog in your sleep or something?”

“Sorry……” Lu Bixing pouted meekly.

This word strangely ticked Lin Jingheng off even more as his gaze cooled down. A whole mouthful of insults and scorn was already at the tip of his tongue when he heard Lu Bixing continue hesitantly: “It’s less than three hours until the meeting time I set up and I thought I could wait until then to see you and talk to you, but...sorry, I can’t wait any longer, I’m at my limit. I can’t even stand waiting for another minute.”

Lin Jingheng hadn’t slept the whole night and was already both physically and mentally tired. He could feel his brain lacking oxygen at this late-night hour and suddenly forgot everything he was going to say after hearing Lu Bixing’s words.

Lu Bixing’s legs finally felt pain, as if thousands of needles were poking at his muscles. He hissed slightly as a pained expression flashed across his face. Even then, this Prime Minister with numb limbs remained still and unwavering as he grabbed onto Lin Jingheng’s arm, unwilling to back down and took a brave step forward.

Lin Jingheng: “......”

While Lin Jingheng pondered whether to kick this young man out, Lu Bixing reached both of his arms out and moved another step forward as he embraced Lin Jingheng’s shoulders tightly. Lu Bixing clung onto the commander with all his energy and let out a large sigh of relief, almost ready to drag Lin Jingheng down to the floor with him.

Lu Bixing’s mind completely blanked out as a single thought surfaced in his head: *“What the heck was I doing before? Why didn’t I come up earlier?”*

“Headmaster Lu, I apologize for my bluntness, but you are currently displaying a clear level of addiction. Are you sure you haven’t been taking any illegal drugs?” Zhanlu’s voice rang up from the door as the repairing robots got up the stairs one by one to repair the broken door.

“I don’t know,” Lu Bixing mumbled. “Is the Marshal illegal?”

These words that he spat out without thinking sounded more suggestive than originally intended. Lin Jingheng’s anger still hadn’t been eased and he was suddenly force fed a spoonful of flirtatious teasing, fueling the fire inside him as his ears reddened up.

“Bullshit,” he said. The commander then turned to Zhanlu, “Did I release you from your ban yet? Who let you upstairs?”

Zhanlu--as a poor AI that could never tell whether his master was joking or being serious, responded by curling up his robotic arm into a question mark and replying: “Sir, you were the one that asked me to come up in the morning to help you organize the strategic changes of the dispatched troops in the Heart of the Rose.”

“.......” Lin Jingheng only now remembered that he had given this order. Thankfully, he was used to being unreasonable and wouldn’t get embarrassed by this little mistake. “Get out.”

Zhanlu then carried the broken door away and ordered the little repair robots back to work.

The semi-opened attic welcomed in a night breeze that also extinguished the fire inside Lin Jingheng’s heart. He leaned back slightly against an old gravity training equipment, already feeling his head growing heavier from lack of sleep.

Lin Jingheng fell silent for a few moments as he attempted to find a place to sit--only to realize after scanning the space around him that there was nowhere to sit in this little treasure room aside from the windowsill he’d sat on earlier.

“Can’t you at least clean this place up a bit?” He said with a hint of exhaustion, “You’re shoving everything in here, it’s turning into a storage room.”

Lu Bixing’s lips moved slightly.

Lin Jingheng shot him a glance: “If you want to say something, say it.”

“This isn’t a storage room.” Lu Bixing’s legs were finally out of that numbing pain as he stood up straight. “This is my….my….”

Lin Jingheng’s senses were also slowly returning to him as he finally discovered that Lu Bixing’s shoulders and hands would stiffen up if he let go of the young man before him. It was a kind of stiffness that was seen commonly on soldiers that slept with their guns, constantly on high alert and calculating everything around them--it was a familiar sight to Lin Jingheng, as if he were looking right into a mirror.

The two stared at each other wordlessly for a few moments. Lin Jingheng struggled to relax his shoulders; this was actually quite difficult for someone like him, used to staying on his toes all the time. Relaxation was not the norm and thus required more focus and conscious effort to do.

“......This is my heart.” Lu Bixing finally finished his sentence after stuttering for a while, “When you weren’t around, I would lock it up and pretend I didn’t see it. Because if I can’t see you, I can finally stop being the coward I used to be.”

Lin Jingheng asked in a low tone: “Who said you’re a coward?”

“If my past self had had the same power to tip the scales of the world like I do now,” Lu Bixing didn’t answer his question, “Turan wouldn’t have knocked me out.”

Lin Jingheng’s gaze flashed across his face for an instant: “I was the one that gave silent approval for Turan to put you out.”

“I know, it was because I couldn’t...I couldn’t do anything for you at the time. I couldn’t magically summon a whole fleet of troops for you even if I sailed out in a small mech to block the fire of the AUS. I didn’t have any game-changing plans either, and I...in that situation, I wouldn’t even be able to patch up that hole that Saturday broke...I simply wanted to find you for my own selfish reasons. If I was Turan in that position, I’d also do the same to myself, it was never her fault.”

Lin Jingheng interrupted: “It’s all in the past now, you don’t need to bring it up again.”

“Okay, let’s talk about now, then. If I could be stronger, enough to manipulate the political games of the Union and instill fear into others, I would be able to tell you that regardless of what you...and even what the Silver Ten thinks or decides to do, I would be able to support you all.” Lu Bixing looked at him. Perhaps it was because he finally said it out loud, or perhaps his gaze was so fixed on Lin Jingheng that he subconsciously mimicked the other’s gesture, but he slowly relaxed his half-clenched fist as well. “But I can’t.”

Lin Jingheng almost wanted to rebutt with, “Who asked you to worry so much for me, can I not make my own decisions?”

But the moment the words reached the tip of his tongue, he forcefully swallowed them back down.

Because Lu Bixing was no longer that naive young man who would give groundless advice in a meeting and get kicked out by his more experienced seniors.

Even Prime Minister Edward was only able to hold up this joke of an Eighth Galaxy government many years ago thanks to the help of Lin Jingheng and the Silver Ninth Squadron. Lin Jingheng’s role in the Eighth Galaxy had been like the same dictator of the Silver Fortress during that time; nobody could question his authority. Yet this new cabinet of the Eighth Galaxy government was different: the Silver Ninth Squadron and Turan who had been pushed to the top lost Lin Jingheng’s absolute rule, and these directionless ducklings were forced to work amongst themselves. After long years of grinding and finally breaking out of their cocoons, they shaped a new leader for themselves.

A new leader of unprecedented prestige and honor who no longer relied on others.

Lin Jingheng fell silent for a few moments: “That’s fine.”

“But I still yearn to make you my own despite my uselessness, am I too greedy?” Lu Bixing said, “I want you, I want to keep the Silver Ten in the Eighth Galaxy, and on top of that I also want to let the Eighth Galaxy that just walked out of an internal warfare to have a break, some peaceful times. I don’t want these people that finally managed to build their own homes and society to be shot down once again by a Union that we no longer trust. Jingheng, would you be put in a dilemma if we end up in a conflict with the Union over this?”

This time, Lin Jingheng didn’t hide and confessed after a short pause: “Yes.”

The Black Orchid Academy was the bedrock of his soul, just as the Eighth Galaxy was Lu Bixing’s.

This was a fact that he could not possibly forget or toss away, no matter how much hatred and pain he had suffered through over the years, no matter how many times he had repeated that he was no longer the Commander Lin of the Silver Fortress.

“Whenever I can’t sleep at night, I lie there and think that the greatest blessing the world gave me was for you to return to my side.” Lu Bixing said slowly as if he were chiseling each word off the flesh from his heart, “I can’t think of how I should thank this blessing, nor do I know how I could possibly prove myself worthy of this gift. Sometimes I have nightmares that they say I’m not good enough, so they will take you away from me again...but I can’t even think of how I could stop forcing you to do things you don’t like, how I could possibly make you happier, even if just a little.”

“‘They said’---who are ‘they’?” Lin Jingheng responded in a rather calm voice. Before Lu Bixing could answer, though, he gestured to interrupt those words and said, “Listen carefully here, this goddamn piece of shit of a world did not ‘return me to you,’ I’m the one that came back to find you on my own. This ‘fate’ thing has never given me a good attitude for as long as I’ve lived; I was the one that broke out of the galactic prison, grappled my way out from the abyss, and ran back to you even if I had to crawl on all fours, do you hear me? There’s no bullshit ‘blessing’ here, what the fuck were you thinking!? I don’t even feel guilty -- who’s telling you to feel bad for something you never did? And who taught you to speak like a whiny bum begging for your next meal?”

## Ch 152 - Can I Kiss You?

Lu Bixing stared at him dumbly and managed to fall into a daze within these mere seconds of time.

Lin Jingheng’s enraged attitude was both familiar and foreign to him.

It was familiar because he had seen various angry and frustrated faces from the man in his album earlier that night.

Lin Jingheng’s attitude changed like a kaleidoscope when he faced his enemies and adjusted based on the character he was playing; for strangers, he would emanate the stereotypical ‘Woltorian style’ unsociable and aloof air to emphasize that he wasn’t easy to get along with. In contrast, his attitude towards normal acquaintances was considered ‘kind’; because he was used to being reserved and not expressing his emotions, he would simply seem to be quiet and calm. When facing his own comrades, he would be much more open, showing his almost antagonistic true self. Lu Bixing once counted that there were 289 little videos inside Zhanlu’s 3D album that were mostly interviews or patrolling journals. Among them, he interacted with the recorder in 56 of these videos and seemed to have a close relationship with the person behind the camera; all of the videos of him above the age of 12 gave the same unimpressed expression on the young man’s face with no exceptions.

Yet what was foreign was that Lin Jingheng had almost never once given him that same kind of attitude over the last few months. He hadn’t spoken in such a vulgar manner in a while, and even those daily insults and scolding which had seemed to always be loaded like a machine gun at the tip of his tongue were kept in check, curses like that were almost non-existent---it was as if Lin Jingshu’s galactic prison was actually a disciplinary camp that managed to pluck all the uncivilized language out of the man. If Lu Bixing could mash up Lin Jingheng together into a ball and squeeze it hard enough with his hands, he could maybe pull out an ounce of patience from this man--which was every last bit of patience he had left that he gave to Lu Bixing.

“What’s going to happen to the Eighth Galaxy, should the Silver Ten stay or leave...these are all topics of discussion for this morning’s meeting, I don’t want to use up my private time to discuss them with you beforehand.” Lin Jingheng said, “I only want to ask, what kind of trouble and pain did you face in your heart that made you think it was better to tell that old Hardin and not me?”

Lu Bixing ran his fingers through his hair, smoothing it back. His warm fingers touched the cold hair follicles, his racing heart from earlier finally cooling down as he asked: “Then why were you listening in like a burglar inside your own house?”

Lin Jingheng wasn’t used to being talked back to when he was angry and didn’t know how to respond for a moment.

Lu Bixing continued: “You threatened the digital butler, climbed the windows, and even used a listening device...were you this prepared back when you assassinated the Primal Alien all by yourself?”

Lin Jingheng strangely didn’t fire back at this little jab and paused a few moments before asking: “So can we skip over Hardin and the listening device now?”

Lu Bixing leaned back against some equipment he couldn’t name with no idea where to start. He looked up and stared at the ceiling to see that the color on the ceiling’s clock was changing from the light outside, hinting at sunrise. He stared at the ever-changing color of the digital clock and felt the words that were stuck in his throat roll out naturally.

“I want to take you somewhere without anyone else, without power and authority, without any obligations; I don’t want to see anyone else; it’ll just be you and me...you can finally properly learn how to brew an actual pot of tea. As for me, I don’t like doing chores at home, but thankfully I know how to construct household robots so I can build a few to do the work for me.”

“When I brought up closing off the Eighth Galaxy back then, the primary reason was for safety, but it was also because of my own selfish desires. If the Eighth Galaxy closed its doors, you would never be able to leave. I know that you all were forced by circumstance or were simply trying to appease me but still held reservations, yet nobody ever spoke up and opposed my suggestion openly...and then the Eighth Galaxy really closed up, but you all left me one by one. It wasn’t until a lot later that I finally realized that none of you were actually willing to close off the galaxy, right?”

Lin Jingheng: “Although from the development in these last years, closing off the Eighth Galaxy back then was actually a smart move…”

Lu Bixing interrupted: “Didn’t we agree to skip over the listening device and Doctor Hardin? Why are you doing this again?”

“......But emotionally, it’s difficult to ‘betray the Union.’” Lin Jingheng struggled to knock down all the barriers inside him and finally managed to find a single line of truth deep within his soul. “Prime Minister Edward was appointed by the Union, so his dreams and aspirations were on Wolto throughout his whole life. And your father...had too many painful memories, so that old cat learned to complain on the outside and keep his feelings hidden. But you should know that he was one of the first group of people in the Eighth Galaxy that bravely stood up and voluntarily chose the Union when he was young.”

“What about you?”

“I graduated from the Black Orchid Military Academy at 18,” Lin Jingheng paused momentarily and lowered his volume, “I protected the Union for 30 years.”

Lu Bixing slowly opened up his mouth and said: “That’s why whenever I remembered these things in the middle of the night over these last few years, I would think that pulling fruit off the branch before it’s ripe wouldn’t be as sweet. I want to keep you in the Eighth Galaxy, but you almost died for the Union. When my dad was guarding the entrance of the secret terminal back then, he didn’t even have time to speak to me one last time; Minister Edward died from DNA deterioration in middle age and never had the chance to see the Union with his own eyes. This was all because I stubbornly persisted in acting without regard for others, so…”

Lin Jingheng interrupted him as he listened to the young man grow more and more unsure of himself: “Right, Prime Minister Lu is so powerful and great he’s the center of the universe, maybe those black holes out there are even just your farts that got expanded infinitely.”

“......” Lu Bixing was speechless and could only give him a smile in response after a short silence. “You’ve been forcing yourself to watch your language these past few months, are you finally feeling freed from your shackles?”

His gaze fell on Lin Jingheng’s hand that was resting on the side and grabbed it instinctively to fiddle with it. Lin Jingheng glared at him coldly in repose, ready to break out of his shell when he heard Lu Bixing continue: “I understand the reasoning, Jingheng. But one day when you find that everything you had been wishing for is finally realized, only to discover that it was a giant condescending laugh back at your foolish past-self, you will finally begin to doubt yourself---Was I wrong? Was it because I was too greedy so something in the shadows had to punish me...do you not understand this feeling?”

Lin Jingheng’s mind blanked out for a moment and couldn’t respond---because he understood that feeling too well.

Back when he faked his own death and smugly thought everything was in his own hands as he waited for the right time, the space pirates had struck and took over the eight galaxies at an unimaginable speed and scale. He saw with his own two eyes how the pirates that took over crashed into the memorials on Wolto and stepped on the heroic markers of past glory as if they were dirt. The most hopeless he had been his whole life was when he received Penny’s video call at that run-down supply station and witnessed her be consumed by the missiles descending upon the planet.

Lin Jingheng had questioned more than once if this was fate’s punishment for his arrogance and almighty attitude.

During the sleepless nights in the galactic prison, aside from wanting to run away or thinking about Lu Bixing, he spent the rest of his time thinking about Lin Jingshu. He couldn’t remember anything significant because they had barely seen each other in person after they stepped into adulthood. Even until now, his impression of his little sister was still that young girl in the depths of his memories; how did she end up down this path? If he had been a little more insistent back then about refusing her marriage to the Committee and hadn’t gotten caught up in preparing a good life for her, would things have changed today? If only he was the one that was taken by the Committee back then and not Jingshu; he was supposed to be the one that was chained down by those shackles and who carried that pain. And if his sister were to be in his place, perhaps she wouldn’t ruin everything like he did up until today.

Were these all not punishments for his cocky attitude in life?

Or perhaps this was the cost he paid for breaking the promise with his sister, tossing her into the darkness as he spent his childhood days under the light of Lu Xin’s protection with no worries for the world.

“Can you tell me…” Lu Bixing stuttered a little bit as if he couldn’t decide how to address the name. Then as if rewarding Lin Jingheng’s rare opening of his heart, he chose to be honest, “About Commander Lu Xin? Would it make you feel uncomfortable if I call him that?”

Lin Jingheng had already suffered through that bit of uncomfortableness in his heart during the conversation the young man had with Doctor Hardin, so he could calmly respond this time: “......not really. I don’t think Lu Xin would mind either since he doesn’t know you.”

Lu Bixing: “Most of his data on Zhanlu was removed by you---this was something you and my dad agreed on, right? Since when did you guys decide to keep it from me?”

“When I discovered that many of Lu Xin’s ex-subordinates were filled with garbage like Ankur and Yelvich.”

“You both wanted to let me stay out of those old dramas and were even willing to remove the spotlight in order to stop me from getting roped into this complicated mess.” Lu Bixing’s voice was content and calm as he spoke on these topics, showing no signs of anger for having his personal privacy invaded. Instead, he nodded in understanding; he’d experienced countless emotions throughout all these years and understood too many people...from Lin Jingheng’s headstrongness, Monoeyed Hawk’s rebelliousness, Prime Minister Edward’s practicalism, Turan’s defiance, Saturday’s betrayal, and even Woolf’s deviousness and Lin Jingshu’s craziness.

“Lu Xin was a…” Lin Jingheng stopped and couldn’t find a proper adjective to describe the man.

Lu Xin wasn’t simply a dependable protector to him when he was young, the man was like a whole world that gave this isolated child aimlessly wandering the universe a corner of belonging.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally explained in a reserved and unbiased manner: “The oath of the Black Orchid Academy was ‘I swear upon my enrollment that I will fight for the lives and physical assets of every legal citizen of the Union, regardless of age or sex, until the end of my life.’ Everyone had said it, but not everyone could uphold its spirit; Lu Xin was the one person I knew that could uphold this oath until his death no matter how much he had been wronged, no matter how much mocking and suffering he had to go through.”

Not even Lu Xin’s mentor had been able to accomplish this. That once admirable old man stepped over billions of lost lives onto another path years after the death of his student. Not even Lu Xin’s comrades in the past had been able to accomplish it either, still stuck in between the living nightmare of the power struggle between the Union and Eighth Galaxy, unsure where to go. Among his followers, many died with their beliefs, but those that survived also changed over the decades as they drowned themselves in endless political battles.

“Zhanlu told me that you once snuck out of the academy and took him back to Commander Lu’s mansion, almost physically ripping yourself into pieces inside the incomplete energy fields. They then locked you up inside a medical capsule and secretly sent you back to the Black Orchid Academy, where the school locked you up for a few days until everything was settled.” Lu Bixing suddenly asked, “Were you awake the whole time?”

“There were anesthetics inside the capsule; by the time I woke up I was already back at school.... why?”

“Anesthetics, huh.” Lu Bixing let out a breath of air and gently pulled Lin Jingheng over into a soft embrace. His hands traced down Lin Jingheng’s spine as if he was looking for that old scar left from that teenager’s reckless act and said, “This place still hurts, right? Improper usage of anesthetics could leave a lasting scar for the rest of your life. I know, I have the same problem.”

Lin Jingheng was taken aback for a moment; the area that Lu Bixing’s fingers pressed on his back stung in sharp pain as it consumed Lin Jingheng’s whole body like a raging tsunami, forcing the man to bend down slightly in discomfort.

A sixteen-year-old Lin Jingheng, a Lu Bixing sixteen years ago.

The Lu Bixing that slowly learned to control his new body on planet Cayley, swearing to conquer himself and the universe; the Lin Jingheng that faced countless failed attempts at breaking the signal barrier in the galactic prison, staring at the Eighth Galaxy star like a bewitched madman every night.

It was as if they two followed each other’s footsteps in a circle until they reunited, only to see how familiar those scars and dust engraved on each other’s bodies looked.

“How could I possibly let go of you?” Lu Bixing spoke softly, “I’m just afraid...that if I get too close to you and hold onto you too tightly, I will hurt you. Can you remove that one-direction tracking device? I have to fight with myself countless times every day because of it, wasting at least an hour every day thinking about all these things. It’s too tiring, I can’t even work properly with these distractions.”

“Who made you fight with yourself?”

“I can’t…. become a hateful person because of my selfishness.”

*The one I love is you, my one and only guardian of the galaxy, not the me that wants to chain you down with my own hands.*

Lin Jingheng wrapped his arm around the young man’s waist and felt that suppressed weak and trembling breathing. The corner of his eyes scanned past the crystal ball hiding by the windowsill and he felt his heart suddenly illuminated with adoration, then said: “The Silver Ten is content staying in the Eighth Galaxy. After leaving the Union, they’ve spent their time wandering the universe; after two decades, they finally found a place to settle down. I heard Thomas and that one student of yours are ready to swear in as brothers. The Silver Ten swears their loyalty to the Pledge of Freedom, and in our eyes the branches of this tree have already withered and died in the Union; only the Eighth Galaxy is still nourishing a seed of the pledge. No matter how many times you’ve wavered, you still managed to nourish this seed and coax it back out to grow with your hands. The Silver Ten willingly enlisted within the Eighth Galaxy’s Defense Force not because of my order, but because they were drawn in by the Eighth Galaxy…by you. Do you understand?”

Lu Bixing stood in shock.

Lin Jingheng held up a hand to grab onto Lu Bixing’s wrist that carried his personal device: “Have you really not tracked my location with this before?”

“......no.”

“If one day the Union and Eighth Galaxy finally turn their backs on each other, will you be like Woolf...my mentor, and decide to throw away two whole galaxies to achieve your goals?”

Lu Bixing’s lips trembled slightly.

“You won’t.” Lin Jingheng let out a small sigh, “Prime Minister, we decided to stay in the Eighth Galaxy because we trust your morals. If the day really comes where we must choose, we also believe that you will do everything you can to prevent meaningless sacrifices. We chose to stand by your side because we believe that you can lead everyone to a better future.”

Lin Jingheng was headstrong and unafraid to pull the trigger all his life; he was used to handling everything on his own without consulting anyone else.

Even when it came to his own emotions, it was always one-sided pampering and one-sided display of love.

This was the first time in his life where he pulled back his pride and stepped down from the stage to tell someone else “we trust you.”

This was the highest praise and compliment from the fierce king of wolves.

Lu Bixing forgot to breathe for a moment and felt his heart about to burst, then asked in a slightly incoherent voice: “You believe in me?”

“What else did you expect? Simply because I like you?” Lin Jingheng said, “If that was the case I would’ve already kidnapped you away and kept you under surveillance every day so that you wouldn’t run out and cause trouble...hiss…”

Lu Bixing turned his head and brushed his trembling lips across Lin Jingheng’s neck. The nerves on Lin Jingheng’s neck seemed to be a little bit dysfunctional; the one side with the scar was less sensitive than the other, he could only feel a slight bit of pain even if he was bitten. The other side was the complete opposite and almost a no-touch zone that could stiffen him up with even the lightest breeze of air. He instinctively leaned back only to have the back of his head fall right into Lu Bixing’s hand. The young man suddenly asked without thinking: “Can I kiss you?”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

He wasn’t someone who was easily flustered; if necessary, he could even run around naked because it was only flesh to him.

But those few words earlier from the bottom of his heart were too difficult to express and were much more embarrassing than exposing his skin, so he suddenly grew strangely flustered as he refuted: “No, I didn’t say I was done being mad at you, bugger off.”

Lu Bixing gave a small “oh” response, but pressed Lin Jingheng down on a training equipment the next moment and invaded his lips and breathing. The sharp fangs crushed Lin Jingheng’s lips as if ready to rip through that thin layer of skin and consume him whole.

The heavy burden of trust and responsibility dropped onto Lu Bixing’s shoulders, but it didn’t suffocate him as he had expected. Instead, it felt like a heavy piece of armor that dropped and supported his injured body with a peerless layer of protection.

He was like a knight ready to fall on his knees that was suddenly given the courage to pick up his sword once again.

## Ch 153 - Don’t See Me, and I Won’t See You.

Wolto was famous for its Ten Beautiful Sceneries that were blessed by nature and enhanced by sculptures and artwork, creating breathtaking landscapes that seemed otherworldly.

One of the most famous among them was a place called Neverland.

The name Neverland was taken from the mythical island in the ancient classic Peter Pan; it was a popular tourist attraction built on a natural island. The island utilized modern technology to build a false dreamland of the fairy tale.; It was initially designed to be a children’s amusement park, but after discovering that the marketing to children wasn’t going as expected and instead attracted countless adults that wanted a temporary escape from the tiring Woltorian society, it was redesigned to fit the needs of its customers.

After a few revamps, Neverland became an artificial paradise on Wolto and was one of the most extravagant and luxurious tourist attractions in the world.

How luxurious was it? As an example, despite being a pure Wolto-born elite, Lin Jingheng had never once stepped foot on the island even up until he left the First Galaxy.

Before the war, the average cost of living on Neverland for a single day was 80,000 First Galaxy currency---which was about 1/10 of the yearly income of a Top Commander in Wolto. The island also required reservations at least a year ahead of time despite being only an ocean channel away from Wolto’s central continent.

A tourist train drove by on the magnetic rail floating up in midair; the surroundings were filled with realistic projections of cloud layers that had little fairies created with special transformable materials that flew alongside the train. These little fairies were equipped with high-functioning AIs that could interact with the passengers inside the trains.

A thin, white hand reached out of the window of the train as a little fairy landed gently on its palm. The little fairy looked up and blew the person above it a sweet kiss.

“Neverland had always been a property under the Committee’s name. If you want to know why the Committee was so obsessed with political power to the point of embracing corruption, you can simply take a look at this place,” the person inside the train said. “The transformable materials used to build the ‘Ten Great Sword,’ six million a gram, were all used to build these silly little things on this island.”

Said fairy gave a hurtful expression after listening to these words and lowered its wings. The individual inside the train chuckled slightly and tossed the fairy outside: “What an eyesore, get out of my sight.”

The person inside the train was Lin Jingshu.

Perhaps not even Wang Ailun could have imagined that this mysterious head of the Freedom Corps had already settled back down in Wolto.

The bodyguard beside her was a new face; in comparison to the one who had served her in the City of Angels, he seemed much more dependable just from his posture and clear eyes. There were no unnecessary expressions on his face nor any hints of careful studying behind a facade; standing beside Lin Jingshu, the only emotion that consumed him was passionate loyalty. He immediately followed up after her and said: “This is because the old world is already in ruins, my master; their social order and management were imperfect, that’s why corruption and political conflicts were born from their society. But they’ve already lost the battle.”

Lin Jingshu chuckled lightly: “Eden is gone, Woolf--Woolf is getting old and senile, and Wang Ailun’s little clique is completely consumed by thirst for power. Do you not see that Secretary Wang is already trying to take away the military autonomy from the Central Militia right now, while the situation is still unstable, to return back to the old order of heavily centralized power? All crows are black, there are no exceptions.”

The guard responded in a deep voice: “The great new world will consume all of this mess before they are given a chance to grow.”

“Let’s hope so.” The train was reaching the central area of the small island and landing onto the ground level; the Union flag stood proudly in the center of the island and could be seen from the windows--However, the flag was only raised halfway today. Lin Jingshu was too tired to continue the conversation with her passionate subordinate; someone that was too driven by emotion could often seem a little too silly...even though she was the one who sculpted this personality trait into her subordinates. She asked quietly: “What’s going on today, why is the flag only half raised?”

The guard responded: “Yesterday was Commander Lu Xin’s death in duty anniversary, so all of Wolto is commemorating with the half-risen flag for three days.”

Lin Jingshu’s expression turned slightly eerie: “The Union announced that Lu Xin’s death was in the line of duty?”

The central government did not hesitate to ‘recycle’ the Committee to their own benefit and nailed them to the wall of shame as a punching bag for the public’s anger. This naturally meant that the frustration about pirates invading the Union was also credited to them, turning the Committee into both the ‘greedy elite class that ruled over the public’ and ‘the traitors of the Union’...even though these two roles fundamentally contradicted each other. Woltorians were filled with high-class smooth talkers who could fabricate a whole tale for the big bad antagonist of their story.

Because Lu Xin’s death had been confirmed to be a conspiracy by the Committee, the late commander’s story was quickly rebranded into a tragic but heroic tale.

Lin Jingshu opened her personal device to see the news filled with live streams of the grand memorial services all over the Union to commemorate the man.

“As the bedrock of the Union, Commander Lu Xin gave his life to the Pledge of Freedom, but his soul remains above us as he protects his people with honor and without regrets. Every general that has followed in his footsteps became kindling fires that spread all over the galaxies, lighting the path honorably for the Union to return to Wolto….”

Lin Jingshu laughed out loud at this commentary and said: “Hey, don’t you think these people are like blind sheep that run around as they bleat proudly? When the shepherd shoos them to the east, they would happily run towards that direction, and when they’re being sent to the west, they would turn around and run back there without hesitation--almost as if they weren’t the same people that were calling for Lu Xin’s execution back in the day.”

The guard opened his personal device to show her: “Look, master, there's about 10,000 people at the Wolto memorial service right now, and here’s a map of the population disparity in the area; all glowing dots on here are our people.”

It was a condensed map of the central plaza in front of the Union Parliament. Every little dot represented a person: black indicated a normal person, a glowing dot indicated a chip user. These chip users somehow managed to pass through the moving security and entered the memorial service site. The glowing dots on the projection glistened like stars in the sky, and at least one-fourth of the people present were lit up.

Lin Jingshu responded lightly: “Looks like the new signal blocker seems to work fairly well?”

“Yes, the ‘seed’ we planted in the First Galaxy was very successful. According to the latest statistics, about 36% of the population have already accepted our biochip injection; we are prepared to fully take over the Parliament overnight. Wang Ailun already ordered the second troop increase at our request -- the total number of armed fleets dispatched has already surpassed the highest number of frontline fleets during wartime by 90%. This means we’ve already met the requirements for initiating a one-sided confrontation against our neighbors; in addition, the Union is completely defenseless inside and around the borders right now. One of our men within the First Galaxy border guards reported back saying that the Eighth Galaxy sent out a message questioning the situation on our side, and Duke quickly responded that it was all a misunderstanding, so he made his way back to Wolto today--Master, we’re one step away from the new world, we’re only waiting for your orders.”

“Good,” Lin Jingshu closed the projection of the map, “Duke’s been loyal to Commander Lu Xin ever after death, it’s about time we send him off to see Lu Xin.”

The train slowly landed and stopped at a station. The little fairies dispersed within an instant and landed on the ground, turning into different forms of ancient mythical creatures; one of them turned into a unicorn and kneeled courteously, ready to offer its back for transportation to the passengers inside the train.

Lin Jingshu was suddenly taken aback when she saw it.

Unicorns weren’t uncommon toys among young children, many had at least a plush doll of one in their toy bins. When Lin Jingshu was young, she also had a unicorn that could even fly. Children under 40 kilograms could ride on its back and fly up to the ceiling. The unicorn was pure white like snow, its eyes made of a rare gem with a unique glow; it was an extremely expensive toy. Lin Wei wasn’t particularly strict with budget when it came to his children…. nor did he mind the money. He left his assets and finances for his AI butler to handle and didn’t even bat an eye when he signed the checks to purchase necessary childcare items--that little unicorn was Lin Jingshu’s most prized possession.

The twins were already aware that they would be separated but didn’t expect it to happen so soon. When Lin Jingshu saw the crowd of military officers from her swing, she fell off in shock and ran back in the house to look for Lin Jingheng before she could even flinch at the small injury from her fall.

Lin Jingheng was taken out of the house by the caretaker and exchanged a glance with the little girl panting heavily from a distance. She was like a little girl that hadn’t prepared for her final test at school and was about to cry out as she thought about what she could do. She then suddenly turned and ran up the stairs to find her unicorn. She didn’t have time to think about what it could possibly do, nor did she consider if Lin Jingheng would like something like this; she simply followed her instinct to let her closest sibling take away her most prized toy, as if he could also take her heart away.

The unicorn was too heavy for her to carry, so she could only let it fly down the stairs on its own. But as a children’s toy that was designed with safety first, its flying was slower than a crawling child. No matter how much she urged for the unicorn to go faster, the toy was like a silly balloon that floated slowly down the stairs...by the time she finally made it to the door, Lin Jingheng already left.

*How could that be?* She thought, *you haven’t even taken away the most important thing yet.* She chased after him out the door, in tears.

But the car had already driven away and disappeared into an after-image on the tracks in midair. It left without a trace.

Lin Jingshu stared at the unicorn before her as her gaze cooled down: “What is this thing?”

The guard quickly explained: “This is the standard transportation within the island. Of course, if you don’t like it, you can also choose other forms, for example, dragons…”

“Can this silly thing run ten kilometers an hour? Do I look like I have that much time to waste?” Lin Jingshu cut him off coldly, “Go away, give me an armed mobile.”

The guard didn’t dare to disobey her. The unicorn that was denied got up in confusion and carefully backed away; its clear and innocent eyes were almost identical to the toy she’d had in the past, filled with sinful purity and weakness.

“Keep a close eye on the Heart of the Rose and the Eighth Galaxy.” Lin Jingshu ordered expresionlessly, “We’ll act immediately as soon as the Eighth Galaxy takes action.”

*Now that you’ve left, don’t come back and stand in my way.*

*Now that we’ve finally reached this point, can you promise me that you will not come see me, and I will not go see you anymore during this lifetime?*

As the representative of the Central Militia’s First Galaxy Border Station Troops, Lorde had been acting as the buffer between Duke and the Union’s central government--in other words, he was the punching bag for both sides. He was appointed to follow Duke back to the Military Council on Wolto to question if Chief Woolf had gone mad.

Lorde’s early days in the border troops had been relatively decent. His family had a reputable background and because of his kind and friendly nature, he didn’t mind picking up the check during outings with his colleagues, which earned himself a warm welcome. People started off with simply wanting to snatch a free meal, but recently he noticed that the number of people who would voluntarily initiate a conversation with him had dropped significantly. People were starting to go back to their distant attitude towards him, which made him slightly uncomfortable. It wasn’t because he was afraid of being singled-out, but the signal that was sent out by this isolation was also very dangerous; it meant that the trench between the Central Militia and the Union was growing wider and deeper.

Duke was still upset from the trip and had just found an excuse to blow off his fumes at Lorde, punishing him with handwriting the military policy handbook. Lorde didn’t bother arguing with him and walked towards the secretary’s office with a heavy heart when the mech suddenly shook.

Lorde almost stepped on himself as he looked up in confusion. Then, a loud siren sounded off within the mech.

“High-energy detected, high-energy detected---”

“Warning, the mech body has been locked on by tracking missiles!”

“Opening up anti-missile system, shield energy level raising to the maximum, particle cannons preheating, all armed personnel please get in position---”

Lorde jolted up and connected to the pilot’s cockpit with his personal device: “This is Colonel Lorde, what’s going on?”

“Colonel Lorde, our mech fleet ran into an enemy attack…. buzz...the internal communication….buzz….”

The internal communication channel of the fleet was forcefully intercepted and cut off.

This interception-first style of battle was eerily familiar. Lorde’s mind went blank for a few moments before his eyes widened, then he turned and ran out--the AUS!

“General, the ambusher is an AUS armed fleet. They have about three heavy mechs and thirty guarding small mechs, our fleet has a considerable size advantage; the enemy refused our communication request!”

Why did the AUS that had suffered a great deal of damage by Lin Jingheng and had disappeared for so many years suddenly appear?

This trip Duke took to complain to the government was completely a last-minute decision, so how could the AUS possibly know about it and set up an ambush on the road?

And since it was a question of diplomatic nature, Duke understood the hostile implications of bringing in too many armed mechs, so much of his fleet was only intimidating by their size and didn’t have much of a bite!

“General, be careful!”

The ambushing AUS didn’t bother saying a word and fired heavily at the escorting fleet. A few of the small mechs on the side that were caught off guard were immediately swept away by the blast. Before the aftershock completely vanished, the enemy shot out another wave of particle cannons right behind the earlier blast, crashing head-on into the heavy mech’s shield. The mech shook violently at the exchange, pushing Duke back as his waist hit the edges of the meeting table: “Shit!”

General Duke wasn’t simply a man of words, he had been a gallant conqueror of the galaxies for many years and now, the old General was enraged. Before the internal communication signals returned, the commanding ship shot out of the fleet into the enemy’s firing range. The guarding mechs immediately followed behind and slashed right into the AUS fleet like sharp blades butchering into the flesh of a battle, opening heavy fire on their ambushers.

The difference between a proper military fleet and the AUS pirate fleet became visible immediately as Duke’s team ripped open a path down the middle of the AUS fleet.

At the same time, the international communication signals on Duke’s side returned; the old General’s voice rang throughout the mechs: “Reel them in with particle cannons, don’t let them escape! These shameless pirates, how dare you pick a fight within the First Galaxy. You all have been hiding underground for so long, I didn’t even know where to dig the rest of you up…”

Before he could finish, the mental network in the commanding ship went unstable for an instant; it was being hacked.

It was common for a heavy mech’s mental network to be hacked during battle, but it wasn’t easy to successfully hijack one because the backup pilots on a heavy mech were often a full team. Even if one had Lin Jingheng’s powerful mental strength that defied the laws of nature, they would only be able to create a small opening with a short disruption. That short disruption would only be used to make room for escape, as fighting head-on with a heavy mech in a battle of mental networks could easily injure the invading pilot.

This time, however, the unstable mental network did not immediately kick out the hacker and instead triggered a warning inside the mech: “Caution, pilot must check human-mech sync rate, caution, pilot must…”

“What a piece of useless bullshit,” Duke cursed, “Give me the…”

A soldier quickly walked up to him before he could finish: “General, the mental network is being hacked from within!”

Duke was startled: “What did you say?”

The soldier said quickly: “There are traitors on the commanding ship, please be careful, General.”

Duke stared at the soldier’s face for a moment; the sixth sense he developed over the years of surviving the battlefield blaring a siren inside his head. WIthout second thought, he pulled out the laser gun from his waist and took a few steps back: “Stand still!”

The ‘soldier’ didn’t obey the orders as an eerie sneer filled his face. Duke’s personal guards charged up and surrounded the guard, who was completely unfazed by the turn of events. In a movement so swift that it was almost impossible to see with the naked eye, the few guards that ran forward all fell to the floor the next instant. Duke fired a shot right into the soldier’s chest, but the latter only trembled slightly as he continued making his way forward, ignoring the bloodied hole in his chest.

Duke stood aghast--this wasn’t a normal person!

Then what about the people who ambushed them from the outside? Were they really the AUS?

This area was already very close to the First Galaxy’s capital planet Wolto, which was heavily guarded by the military, so how did they manage to sneak in?

Was Woolf truly the one giving out commands behind the Union’s central government, or…

Within a few moments, he felt as if he saw a massive conspiracy in the shadows drop down before his eyes.

Soon after, he felt a cold object lock onto the back of his neck. Duke stared at the pool of blood before him, reached his hand back and realized his carotid artery was slashed open. He staggered a few steps forward and turned his head around in disbelief, only to see another assassin with the face of his vice admiral standing behind him with a ghostly smile. The next moment, that face slowly changed before Duke’s eyes and turned into a stranger’s face.

Opium…

But he realized it too late.

The communication channel within the Central Militia immediately broke down; the next moment, the mental network of the commanding ship fell into enemy hands as all cannons on the ship opened fire at the surrounding ally mechs. The Central Militia that controlled the battlefield earlier completely fell apart from within.

As a colonel, Lorde was supposed to be on standby during conflicts like this and wait by the launching deck of the heavy mech for the next orders, ready to sail out to the frontlines at any moment. He had barely connected onto the mental network of the small mech and was about to report to the commanding ship’s cockpit when he heard the alert about the mental network hack. General Duke was assassinated immediately afterwards and sent out one last order before his last breath--request help from the Eighth Galaxy.

Lorde’s hand was covered with cold sweat. All unoccupied small mechs suddenly moved at the same time under the control of the heavy mech, which ordered everyone to disarm and surrender immediately.

Lorde bit down on his tongue and sailed his small mech out without hesitation. The Central Militia soldiers that were on standby in the deck followed him out; within the narrow launching deck, under endless sirens, the exchange of mech fire clouded Lorde’s vision. He had been enlisted for half a century, starting off with sending and receiving mail in the Silver Fortress, then followed Chief Woolf around like a clueless lackey. The number of times he had fired a missile could be counted on two hands and had all been ordered by his higher-ups.

As a colonel, this was the first time he’d ever been on the frontlines of war.

Lorde yelled out desperately as he sent out the order to fire; a missile broke through the door of the launching deck. Soon after, an enemy’s missile also reached the tail of his mech; Lorde didn’t have time to react as he stiffened up his body, the range of his mental network contracting out of fear and instinct. A loud blast rang inside his ears as his vision blackened, almost falling off the mental network. When he regained consciousness, he discovered he had already left the heavy mech--an unknown colleague had blocked off the missile for him and even added an extra layer of shield for his mech, sacrificing their own mech under the missile blast. The aftershock of the explosion pushed Lorde’s mech out and dodged past the first wave of fire from the hijacked commanding ship.

Lorde’s face was cold; he couldn’t tell if it was tears or sweat rolling down his face and made an emergency warp before he could turn his head around.

The Eighth Galaxy, in the Home of Commander Lin…

“Do you not have a sense of time anymore!?”

After multiple failed attempts at waking up the Prime Minister, the personal device on Lu Bixing’s wrist activated its little electric shock. The unfortunate Grand Marshal was once again pulled in as collateral damage, feeling as if he had just grabbed onto a cactus plant with his bare hands as the sting almost triggered a heart attack. He angrily tossed Lu Bixing’s hand away in response.

“I’ll stop, I’ll stop, I promise I’ll ban this thing from now on.” Lu Bixing frantically turned off his unique alarm.

Zhanlu once again appeared out of nowhere: “Excuse me…”

Lu Bixing interrupted: “I know, we’re going to be late, we’re getting ready.”

“That’s not it, sir, Headmaster Lu,” Zhanlu’s voice almost sounded more stern than usual, “The Milky Way City Command Post sent an emergency telegram---”

## Ch 154 - The Same Method Again

The irritated expression and slight redness on Lin Jingheng’s face immediately vanished as he shifted his numbed fingers: “Report in.”

Zhanlu: “General Turan sent another message to General Duke last night regarding the second troop increase near the Heart of the Rose, but the latter only gave a very hasty response. And just ten minutes ago, the First Galaxy Border Patrol cut off the mutual connection with us from their end--the Ninth Squadron is already gathered up and on standby outside the wormhole area right now.”

Lin Jingheng picked up the stack of clothes Zhanlu left for him by the door and quickly changed into them. By the time Zhanlu was done speaking, he had already put on his clothes and buttoned up his shirt: “Tell them to remain on standby, don’t worry.”

Lu Bixing’s gaze subconsciously followed him and asked: “Have you determined that General Duke doesn’t have any ill intentions?”

“For now at least, he has no reason to bear any malice toward us,” Lin Jingheng said. “The natural wormhole area is easier to defend than to break into. Have Turan guard the area with 30 small mechs; as long as they have enough fire power, they’re as strong as an iron wall even if the entirety of the First Galaxy’s border troops flood the wormhole.”

Despite looking quite disheveled and procrastinating on cleaning himself up, Lu Bixing’s brain was still following the conversation: “As the top commander of the First Galaxy border patrol, General Duke should know that the vanguard on the other side of the wormhole is the Silver Ninth Squadron. I’m sure he also knows Turan; even if the Union’s spacetime traveling technology developed leaps ahead within the last few months to the point where they can pass through the wormhole safely, there would be no reason for them to offer their heads to the Ninth Squadron. If he did have a conspiracy behind our backs, he would have lured us out of our base instead of purposefully creating this hostile atmosphere...in other words, it’s very likely that something happened over there, right? Do you think it may have something to do with the 306th Decree?”

Lin Jingheng shot him a glance: “Possibly. The first troop increase could be understood as appropriate self-defense, but a second time is almost crossing into the territory of paranoia. If I were Duke, as the top commander of the First Galaxy’s border troops, I’d also be annoyed at this...besides, it’s only a matter of time before the conflict between the Union government and Central Militias arises again.”

Lu Bixing asked as he absorbed himself in deep thought: “Why?”

“Do you think there’s ever an end to power-hungriness?” Lin Jingheng responded, “During wartime, the Central Militia took the opportunity to gain control of their respective territories through force. It’s like how Ankur was in the Seventh Galaxy: they’ve actually already formed their own system of authority as they claimed the title of warlords. It was only due to later circumstances that they were regathered by Woolf to fight against their common enemy, but once this all settled down they soon realized that they’d been demoted back to sub-organizations under the Union, despite feeling like they’d gained military autonomy. These Central Militias had lots of complicated relationships with the Union in the past and were never truly unified with the central government. Now that they have military autonomy in their hands, they are more likely to nourish their ambitions. Besides…”

Lin Jingheng paused slightly as he struggled to finish the rest of his sentence: “Besides, the Freedom Corps is still around. Lin...Lin Jingshu is mingling from within, so perhaps the conflict was brought out in advance.”

“......Or there’s another possibility. “ Lu Bixing picked up the tie that had rolled to the corner of the room and shoved it into a ball. His expression fell grave as he handed the tie over to Zhanlu’s robotic arm. “If we go back to the issue earlier, which is that Duke...perhaps someone is purposely using him to create a misconception that something went wrong on the other side. So they would send someone over and ask for our help in order to lure us out of the wormhole, then send a Trojan Horse into the Eighth Galaxy in the midst of everything. Of course, it’s all hard to say for sure since the situation in the Union is too complicated--didn’t they use this same method back when the Eighth Galaxy was forced to close itself off? To be honest, we’re a bit scared of being bitten by this snake again.”

Sixteen years ago, Woolf used Ankur as a lure and the lives of the Seventh Galaxy’s billions of residents as a bait for his plot to kill two birds with one stone. He almost succeeded in destroying the Eighth Galaxy back then, and now, history seemed to be going down a familiar path.

It was a lesson with an incredibly painful price.

Lin Jingheng didn’t respond and walked toward Zhanlu expressionlessly, pulling that tie out of Zhanlu’s hand without a word.

Lu Bixing: “......”

Lu Bixing suddenly realized something and jumped out of that little circle of pain he tied himself around in his mind, his face flustered into a bright red shade. As a proper man of culture, the Prime Minister still needed to keep that tiny bit of shame after walking out of his personal space.

Zhanlu questioned, confused: “Headmaster Lu, did you need me to dry clean this tie?”

Lu Bixing let out a timid mumble: “Don’t worry about it, I’ll clean it up myself.”

Lin Jingheng pretended not to hear this and ordered Zhanlu sternly: “Call up Lee, I want to hear the First Squadron’s military report on the situation.”

“Understood,” Zhanlu responded. At the same time, a little drawing popped out from the staircase with a few small icons flashing above. The little symbol indicated that it was a storage space for household items that needed to be cleaned: everything from utensils to dirty clothes and towels could be shoved in as the AI automatically sorted each item based on their material and filth level. “The household cleaning storage system has just been upgraded, it can answer all your summons at any time and even be customized to return all cleaned belongings back to their designated locations, for example, the attic…”

Lu Bixing: “......Zhanlu, bro, please read the room.”

A vein popped on Lin Jingheng’s forehead as he straight up banned the AI from talking: “Zhanlu, shut up.”

The secret headquarters of the AUS---

Hope, now known as Prophet Harris, listened to his subordinate’s report on the rumors surrounding the Eighth Galaxy and rewatched the footage that had been brought back multiple times. He finally stopped at the part where Chief Woolf mentioned the ‘Night Empress’ to the reporter with a smile. It was easier to tell the subtle differences in people’s expression through a recording, and the old prophet noticed that the smile on Woolf’s face through the screen was almost completely out of character.

“Prophet, we believe Woolf suspects that the Eighth Galaxy already built a superhuman armed forces fleet behind the Union’s back. Also, the Central Militias throughout the galaxies seemed to be coaxed by the independence of the Eighth Galaxy and are looking to do the same; it’s possible that Woolf wants to destroy the Eighth Galaxy before these armed forces can make a move.”

Hope frowned as he locked his eyes on Woolf’s seemingly at-ease expression.

The subordinate noticed the expression on his superior and asked: “Prophet, didn’t you say that you would risk anything to stop another outbreak of total war? What should we do now?”

Hope looked at him in deep thought and still felt something was off about the footage. He used to think Woolf carried the spirits of the of White Tower and had stepped up the ladder to power within the organization thanks to the old Chief. At the same time, he had also played the role of a puppet used by Woolf for his ambitions, only to be trapped by the old Chief like a chess piece on a game board. He had mixed feelings toward that old hand pressing down on the chessboard, but also felt that he could understand the motives behind those powerful hands.

For some reason, Hope felt that Woolf wasn’t someone who was obsessed with centralizing the power of the Union government in his hands--he was already close to 320 years old, how long could he hold onto that power? He was unmarried all his life with no family, who was going to inherit this absolute authority from him?

The last time he saw Woolf was when he heard the shocking news that Lin Jingheng had appeared before the Union with the Silver Ten in the Heart of the Rose. Woolf secretly requested to meet with Hope but hadn’t spoken too much about the current political climate. Instead, he only made a comment without any logical context: “Both of you---you and Lin Jingheng, must think that the Union is built on lies and conspiracies. Even if neither of you are willing to break the peace now, you both don’t think much about this kind of peace...but both of you are wrong. This whole world was built on conspiracies and lies, but it doesn’t make the world ugly because at least one person fell victim to these lies. They appease the anger of the public and lead the shaped world to the future; this is the uncontested law of certainty...here’s a present for you, take a look at it when you return.”

Right-- the present that Woolf had given him was a pack of seeds of the Night Empress.

What did that pack of seeds mean?

“Prophet!” Someone suddenly barged in at the moment and interrupted Hope’s train of thought, “General Duke of the First Galaxy’s Border Patrols was assassinated on the way back from Wolto, they’ve claimed it was our doing!”

Hope was startled by this news: “What!?”

“What!?” Wang Ailun felt as if he had been struck by lightning. “Say it again, who got assassinated?”

“It’s from a reliable source--General Duke was struck by an AUS ambush this morning on his way back from Wolto and was assassinated!”

Cold sweat rolled down Wang Ailun’s face; Duke was the head of the Central Militias and was essentially the commander among those old veterans spread throughout the galaxies. How could the Union possibly find an excuse now that he died in the First Galaxy? Wang Ailun wanted to hold the emperor hostage to control the nobility, using Woolf to maintain a stronghold over the Central Militia; however, this plan would only work if these ‘nobles’ remained loyal to their ‘emperor.’

A siren rang inside his head. Panicked, he almost forgot that nobody else besides himself and Woolf knew who was behind the AUS.

At that moment, a secret message was sent to his personal device. Wang Ailun waved off his subordinate and walked into a secret chamber to pick up the call: “I heard that Duke just……”

“I’m the one that killed Duke.” Lin Jingshu interrupted him calmly, “No need to worry.”

Wang Ailun could feel cold air freezing down to his bones as he struggled to speak through his gritted teeth: “Are you crazy?”

“Duke left his post without giving proper notice earlier this morning and brought an armed fleet that contained a heavy mech over. If I remember correctly, any armed fleet that is equipped with warping systems were not allowed to sail near the capital planet of Wolto; even Commander Lin Jingheng was forced to sail on an unarmed starship back then and pass through all checkpoints one by one.” Lin Jingshu lowered her gaze. “Are you saying that Duke is more arrogant than him and didn’t know the law? He was doing it on purpose and if I didn’t stop him on the way, he would’ve already brought his guns up to the Parliament on Wolto by now. If that happens, what do you plan on doing? Are you going to play the nice guy and talk him out of it with kind words, Mister Secretary General?”

Wang Ailun’s slightly tanned skin looked paler than usual: “What will the Central Militias think if they hear…”

Lin Jingshu chuckled lightly: “Duke brought an armed fleet near Wolto, what do you think the Central Militias will think if they hear about this? You have to take the initiative in this situation. Besides, since when did the honored body of the Secretary General voluntarily sit on the same bench as space pirates? General Duke was killed by the AUS, what does this have anything to do with you? All you need to do is to rile up the anger and feed the hungry birds.”

Wang Ailun’s guilty conscience finally settled down as he realized the situation and let out a sigh of relief. The frown on his face remained unchanged as he shot a cold gaze at Lin Jingshu: “You make it sound easy, but Duke died less than one sailing day away from the Union Troop’s headquarters. Even if he really was ‘killed by the AUS,’ how could the Union government possibly come out of this mess unstained? Are you doing it on purpose!? Besides, you were the one who told me that as long as Woolf exists, as long as the threat of the Freedom Corps exists, the Union and the Central Militias would still maintain a stable relationship; so why did this situation with Duke happen?”

“Perhaps impulse is a demon; or maybe Duke’s loyalty towards Lu Xin was much stronger than we thought? I’ve never carried cannons in my arms and fought wars before, how would I understand that kind of silly admiration and idolization?” Lin Jingshu responded, unfazed. “The ambush was chosen at that location because the further out it went, the further we would be trudging into the patrolling range of the First Galaxy’s Border Patrol. Secretary General, did you really think my little lackeys are any match against a properly trained military fleet? If that was the case, I would’ve already taken Wolto down; why would I waste my time and listen to your unreasonable accusations right now?”

Wang Ailun’s expression relaxed slightly at this explanation.

From his perspective, the Freedom Corps certainly didn’t have the power to stand in the spotlight. As the two major pirate forces, the AUS and Freedom Corps had suffered through wars and battles throughout these years. Only the Freedom Corps still continued their little conspiracy games under the table today, like poor peasants trying to make ends meet through illegal trades. Lin Jingshu was still a terrorist at the end of the day, no matter how much chaos she could cause; she could launch terrorist attacks, but still needed his help to truly cause a storm within the political stage of the Union.

Lin Jingshu said coldly: “If you don’t believe me, then I’m not obligated to help you clean up the mess afterwards. Goodbye.”

“Wait, Jingshu!” Wang Ailun’s expression softened up within a blink of an eye. “How do you still have this kind of attitude at your age? I thought I was still talking to that little girl with the flying unicorn in General Lin’s house back then.”

Lin Jingshu clenched her fist slightly, but her expression became slightly relieved.

“The news came too suddenly; you should’ve informed me beforehand. I was just panicking a little and didn’t really mean what I said.” Wang Ailun’s attitude changed like the flip of a page as smooth talk rolled off of his tongue. He spent about ten minutes ‘opening up’ to Lin Jingshu, finally seeing a slight bit of change on that ice cold statue-like face through his personal device. He then let out a long sigh of relief at last, as if he had understood everything. “People are like this all the time. They keep a mask on in front of strangers, and after wearing it for extended periods of time, they would even act quite distant towards their closest friends and family.”

Lin Jingshu seemed to be moved by these words of ‘friends and family’ and lowered her voice: “To be quite honest, Duke’s death could potentially be a good card in our hands if we know how to play it right---don’t forget how Woolf managed to unite the Central Militias back then. The central government should put out an announcement immediately and prepare itself in front of the camera….”

Wang Ailun: “I’m afraid being prepared on the outside won’t be enough.”

“Composure certainly isn’t enough.” Lin Jingshu lifted an eyebrow. “The Union wants to share a common enemy with the Central Militias, so they would at least need to face the same amount of loss and damage to make it believable, right?”

Wang Ailun understood her unspoken words and trembled: “You’re saying……”

Lin Jingshu lifted a finger and pressed it to her lips: “Uncle Ailun, you need to step out of the box to look at the situation. You have to be able to toss away all your old cards that are losing value over time and adapt to the ever-changing situation with new methods in order to maintain a strong foundation for your authority.”

Wang Ailun stood dumbly as layers of cold sweat covered his body. He felt as if he was standing at the edge of a cliff. He walked down this crooked path under the temptations of power and ambition, but still hadn't mentally prepared himself to completely betray his former master. After working for almost 200 years under Woolf, servitude was silently beaten to his nature. Despite hating this part of his character with all of his heart, that cursed part of his personality would occasionally arise and enchant him.

“I’ll think about it, let me……”

“Duke’s corpse is already cold,” Lin Jingshu said calmly. “Uncle Ailun, you don’t have time left. Fate will only give its chosen victim one chance, and this chance could only last one minute---do you know how Waterloo fell into the hands of Grouchy?”

Wang Ailun: “Then…...what about the Eighth Galaxy?”

“My spy has just cut off the mutual communication channel between the Border Patrols and the Eighth Galaxy and made it seem like something happened over here. Now take a guess: what would the Eighth Galaxy that has already once suffered at the hands of Ankur think of the situation over here now that they’re completely blind to what’s happening? And what would happen if Duke sent someone to ask the Eighth Galaxy for help at this time? Would the generals of the Eighth Galaxy think the Union was using the same method twice to insult their intellect?” Lin Jingshu smiled. “The best-case scenario is if that ‘anti-war prophet’ of the AUS freaked out over the sudden accusation and sent more information to the Eighth Galaxy in a panic; that would make things even more believable. Don’t worry, Uncle Ailun, the Eighth Galaxy will close their doors on it all.”

## Ch 155 - I Won

Independent Year 13, May 26th, Eighth Galaxy standard time, 10:00 AM.

NSC 291, May 4th, Woltorian standard time, 18:25 P.M.

Turan only took 30 mechs along with her to the wormhole zone, but they were all Eighth Galaxy-produced superdimensional heavy mechs.

For the vanguards with the highest mobility on the battlefield, 30 was a magical number: one less meant they wouldn’t have enough firepower, but one more meant they would have to sacrifice a certain amount of mobility on the battlefield. Thirty mechs in Turan’s hands could be turned into either a phantom or a sharp blade. She listened carefully to the sounds coming from the other side of the wormhole through the channel, cannons all preheated, standing on guard like a fearsome swordsman resting her great blade across her knees on the throne. Her expression was calm and quiet, almost too quiet for a longhorn beetle.

“General Turan, a researcher from the Expedition team is reporting in.”

“Okay, let them in.” Turan nodded as Mint walked over in her white lab coat.

“General, I’m here for equipment support. Sixteen starships carrying amplifiers are fully prepared and on their way.” Mint lifted her hand as her personal device automatically projected a complicated and detailed blueprint from the ceiling down to the floor. “To put it simply, a natural wormhole is so unstable that it can collapse at any time. Our job in the past was to prevent these sudden collapses and ensure that it was safe to pass through. However, these sixteen starships are equipped with disruption signals that do the exact opposite; they can disrupt the energy flow around the wormholes and cause a temporary shutdown of the area.”

Turan asked: “What’s the range of the ‘mesh opening’’ after it’s closed off, is it big enough for a bug from the other side to slide past?”

Mint: “Even if an actual bug-sized mech were to slip through from the other side, it would still cause the collapse of the wormhole and get dragged into distorted spacetime.”

“Okay, stay on standby and wait for the orders from the command post.”

Mint let out a breath of cold air. All the preparations were ready, they only needed to wait for further orders from the meeting in the command post.

Mint suddenly asked: “I wonder what kind of solution will come out of the meeting in the command post...General, are you also a Woltorian?”

“Hm? Are you kidding me?” Turan laughed, “Do I look like a rich and delicate heir to a noble family?”

Mint blinked; Turan’s hands were rough from years of harsh training. After a long career as a soldier, the aura of a galactic soldier on this General covered up all other indicators of her identity.

“I was born in the Fifth Galaxy,” Turan said. “It was before the management law for external breeding was enacted; private breeding centers were just picking up on business and were a mess in terms of management. A private breeding center there was doing some opening campaign where they found a group of newly wed couples to join in, the first prize was a free DNA collection to breed a newborn at their center--I was the prize that came out of that campaign. My parents broke up before I was even ‘born’ and threw me under the care of the breeding center. That breeding center eventually got outlawed and we were all taken in by the government. Because my mental strength was a bit above average, I later got dragged out and selected as a backup soldier by the Silver Ten. I was probably one of the last groups of recruits; they stopped doing open recruitments later. I heard it was Commander Lu Xin’s idea because he wanted the Silver Ten to slowly blend into the Union and start recruiting from military schools like every other fleet…too bad that never happened.”

Mint asked: “Then have you ever been homesick, General? What if we have to point our cannons at the Union one day, what will you do?”

Turan simply avoided answering directly and responded nonchalantly: “Me? I have my boss the Marshal already, I’ll follow any orders without question.”

Mint asked: “Then do you...still believe in the Pledge of Freedom?”

“Of course,” Turan didn’t hesitate to answer, but paused for a moment before adding on, “but to tell you the truth, little girl, it certainly feels great to simply follow orders and not make decisions or hold responsibilities.”

Mint: “......”

Turan openly broke the rules of no open fire inside a mech and lit up a cigarette: “I can say something that I don’t mean but will still fight for it regardless. People, you know---tsk, here, connect me over to the Milky Way City Command Post, feed me some beautiful men to wake me up.”

Milky Way City Command Post---

“We’ve been sending out communication requests with no response back.” Lee’s expression was grave and deep like the ocean. “We have reason to believe that the Union has their own opinions on the Eighth Galaxy’s proclamation of independence...that’s right, Prime Minister Lu. After the communication signals were cut off, the information department in the First Squadron here hasn’t been able to connect to the Union’s internal network. We found a news article in the Wolto Daily not too long ago regarding the Union’s public announcement towards the Eighth Galaxy; the topic was ‘we firmly refuse to acknowledge illegal proclamations of independence, the Union’s central government refuses to hold diplomatic talks.’”

Anakin shrugged and said: “At least this proves that Duke isn’t purposely blocking off our messages to the central government.”

Thomas was afraid that Lu Bixing didn’t understand the Wolto Daily and quickly explained on the side: “The Wolto Daily is the dog of the Union’s central government; they bark at whoever the government points at and are infamous for being shameless in that aspect. Back then, they would drag our Marshal out whenever they saw a drop in readership; my Marshal here is like their source of dog food, he’s guaranteed to have a stable market.”

Poisson saw his own brother start running his mouth again like cannons on a mech and kicked his leg under the table in fear that this idiot would anger the Marshal again: “His point is that the Wolto Daily’s position is a direct reflection of the central government’s attitude.”

Poisson carefully glanced at Lin Jingheng, only to find that despite showing a hint of fatigue, the Marshal’s expression remained calm and peaceful with no signs of anger: “Continue.”

“We also collected a lot of unofficial theories and discussion; many of the rumors among the public aren’t completely baseless, so we managed to pick out some key information from these discussions.” Lee said, “First, the Union is worried that the Central Militias will not listen to their boss. Second, all galaxies outside of the First Galaxy are also worried that the Union will return to how things were before the war, turning them all back into secondary citizens. Third, there were rumors that Prime Minister Lu’s Rainbow Virus experiment succeeded and had already built a superhuman fleet, ready to invade the Union at any time--I personally think this particular rumor clearly displays the Union’s fear of space pirates outside of their territory, which also explains why the military is not enough to ease the worries of the public.”

Lin Jingheng frowned and quickly exchanged a glance with Lu Bixing.

Lee didn’t know that these ‘rumors’ weren’t completely fabricated; the success case of the Rainbow Virus experiment was sitting right here in this meeting room. The only difference was that he refused to take the research a step further.

But Lu Bixing’s experiment had always been done in secret and the Eighth Galaxy had been closed off for so many years already. How did such a rumor suddenly arise at this time?

Lu Bixing smiled and tapped the tips of Lin Jingheng’s boots under the table: “That’s not wrong, General Lee, it certainly isn’t a rumor. I do have a powerful superdimensional fleet in my hands; isn’t that all of you sitting here in the room right now?”

Turan’s ghostly voice rang out through the long-distance connection screen: “Oh look, the token gay’s feeding the soup of temptation to a bunch of adult men in the room and abducting these boy toys right in front of you. Marshal, here, I’ll keep a note of everyone that’s blushing right now for you.”

Lee cleared his throat and glared at Turan before continuing his report: “Just from what we know of the 306th Decree, the number of troops dispatched during the second increase, and their placement...it’s clear that the Union is hostile towards us. That’s very strange.”

The Captain of the First Squadron stood up and opened up his personal device. A large amount of data flooded the meeting table as he said: “This is all the data the First Squadron collected over the last 200 days on the Union and Central Militias, which includes everything from fleet organization, firepower, arms, size grade---after our thorough analysis, we feel that if the development continues on at this rate, both sides will maintain a stalemate of balanced military power for at least the next two to three years. After that, it will depend on the internal power struggle between the individual galaxies and the central government; also whether or not we will see another great leap in technological advancement.”

“Back in the Heart of the Rose, the Union was pressured by the situation and let us off the hook because the Central Militias had our backs. They also didn’t comment on the independence of the Eighth Galaxy; according to your reasoning, it’s not likely that the scales of the internal conflict would have tipped so much in favor of one side in a mere 200-day timeframe. Therefore, there are only two possibilities: first, the 306th Decree had a different intention than what we interpreted, and the Union wasn’t actually targeting the Eighth Galaxy, they’re just using their attitude to hide something else. Second, the Central Militias and the Union came to an agreement on the topic regarding the Eighth Galaxy and both see us as a threat, so my sympathy card is completely obsolete.” Lu Bixing spread his hands in front of him at this point and turned to give Lin Jingheng a deep and suggestive look. “Looks like emotions and feelings aren’t strong enough as a promise without a written contract. Marshal, when do you plan on signing one with me?”

Lin Jingheng did not catch the implications behind those words and nodded sternly in response: “I personally lean more towards the former theory---I don’t know how difficult it is for the Central Militias and the Union government to come to a consensus, but it certainly is easy to break their alliance when the time comes, since Zhanlu still has the list from the forbidden fruit with him. I’m sure Woolf also understands my intention behind those words I didn’t say in the Heart of the Rose.”

The entire meeting room, including Turan on the other side of the screen, fell in complete silence after he finished and stared right at him. Lin Jingheng lifted an eyebrow in confusion: “Anyone have questions?”

The generals of the Silver Ten all lowered their heads simultaneously like parrots and insisted that nothing was wrong, everything the Marshal said was right.

The Marshal wasn’t dense and could read the room; it must be because the Prime Minister’s marriage proposal was too vague.

Lu Bixing gave him a slightly defeated and faint smile in response.

Lin Jingheng: “So the 306th Decree might have another motive behind it--to threaten us into closing off the wormhole zone.”

“Indeed.” Lu Bixing pulled back his joking demeanor and tapped his fingers lightly on the table. “During a time like this when the situation is complicated and our only source of information isn’t providing enough, the best option for us is to close off the wormhole zone. The Eighth Galaxy is a difficult target for our enemies, so that is our natural course of action; the Expedition Team should have already delivered the disruption ships over to Turan, right?”

Turan: “Yes sir, we’ve received them.”

“Let’s try thinking outside of the box for a second. The outside world barely knows anything about me, so this seems more like a collective gamble by numerous unidentified outside forces targeting Jingheng specifically,” Lu Bixing said slowly but clearly, “They’re gambling to see if we will make the same mistake, even with a precedent that almost cost your life at the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy border battle.”

A sudden sound came out of Turan’s side of the screen at this moment, all eyes immediately turned towards the screen.

“There’s abnormal energy activity from the other side of the wormhole,” Turan said in a low tone, “It seems as if something is attempting to pass through and even sent a coded message signal--Mint!”

“Yes ma’am, decoding immediately.”

Lorde could feel that his human-mech sync rate had dropped to an extremely dangerous percentage right now. He was able to escape from Duke’s heavy mech under the cover of his comrades but spent the rest of the journey chased down by ‘the AUS’ fleet. His missiles were completely emptied out as he dodged another wave of particle beams from the side. Thankfully, he escaped the firing range quickly enough, but even then his mech body was already war-torn with damages on all sides. The internal gravity system could no longer maintain a reasonable air pressure, so Lorde put on a space suit and tied himself up in the cockpit as he shoved the last relaxant into his body.

He twitched in pain with the familiar muscle spasm--*just a little longer*, he thought. *I’m almost at the Heart of the Rose.*

He saw the pursuing mechs from behind through the mental network; the relaxant forcefully increased his mental strength temporarily as he yelled out loud and entered his fifth emergency warp. The flesh-ripping pain once again consumed his whole body as the sirens inside the mech rang out in a frenzy; Lorde’s vision blacked out almost instantly.

Emergency warp successful!

He returned near the Heart of the Rose. This area was heavily stationed with patrol fleets; thus the pirates would not dare to enter.

A heavy burden dropped off Lorde’s shoulder, and the next second, a long-distance signal scanned his ship. He recognized it as the patrolling guards scanning his identity. Lorde took a deep and exhausted breath of air as he responded: “I am the representative of the First Galaxy’s Border Patrol, Colonel Lorde. I was ordered to escort General Duke to Wolto until we were ambushed by the AUS pirates on our way back; General Duke was assassinated. Quick, I need to speak to the Eighth Galaxy….”

Before he could finish, the cold cannons locked onto him.

Lorde was shocked: “I’m…..”

“General Duke ordered to cut off communication with the Eighth Galaxy. There’s a traitor among us,” the patrol on the other side said coldly. “If you don’t want to die, disarm immediately and wait for us to capture you, don’t do anything funny.”

Lorde’s head was completely empty and could clearly hear his own heavy breathing. The next instant, a few mechs from the border patrol fleet sailed over and surrounded him. The naive and foolish colonel had lived in peace for decades until he was once again pushed into the storm of the era, feeling the cold air from the dark abyss beneath his feet.

*“Go to the Eighth Galaxy, find Lin Jingheng.”*

*“Request help from the Eighth Galaxy---”*

Suddenly, Lorde used up what little fuel was left on his small and battered-up mech to accelerate and fly out of the barricade. At the same time, the patrolling guards also fired at him without hesitation. Lorde’s shield was already destroyed, so any tiny scratch by the cannon fires and missiles would burn him up into ashes. He didn’t dare to turn back and dodged on instinct, but how could a mech be faster than particle cannons?

The overlaying particle cannons that were already visible through the mental network charged at him like a deadly wave.

Lorde closed his eyes.

Then, a few mechs suddenly appeared and set up a layer of shield over Lorde’s small mech temporarily, blocking off the particle cannons that were already in range. The massive energy explosion shot Lorde’s small mech into the heavy gravitation field in the Heart of the Rose.

“He has comrades!”

“This mech model is from the AUS, he really is the traitor!”

Lorde turned his head abruptly through the mental network and noticed that the small mechs that saved him all had the AUS logo on their ships; but what was going on? Lorde felt his head was going to overload, but as he closed into the wormhole zone, he no longer had time to think too much about it.

The First Galaxy patrols activated their signal disruption; Lorde bit down his lips and charged forward physically with the body of his mech. A message left by a trail of blood passed through the signal blockage and was sent to the Eighth Galaxy: “General Duke was assassinated, Chief Woolf became a puppet to the Union government, we’re requesting help from the Eighth Galaxy! Commander Lin, please save us!”

Turan stood up in shock: “What did you say? Duke is dead!?”

Lorde’s mech caught on fire within the explosions, his eyes closing at the bright lights. Soon after, the tail of his mech was hit by a missile. It passed through as the limited oxygen left inside the mech body blew up like little sparks of fireworks, burning away the matches of life one by one.

That year, the newly graduated youth had knocked on the commander’s door. He pressed his feet together through the new boots as he gave a slightly stiff salute: “Commander Lin!”

The man turned his head around, half of his face hidden in his shadows. Only those cold grey eyes and an unforgettable side profile looked at him briefly before giving a nod in acknowledgement.

Lorde could hear his increased heartbeat.

“Honorary graduate of the 260th class from the Black Orchid Academy, Andrew Brandon Lorde, reporting in. I hope to follow your footsteps and give my life to fight for the Union, all hail the Pledge of Freedom!”

*I hope to follow your footsteps….*

*Boom!*

“One second. General Turan, the second message.” Mint said sternly, “Decoding is about to be completed…”

“This is the First Galaxy Border Patrol, sending our greetings to the Prime Minister and Grand Marshal of the Eighth Galaxy. General Duke ordered us to cut off communication with the Eighth Galaxy under emergency circumstances. We have lost contact with General Duke and are unsure whether he has been assassinated or not. Pirate spies have snuck into our fleet and have just passed through our barricade to send false information to the Eighth Galaxy, please be cautious of their message. I repeat, please be cautious of their message---”

The second message was much more detailed and thorough, which also included footage of the battlefield.

Turan turned to the communication channel back to the meeting: “Marshal!”

13:34 P.M. Eighth Galaxy Standard Time.

21:59 P.M. Woltorian Standard Time.

Sixteen starships in the Eighth Galaxy simultaneously released their disruption signals.

The Eighth Galaxy that had been hesitating finally closed off the wormhole terminal.

At the same time, the news was sent to the Union Parliament’s Secretary Office and Neverland.

Lin Jingshu let out a long sigh of relief: “Send out the order. I won.”

## Ch 156 - A Bad Feeling

The Eighth Galaxy and the Border Patrol of the First Galaxy had always been on rather friendly terms and were both quite respectful toward each other. Before the wormhole was closed off, the Eighth Galaxy sent out three separate warnings followed by the disruption signals.

The First Galaxy Patrol fleet all backed out of the Heart of the Rose out of safety concerns.

Inside the empty forbidden zone of the Heart of the Rose, the massive galactic signal post trembled slightly and began distorting in the direction toward the center of the forbidden zone. The next moment, the signal post snapped in half as countless pieces of equipment inside the massive body poured out like droplets of water, which were later sucked into the center of the gravitational field.

The backup engine of a small mech someone must have left behind caused a series of small explosions around the area. The outward flow of oxygen into the void of space quickly subsumed the explosions as the engine crashed into the remnants of space waste. These colliding objects then quietly flowed into the massive graveyard inside the Heart of the Rose.

All remaining artificial objects left in the area began to collapse in a grand apocalyptic scene.

If anyone were to witness this scene, perhaps they wouldn’t be instilled with fear. Fragile carbon lifeforms might be as weak as an ant under this overwhelming force of power, but beneath this awesome display was a shadow of man-made production.

The process of collapse lasted a full three hours, turning the Heart of the Rose that had just recently gained some liveliness back into a deserted forbidden land.

Perhaps they still lacked the technology for a smoother process, but the closing-off of the wormhole this time was a tremendous feat that sent off waves of high-energy particles like leakages of water. The First Galaxy Patrols backed off six sailing days away from the wormhole zone and could still feel the lingering effects of the abnormal energy disruption; even the transfer portals nearby were completely shut down. Out of safety concerns, they finally decided to fully retreat from the Heart of the Rose.

Therefore, nobody noticed that the ‘whirlpool’ inside the Heart of the Rose settled down temporarily about ten Woltorian days after the large commotion of the Eighth Galaxy shutting off the wormhole. Soon after, a full fleet of superdimensional mechs sailing in the shadows appeared out of the wormhole zone and gathered up within the Heart of the Rose.

These mechs mimicked the disruption of the wormhole’s energy waves and created a fake flow of disruption that was later amplified through special equipment, spreading out toward every corner of the First Galaxy. They manually covered up the Heart of the Rose with danger signs for display, as if the Eighth Galaxy was still currently ‘closed up.’

The heavy mech fleet hid inside the Heart of the Rose on standby, then a disguised civilian starship sailed out from one of the heavy mechs. The starship swiftly sailed around the Heart of the Rose from the other direction and silently snuck into a remote supply station, waiting patiently to enter the First Galaxy.

“With this speed, we’ll be in line for at least another two hours. The First Galaxy’s efficiency in customs is certainly impressive, has it always been like this?”

A man walked down from the top observatory deck of the starship as he commented.

He was wearing an awfully fitted dress shirt with a unique cut; it was fitted enough where an extra centimeter would hide his waistline, but a centimeter less would be too tight to wear. It looked almost like any normal white collared shirt but glistened in a spectacular glow under the dimmed lights of the bar. It looked almost a little too cheeky for a proper collared shirt. His pupils were artificially altered into a deep green color and the natural curls of his hair had been bleached to a lighter blonde color and brushed back into a clean and docile all-back style. This clean-cut hairstyle further contrasted his sharpened features over the last few years, grinding off every last bit of modest and gentle aura that normally surrounded the man.

No stranger or acquaintance that ever interacted with him on a daily basis would have recognized that this was that forever dependable Prime Minister Lu of the Eighth Galaxy.

The lower level of the starship had a little bar. Lin Jingheng slid a glass of wine over the counter from behind the bar to him. His gaze scanned the other man from head to toe discreetly as he responded: “The First Galaxy is normally quite cautious, but this certainly is a bit too much.”

Border customs were of course all manned by AIs; they were both walking databases and workers with extremely high work efficiency. Normally it would take only one minute to scan through an entire merchant ship--there was no reason why there would be such a long line.

“Maybe there’s a human checkpoint after the machine checks.” Lin Jingheng said, “The old Sidereal Era fell from their overdependence on AIs, so when the NSC era began, the Union was very careful about AI safety. Government examinations for Artificial Intelligence are very strict; calling stops to investigations is common and the risk of new research is extremely high, so naturally there aren’t a lot of investors. Instead, AI controls, management, and defense became popular subject areas, leading to about 300 years of academic and developmental imbalance. Normal worker AIs are easy targets for hackers, so if any emergency arose, they wouldn’t have time to do a full upgrade of the robots and would just add an extra human checkpoint on top of regular security...the atmosphere is heavy here, looks like something did happen to Duke.”

Lu Bixing frowned at ‘human checkpoint’: “Human scans? Will we run into any issues with that?”

“Don’t worry, Prime Minister.” A voice suddenly rang out from the dark corner. If it wasn’t for Lu Bixing’s chip that gave him more sensitive hearing and that he already knew someone was standing there, he would’ve jumped in shock. The speaker was Bayer from the Silver Tenth Squadron. “Old Lee can take care of it, that’s his job.”

“After Eden broke down, Lee took the First Squadron and wandered the galaxies while building multiple fake identities along the way in case of emergencies,” Lin Jingheng responded airily. “Everything from the starship we’re on right now to the person you’re roleplaying has a full story behind it. If border customs could catch us, he would be jobless by now.”

Lu Bixing nodded in response. The next moment, he leaned on the bar counter with both arms to reach Lin Jingheng’s ears.

The latter thought there was some important news and naturally closed in to listen, only to hear Lu Bixing whisper to him: “If you want to check me out, just do so openly without shame. You know, your little glances every so often are starting to turn into sexual harassment, mister.”

Their false identity had been arbitrarily assigned through the First Squadron’s database that followed the rule of ‘the most contrasting character with the smallest change.’ Lu Bixing’s real colors were hidden behind the fake green pupils at this moment, shadows of his character peeking out through the product of technology. The blend of authenticity and deceptive front created a mysterious but captivating sense of allure, not unlike a sweet and tempting poison.

However, there was a certain Captain of the Tenth Squadron waiting with his ears perked up on the side, so Lin Jingheng had no choice but to maintain self-restraint and composure. He pinched Lu Bixing’s chin with his fingers and pushed him away: “Screw off, lover boy, don’t bother me.”

He quickly pulled up his personal device to cover himself and flipped quickly through the Wolto Daily from the last few days: “This is all pointless news; the Wolto Daily’s used to earning their pats on the back by riling up public opinion, so they’re always out for scandals they can fry up in their pans. The last time they were this quiet was when Woolf took down the Committee and dragged the media into a scandal--in other words, they sense the impending danger but still aren’t sure which side to stay on.”

“General Duke was assassinated on his way back to the capital planet, so it’s natural that the atmosphere is hostile as the Central Militias demand an explanation from the Union government.” Lu Bixing straightened up from the counter and showed a more disciplined look on his face as he spoke. “From the outside, there isn’t a reason for the Union government to kill Duke in their territory, and the situation right now isn’t stable enough for them to sit down leisurely and carefully grind out the rotten grains from their stock. So clearly, some pirates are mingling and purposely souring the relationship between the two; at least that’s what everyone would think.”

Lin Jingheng lifted his gaze: “So?”

“So what should I do if I were the Union government, feeling that the situation is still unstable, the pirates are still lurking in the shadows, and relationships between the Union and Central Militias are growing more unfriendly by the day? It’s a matter of profits and power--I certainly can’t rely on good merits and words to win over public opinion, so I can only deliver a common enemy to direct all the attention onto. That way, through this wavering and uncertain situation with everyone standing on their toes, I can reunite the lost lambs together with a clear goal.” Lu Bixing picked up the wine glass and twirled it a bit in his hands. His whole body was covered in a bold and almost flashy outfit, like a snazzy host, but the moment he opened his mouth he once again returned to the familiar Prime Minister Lu. “That way, ‘the pirates assassinated Duke’ would become a great headline that could emphasize the wicked arrogance of the pirates. This would further rile up the anger of the Central Militia and turn their frustration away from the Union---see, even the pirates think that the Union and Central Militia need a bit of fuel between them to escalate the conflict. Doesn’t that mean it should be time for everyone to unite together instead?”

Bayer peeked his head out from the shadows: “Prime Minister, so you’re saying that the Union government might be the ones behind this assassination.”

“If the blame of this assassination gets placed on the Freedom Corps, it’s very likely that it’s the work of the Union government.” Lu Bixing said in a low tone, “But what’s strange to me is that according to the information that was leaked to the Eighth Galaxy, it was the AUS that killed Duke. Woolf is behind the AUS, this is a fact that we all know, and according to what General Lee said, after the AUS recovered from the great battle that year, they’ve been rather quiet. Isn’t it a bit strange to suddenly pull them back out again at this time to be the punching bag? Isn’t Woolf scared of playing with fire here?”

Lin Jingheng: “So you think that the rumor about Woolf being turned into someone’s puppet might be true.”

Bayer interrupted: “But Prime Minister, that doesn’t sound very realistic. Woolf may be old but he’s reaching a level above mortals, who could possibly control him?”

“Doctor Hardin brought up this man multiple times during our conversations,” Lu Bixing said. “I’ve heard that Woolf had refused to have his name on the forbidden fruit’s list and was quite upset about Hardin’s betrayal to the Union. But the same man many years later didn’t hesitate to sacrifice two whole galaxies to cover up the fact that his name was on the list--what do you think? This is a striking contrast that sounds almost like he was being controlled, don’t you think? Whether he was being controlled by his own obsessions or by outside forces, the fact still remains the same: there is a weakness in his heart. No matter how powerful a person may seem, how fearsome their tactics may be, they can’t make up for that bit of weakness in their hearts. Anyone that manages to find it can poke at that weak spot and claim a life.”

Lin Jingheng’s heart skipped a beat momentarily as he lifted his head up and looked at Lu Bixing.

Lu Bixing gave him an understanding but peaceful smile: “But a skinny camel is still larger than a horse; it’s not likely that Woolf would let anyone control him that easily, he may have kept another trick up his sleeves. The two messages of ‘Woolf became a puppet’ that we received might have been important hints he was sending out.”

Bayer could almost feel his brain overload and explode like a volcano, quietly thinking that it may be better for him to remain an innocent and pure little galactic assassin. He didn’t dare to speak up again due to his slow processing speed and could only give Lin Jingheng a slightly concerned look. This was the first time in his life that he worried that their infamously cunning Marshal might lose in a battle of wits one day.

Lu Bixing picked up a little pack of snacks and handed it over to the distressed Bayer: “That’s why we’re here to see things for ourselves personally.”

This all had to be traced back to the time when the Milky Way City Command Post first received two completely contradicting messages---

One was an SOS, the other was a stern warning. The entire meeting room blew up in shock as the Generals of the Silver Ten all turned their gaze towards Lin Jingheng. The latter remained silent and didn’t give any visible reactions.

Lu Bixing raised a hand to calm down the commotion: “Seems like the players on both sides of the bet are forcing us to make a decision immediately.”

“Prime Minister, the more conservative decision is always the best option.” Someone from the Eighth Galaxy Financial Department spoke up and then turned towards Lin Jingheng, saying, “Right, Marshal? A similar thing happened before and we almost lost you; it wouldn’t hurt to be a little bit more conservative this time to avoid following in the same footsteps, right?”

Before Lin Jingheng could answer, Lu Bixing responded in his place: “The more conservative option is not always the safest option; we can’t determine right now if there are any parties out there that want us to seclude ourselves in the Eighth Galaxy.”

The Minister of Finance said, “What kind of threat would an enemy that wants us to seclude ourselves pose? I believe that as long as we have the Marshal and the Silver Ten with us, even if they open up the wormhole from the outside, we can still guard our homeland without issues.”

“Then what if we’re all gone?” Lu Bixing once again interrupted Lin Jingheng before the latter could even open his mouth. “Besides, even if we managed to guard the wormhole zone, we aren’t living in a void. It takes only a century to sail from the Union to Qiming even without transfer portals, and if we take galactic transportation technology’s advancement into consideration, the time could be cut shorter into an unimaginable scale. Perhaps 50 years...or even twenty years, ten years.”

The Minister of Finance didn’t have words to respond.

“Let’s also consider the worst-case scenario here,” Lu Bixing said. “We don’t close off the Eighth Galaxy. In the worst scenario, we would see a repeat of the events that happened in the first Independent year. But the good news is, unlike where we were at during that time, we finally have our own military and proper fleets, so we can’t possibly face the same loss as we did before. If we close off the Eighth Galaxy, it would be hard to tell what the worst-case scenario is…. perhaps a force none of us sitting here would wish to see will take over the Union and turn it into a world we don’t wish to see. Here’s an example--like the Freedom Corps.”

The Minister of Finance once again looked at Lin Jingheng, but the latter could sense that Lu Bixing refused to let him talk, so he decided to keep quiet.

“A classic sci-fi horror trope in ancient earth times was the concept of mankind versus ‘bugs’ in an all-out war; this often reflected the ancients’ fear of insects as a species. The fear didn’t stem solely from their griotique appearances, but also the fundamental societal structure of them that eliminated all individuality. Now imagine a human society that is a direct copy of that, where every individual person is a superhuman with unbelievable power, and they still manage to completely obey their social hierarchy and status by sacrificing their lives to carry out all orders under those conditions while maintaining cognitive abilities. What do you think will happen to us if we face them? Don’t look at the Marshal--if it really does end up at that point, even ten of Marshal Lin won’t be enough to deal with them.”

Lu Bixing grabbed onto Lin Jingheng’s clenched fist under the table and carefully but forcefully pulled those tightened fingers apart.

*Don’t say those fake words you don’t truly believe in.* Lu Bixing gave him a glance and thought to himself, *If I was in the Union gambling with them, my bet would also be that you won’t sleep on this.*

Prime Minister Lu gave the final word at the meeting: “We can’t give up this opportunity to choose our path in history.”

Thus, the plan to secretly dispatch the Eighth Galaxy troops out of the Heart of the Rose was settled. The Silver Sixth Squadron’s main fleet remained on standby in the Heart of the Rose, then the Galactic Expedition Team provided the technological support and faked an abnormal energy wave of shutting down the wormhole.

The Ninth Squadron remained the last line of defense stationed on the other side of the wormhole.

The SIlver First Squadron acted as the secret service squad that provided the fake IDs and identities. Finally, an elite espionage team of professionals from the Silver Tenth Squadron followed along and escorted the spies into the First Galaxy.

This was the first time in Lu Bixing’s life, excluding the time he sailed around the Heart of the Rose, that he encountered human society outside of the Eighth Galaxy. He felt as if his own two eyes were not enough for him; he munched on some snacks down at the bar, chatted with Lin Jingheng briefly and ran back up to the observatory deck on the starship. He studied the supply station and unarmed starships of the First Galaxy, sending countless messages to the ships beside him and chatted a whole world away during the two-hour line wait. Finally, after mapping out a whole family tree of these strangers he’d just met and listening to a whole rant from a luxury item merchant, he managed to gather up enough information to estimate the economic situation of the First Galaxy after the war.

Lin Jingheng couldn’t go with him because the cursed system from the First Squadron had assigned him the role of a sickly man that needed a wheelchair. He needed to avoid unnecessary activity to be in character for this role. Of course, it wasn’t that easy of a job originally. Lu Bixing absolutely refused to let him use drugs to melt down his muscle tissues and without the help of drugs, having to act as a sick patient for extended periods of time would risk exposing their identities. Therefore, to make things more ‘realistic’, Lee had no choice but to suggest to his boss to not move around so much.

Bayer walked over and shook hands with Zhanlu’s robotic arm that was draped across the corner of the bar counter: “You haven’t returned to the First Galaxy in about twenty years, how does it feel to come back and pay it a visit?”

Lin Jingheng sighed: “I can only remember the terminal maps of the First Galaxy and the locations of the stationed troops…...I have a bad feeling about this.”

Lin Jingheng’s words of fortune were equivalent to curses, and bad feelings often became reality.

Wolto, mid-level mountain ranges, the Chief's Mansion.

The guards by the backdoor were switching shifts when the light in the robotic security’s eyes flashed a few times before suddenly vanishing completely.

## Ch 157 - Died from Betrayal and Conspiracies

The Night Empress in the gardens were blooming almost a little too outlandishly; their colors were rich and visible under the dim lights as if covered in a thin layer of blood.

The gardening robots automatically adjusted the moisture in the soil and detected that there wasn’t enough water; soon after, a gentle stream of water splashed out. The piano’s soothing rhythm captured the scenery of an almost dream-like world in this corner of the garden.

Suddenly, the watering stopped, and the piano fell silent.

A dark shadow the size of a palm flashed by, shaped like a disk and thin as a blade. It flew by so quickly it was nearly impossible to see with the naked eye. The flying disk passed through the garden and sliced down the tips of a Night Empress soundlessly, releasing a thick aroma from the flower that looked almost as if it were bleeding.

The security system inside Chief Woolf’s mansion was almost like a magical ward in high fantasy novels: from the skies down to the underground chambers, any unauthorized objects or lifeforms that passed through would trigger a reaction from the control center within 1/10th of a second. Aside from patrolling robots, there were three layers of security in the system: the first was an outer layer of nano-cannons and laser guns that could fire long-distance on a locked target. The second was a group of robotic security with an extremely fast reaction time, and the third was a layer made from a special transformable material not unlike Zhanlu’s mech core. This type of material was directly connected to the security system that could show up instantly at any location within the Chief’s mansion, either through the ground or garden, and would remove the invader.

These three layers of security turned this mansion into a powerful citadel not unlike the Silver Fortress, making assassination near impossible.

But this time, when that unknown object flew through the old chief’s most prized garden, the security system was dead silent.

The disk that flew by carefully attached itself onto an open glass window past the flower garden; that room was Chief Woolf’s bedroom.

The old chief was fast asleep, tired in his old age, as if he didn’t notice any noise from the outside.

The disk slowly turned transparent and blended in with the glass, flashing small rows of text on the window---

“Scanning DNA….”

“Confirmed.”

“Scanning physical state, checking if symptoms match existing records.”

“Scan completed. Target’s symptoms confirmed to match up with existing records up to 98%, confirmed target identity.”

“Concentration of Night Empress within the target's blood is 56mg/100mL……”

Soon after, a dozen or so ‘disks’ once again flew in from around the mansion and merged in through the window, door, and even walls. An invisible infrared radiation shot out from the center of the disks and pointed at the man on the bed--if anyone could see the scene with an infrared detector, they would see that a complex web surrounded Woofl’s body like prey trapped inside a net.

The door inside the bedroom opened up automatically. A stranger walked in quietly toward the side of Woolf’s bed.

The old chief was finally woken up by the sound of those footsteps, however, his pupils dilated, and he couldn’t see who walked in. His muddied eyes looked confused as if his soul had been sucked away from his body, leaving only his flesh behind.

“Chief Commander Woof.” The uninvited guest nodded courteously at him. “Sorry to bother you so late into the night. It isn’t hard to take your life--these cute little disk-shaped nano-assassins could’ve easily done the job, but my master felt that was too pitiful. She doesn’t believe you should die in the hands of a nobody, and even offered to speak to you herself.”

Woolf’s eyes slowly shined a bit, but even with the stranger inside his house in the middle of the night, he didn’t call for help nor show signs of panic. It was difficult to tell whether he was truly at ease or if he’d really lost all cognitive abilities.

The man by his bed cleared his throat and spoke up again, but this time, it was the sound of a gentle woman’s voice: “Grandpa Woolf, I’m Jingshu.”

The corner of Woolf’s eyes twitched slightly.

This uninvited guest was a fifth-generation opium carrier, which would make him almost at the top of the food chain in the Freedom Corps hierarchy. It was a considerable honor for him to carry out an assassination job that a robot could easily do, showing that the mastermind gave him a certain level of respect.

But even the big fish in the pond was still a biochip human, meaning that any part of their body could easily be controlled by their master at any time. Lin Jingshu was currently using this body to speak to Woolf.

“My father used to hang a photo inside his study; it was a group shot of my grandfather, you, and Doctor Hardin. The photo later disappeared, and I thought perhaps you were the one that took it. But a photo is still a dead object. How could it compare to a living person beside you?” Lin Jingshu’s gentle voice coming out of the tall man made the scene even more eerie than usual. “So over these last few months, I used the Night Empress to return these people back to your side; do you like my present?”

Woolf’s gaze moved slightly as it turned toward the corner of his bed and outside the window while the disks surrounding him scanned his brain waves at the moment.

The world in Woolf’s eyes right now was an overlap of reality and illusion. He saw Lin Ge’er leaning by the corner of the bed and sharing half of his blanket. The young man’s personal device was left on with an open book still floating by his knee as he quietly fell asleep. Outside the window, Hardin was sitting by the flower garden with his knees together, head looking up at the clear night sky---they were all young, including himself.

They were at the City of Angels at the time. What kind of peaceful life could the revolutionaries possibly have? They had to stay alert at all times against their enemy’s AIs that could appear at any moment. They slept with their guns and swords, wore capes stained by blood and fire, hoping to build a future for this world. Woolf couldn’t remember how many times they were almost completely annihilated, how many times he saw countless seniors before him die as he ran for his life; he couldn’t remember how many times he feared that he would die on the battlefield like them…..

But thinking back now, he was surprised to find that the happiest days of his life were during that age of unrest and uncertainty.

The friends at that time were real friends, the emotions were genuine and earnest; he could still see the sun rise with his own two eyes, his heart still lingered with hope for the future before him.

“It looks like you enjoyed it, I’m relieved.” Lin Jingshu said in a gleeful tone, “Farewell, may you have a good night’s sleep; rest assured that the future will be in my hands.”

She fell completely silent after that line. This fifth-generation chip carrier once again regained control of his own body and put gloves on his hands. He stabbed a thin needle into Woolf’s neck: “You won’t feel any pain, is there anything else you’d like to say?”

Woolf certainly didn’t feel any pain; the new type of hallucinogen Night Empress numbed his skin enough to the point where he could ignore the stinging pain of the needle. He was like an old addict that had given up on rehab and stayed still, waiting for the guillotine to drop. His eyes relaxed as they curled up soundlessly and he started whistling a simple tune---

The tune was too old, it probably belonged to a rural tribe back in the old Sidereal Era; nobody recognized where it came from.

The night breeze gently sent the aroma of the Night Empress into the bedroom, submerging Woolf inside.

…...The whistling stopped.

Chief Commander Hubert Woolf died quietly on a night when the Night Empress bloomed.

He died of betrayal and conspiracy.

There was no will from him, as if foreshadowing that even if his flesh had perished, he still hadn’t stepped off the stage---

When Lin Jingheng’s starship passed the customs check by the supply station, he was putting ice in his drink. At the same moment, the starship suddenly shook violently as a wave of particle cannons crashed into its shield. Zhanlu’s robotic arm caught the glass that slid off the table. The ice dropped to the floor; Lin Jingheng felt his heart jump a little: “What happened?”

“They’re enacting martial law.” Lee and Lu Bixing walked down toward the bar.

Lee continued: “We received a sudden notice that they won’t let any more starships in behind us, and the ones that already passed through are being asked to immediately land on the supply station. Get ready, everyone, we’re connecting to the tracks soon.”

“At least we didn’t get blocked outside,” Bayer said. “The supply stations in the First Galaxy are pretty decent, we can stay a few days if we must…”

As if.

Before Bayer could finish, the starship that was about to connect to the tracks suddenly accelerated and charged forward with a speed that was clearly above the limit of an unarmed starship. The gravity system inside the ship temporarily shut down as Lu Bixing grabbed onto the wheelchair that was about to fly out.

Lin Jingheng grabbed onto Zhanlu’s robotic hand and almost forgot he was supposed to be a ‘weak and terminally ill patient’: “Give me the pilot’s permission.”

The pilot was a veteran soldier from the First Squadron and immediately handed the piloting permissions to him. The transfer was completed within a blink of an eye. To everyone’s surprise, Lin Jingheng didn’t immediately resort to his bad habit of piloting a mech like a rollercoaster and smoothly adjusted the starship onto the supply station’s receiving tracks, swiftly dodging another wave of particle beams.

“Who’s out there opening fire on unarmed starships?”

“Collateral damage,” Lin Jingheng said, “There’s a mech fleet outside the station, from the ID it looks like…”

“The Central Militia from the Third Galaxy,” Lee followed up. The First Galaxy had already collected data within this short time as he reported, “The central command of the Third Galaxy’s Central Militia was sent off personally by the Marshal himself. They gathered up illegally and left their post towards the First Galaxy; it seems like that wave of particle beams was just a threatening display.”

“Such impudence.” Lin Jingheng frowned as he signaled towards the surrounding starships to follow him and land carefully onto the station’s tracks.

The entire atmosphere around the border supply station was only one spark away from war; a row of military-grade mechs was on standby along with another group of soldiers reorganizing beside them. All of the service robots in the starship receiving deck were switched to security robots; all of the terminals into the station were closed off except for the escalators that seemed as if they led up to the heavens.

Lin Jingheng shot a cold glance at Lee: “You made me sit in a wheelchair.”

The poor captain didn’t dare to argue that it was the Marshal’s own bad lottery luck that gave him this role and could only lower his head in slight defeat.

Lin Jingheng waved his hand in frustration: “Zhanlu, contact the supply station’s telecommunication center, let them…”

Before he could finish, he felt his feet leave the ground; under Bayer and Lee’s absolutely astonished expressions, Lu Bixing picked him up directly from the wheelchair in a princess carry.

Lin Jingheng almost choked on air.

“We came all the way to the First Galaxy to ‘treat your illness,’ not to blow Wolto up.” Lu Bixing snickered mischievously by his ears, “Mister ‘patient,’ there’s a checkpoint in front of us, can you control your expression and lower the hand that’s ready to strangle me?”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

“Relax, close your eyes, lean on my shoulders.” Lu Bixing clearly didn’t let this opportunity go to waste. “Hey, pull your hand back, I can see your veins popping. How could a terminally ill patient who’s been stuck in bed for years have your kind of attitude---didn’t Doctor Hardin say you were a professional liar? Where’s your professionalism, hm?”

Bayer nudged Lee with his elbow and whispered: “Hey bro, do you think I’ll get an order to assassinate the Prime Minister later?”

Lee completely ignored the comment and felt the future of the First Squadron clouding up ahead of him as he followed behind, maintaining a courteous distance with a face as stern and blank as Zhanlu’s.

The guards on the supply station quickly scanned the IDs on their personal devices, their gaze stopped briefly on Lin Jingheng. A part of Lin Jingheng’s fringe that was down covered a good half of his face, exposing only his pale chin and lips as he leaned in Lu Bixing’s arms like a corpse.

The First Galaxy had always placed emphasis on their humanitarian acts and commented courteously with sympathy: “From the Fourth Galaxy? That certainly is a long trip, has the patient been doing well on the journey?”

“He was diagnosed by a specialist in the Fourth Galaxy, we didn’t have a choice, so they advised us to try our luck in Wolto---here’s the letter.” Lee gave him a complicated smile that was genuinely from the bottom of his heart, making the whole act seem more believable and earning him extra sympathy from the soldiers.

“Normally we would arrange for priority passage and provide special terminals inside the galaxy to send you to Wolto as soon as possible,” a soldier said with a slightly troubled tone. “But we just received an order that all public terminals to Wolto must be closed off temporarily.”

Lee and Bayer exchanged a quick glance.

At that moment, the musical that was playing on the multimedia screen floating above the center of the station stopped as it was interrupted by urgent news, capturing the attention of everyone on the station.

“.....Breaking news from Wolto. Early this morning, Woltorian standard time 1:15A.M., Chief Woolf’s mansion in the mountain ranges suddenly experienced a blackout. All three backup energy supplies have also simultaneously malfunctioned, the security system dead; it is suspected to be destroyed by outside forces, currently…” the host paused for ten whole seconds before they raised their voice in shock, “What!? Are you sure!?”

The majority of the central continent on Wolto was still in the middle of the night. Sirens, voices, and sounds of robots flying and running around created lively background noise.

Lu Bixing’s grip tightened.

“......Ladies and gentlemen, we have just received official confirmation from the Military Council that Chief Commander Woolf was assassinated in his own residence this morning…”

Lin Jingheng felt a buzzing sound ring inside his ears.

When the three pirate organizations invaded the Union, Chief Woolf had stood up from his half-retired seat and single-handedly turned the tide. After twenty years, he managed to reclaim Wolto; in the hearts of the people, he was almost like a god that protected the Union.

How could a god die?

Immediately after, the news of General Duke’s assassination that had been suppressed by the central government for days was finally released at the same time. All of the Central Militias that had gathered at the border of the First Galaxy demanding an explanation for Duke’s death were stunned.

Wang Ailun summoned an emergency press conference in the middle of the night after countless restless nights of the same thing. Fatigue and exhaustion engulfed his face as he stood before the camera, words almost escaping him as he opened his mouth.

News spread like an explosion; the press conference was already filled with crowds of people while the security scans were completely silent in contrast. Nobody noticed that beneath these same confused and anxious faces, over 50% of the people had already been injected with opium biochips and were simultaneously listening to the next orders from their higher-ups.

## Ch 158 - The True Face of The Capital Planet

Since the old Sidereal Era, the First Galaxy had been the economic and political center of the world. It flourished above the history of mankind and fortunately survived countless wars with peaceful coups throughout time. The most violent storm within recent years was the explosion caused by the Glory Troops pirates of a few military fortresses and the memorials behind the Union’s Parliament building.

In contrast, the internal warfare within the Eighth Galaxy had barely settled within the last few years as the galaxy itself continuously rebuilt atop ruins of war. Even the Prime Minister’s own house was a standard-print building with a small garden that didn’t even require gardening robots to maintain;the owner of the house himself could easily do the handywork. The Galaxy’s core Military Command Headquarters in Milky Way City was built on top of the old AUS homebase; it would be too generous to call it shabby. It was virtually a large-scale refugee camp.

“Refugee Camp Leader”--the rural bumpkin Mister Lu Bixing expanded his worldview on this little public supply station on the border of the galaxy he was stuck on, along with the other travellers on the station. Because they had a ‘terminally ill’ patient among them, out of good conscience the supply station still arranged the best room and emergency medical equipment for them, despite not being able to let them go.

The ‘severely ill patient’ was listening quietly to the news about Woolf’s assassination right now while the ‘caretaker’ by his side claimed the patient’s bed and took apart the entire emergency medical equipment with the help of super AI Zhanlu.

“Back when the Union government fled to the City of Angels, Thomas and I had joined in the planning and setup of the temporary security system for Chief Woolf’s mansion on the fortress.” Poisson was currently on standby in the Heart of the Rose, speaking to Lin Jingheng through a long-distance call. “The system in the temporary mansion was already extremely high-level, almost like a miniature military fortress. The real system in the Chief’s mansion on Wolto could only be even more powerful than that. I feel like this spokesperson’s words about ‘security system got destroyed from the outside, the culprit snuck in from the blind side of the mountain ranges’ could only fool the non-professionals--I’d like to see him try actually destroying one.”

Lee asked: “Marshal, could Woolf possibly fake his death?”

Lin Jingheng tucked his hands behind his back: “What’s his reason for faking his death?”

“If you think about it, the Union has suppressed the news of Duke’s death for over ten days already. Woolf was assassinated in the middle of the night, but they called for a press conference immediately the next morning. If these two pieces of news were made public at the same time, the tension between the Union and Central Militias would only escalate. Duke’s death would suddenly become a secondary issue, and the pirates once again would be pushed to the position of a common enemy.”

Lin Jingheng returned the question with a cold expression on his face: “What’s going to happen once they ease the tension? Woolf’s too old; where would the trust for the Union government go if he pulls another fake death scenario out of his sleeves? He’s not like me; my reputation back then was undisputed but vile, nobody believed I could get any more heinous, no matter what I did. Woolf’s position in the Union is too sublime. It’s easy to climb up the throne of gods but difficult to step down; he can’t afford to do anything that would taint his reputation like pull this sort of lowly trick. But if he’s gone, the conflict between the Union and Central Militias would certainly be gone, and the power the central government has over the militias would also vanish. Now that Woolf’s dead, who else in the government could possibly hold the leash of those Central Militias that had lived most of their lives on the battlefield?”

“Perhaps it’s not simply a matter of easing the tension,” Lee’s reaction was quick and immediately followed his boss’s train of thought. “Maybe Duke’s assassination was an order by Woolf: he could lure in the Central Militias with Duke’s death then fake his own death to further complicate the situation. Then, while all the Generals across the galaxies had their guards down, he would come out from the shadows to capture his prey and control them with arms, forcefully stripping away the military autonomy from each galaxy.”

“The plan makes sense, but I still kind of disagree,” Lu Bixing chimed in while his attention was still locked on taking apart the emergency medical capsule. “Same reasoning; if Duke was killed by Woolf, why would he use the AUS’s name and not the Freedom Corps? Besides, it wouldn’t be smart to snipe the Central Militias right now; the pirates are still around, their enemies are still around. Even if Woolf had the power to kill all of the Generals of the Central Militias, it would only stir up more chaos among the station troops and wouldn’t unite them under the central government. Wouldn’t that also give the pirates an opportunity to strike? The fundamental characteristic of a good politician is the ability to pinpoint all main conflicts of interest in any situation, then know how to clean up this mess; Woolf can’t possibly be this dumb.”

“Poisson said earlier that the security system in the Chief’s mansion was as strict as a military fortress, it’s very unlikely for someone to break in from the outside. That’s actually how the Silver Fortress was back then...the security and defense system that was impossible to take down broke down internally, so now hacked security systems can’t possibly be shut down from the inside. Woolf invited the demon inside years ago, now he became the demon that was invited--don’t you all think this kind of assassination is reflecting something?” Lin Jingheng pulled out a cigarette from somewhere. “From all these years I’ve known him, Woolf doesn’t have this kind of self-deprecating sense of humor.”

Lee, Bayer, and Lu Bixing all commented simultaneously: “Don’t light it.”

Bayer pointed gingerly at the red cross mark by the door: “This is a hospital-grade room, boss; they’re very strict with air quality control.”

“You picked to be a ‘patient that feels pain even when breathing,’ Marshal. You can’t deny it even if you hate it, you were the one that pulled the card. Be a little more sincere with your illness here, don’t wing it like that.” Life in the refugee camp was harsh and boring; Lu Bixing spoke righteously as if he was planning on joking about this for the rest of his life to entertain himself, “Besides, that’s from my pocket, give it back to me. How could you be touching me like this so openly out in daylight?”

Lin Jingheng: “.....”

Fuck.

Lee could feel the heavy air filling with killing intent and quickly soothed the upset king with some good words: “The Marshal is right---then the spy inside the Chief’s mansion, the rumors of Woolf being controlled, the AUS that was dragged in, and the two assassinations that gathered up the Central Militias...do we have a full picture of the situation now?”

Bayer caught on and followed up: “The Freedom Corps hooked up with someone close to Chief Woolf!”

Lin Jingheng suddenly turned around: “Engineer 001, can we still depend on your shabby temporary technological support?”

Lu Bixing’s personal device popped up multiple personnel IDs the moment Lin Jingheng’s line finished. There were Union troops soldiers inside the supply station; everything from the communication lines and internet to transportation vehicles were all divided between public and military-use, with only this expensive emergency capsule being shared.

To protect personal privacy, the capsule would automatically clean up all its previous patient information. However, anything that was once saved would always leave a trace; Lu Bixing followed these traces and uncovered all this lost data. Fingerprints, iris identification, genes, ID numbers, and all the other important information were available at his fingertips; a small tweak could be easily made into a believable fake ID.

“I haven’t done these kinds of shady things undercover in a while, I’m getting a little rusty,” Lu Bixing said. “Here, everyone take your new IDs and records, let’s all rest up in our own rooms. The supply station will enter nighttime in three hours, we’ll take our leave at midnight.”

With the Prime Minister’s permission, Lee and Bayer who couldn’t stand in the same space any longer ran out as if teleported through a mini energy field under their feet. Poisson also hung up the line without another word. Lu Bixing pulled up all that junk he’d taken apart earlier and shoved it all under the bed, then gave a pat on the pillow: “The patient needs some rest, let me take care of you.”

Lin Jingheng sneered and tossed Lu Bixing onto the bed, then pinned down the young man’s arm behind his back onto the soft pillow: “How do you plan on taking care of me, hm?”

Lu Bixing sighed: “You know, you never catch anything when other people are properly confessing to you, but a random line out of my mouth could be twisted into adult content in your mind. When I get time one day I’m going to anonymously write a book called ‘how it feels to date a stoic loser.’”

Lin Jingheng asked in confusion: “What word out of your mouth is considered a proper confession?”

“I said I’ll take care of you.” Lu Bixing turned his body over and pressed a finger on Lin Jingheng’s lips as if he wanted to squeeze out some redness onto it. He stared with those artificial green pupils as sweet words rolled smoothly off of his tongue, “That means I want to wake you up everyday with kisses, put your clothes on for you, carry you around for walks, feed you all the good food, surround you day and night, and do all these mundane things for you.”

Lin Jingheng: “......You can’t even make your own bed, don’t you feel shameless saying all these things?”

Lu Bixing: “......”

Lin Jingheng laughed and reached his hand over to ruffle out the young man’s styled hair.

Yet Lu Bixing felt as if he saw a hint of melancholy in that smile: “Are you worried about your sister?”

Lin Jingheng fell silent for about two seconds, then finally got Lu Bixing out of his grip as he laid down beside the young man: “No, I’ll face anyone that gets in my way.”

Lu Bixing turned his head towards him: “Hey, didn’t we agree that we’d ‘slip over the listening device and Doctor Hardin’ between the two of us?”

Lin Jingheng’s silence extended as he felt his body being consumed by the soft bed, clinging to his limbs and stopping him from getting back up; he could feel that even his energy was being dragged down. It was still daytime on the space station; Lin Jingheng lifted his arm up in a pensive manner over his eyes to block out the light.

“The first message that the Eighth Galaxy received that day...the one that was later denied by the border patrols,” Lin Jingheng said lightly in a soft tone, “He said ‘Chief Woolf fell under their control.’”

Lu Bixing gave a patient and small verbal response.

“I’m not sure,” Lin Jingheng continued in a small voice, “but this line made me think of Lorde.”

“Your former Vice Admiral?”

“When I was still in school, Lorde’s mother was the director of the strategic command department and one of my teachers; she later was promoted to be the principal of the Black Orchid Academy. His father was the director of the pharmaceutical department of the White Tower, so he lived between the Committee and Military Council,” Lin Jingheng continued lightly. “His background was prestigious, but he was quite disciplined as a person; he was never showy in the Silver Fortress, and would only mention his father was a doctor and mother was a teacher when asked. He maintained a good relationship with all his colleagues regardless of rank...he thought I didn’t know, but before he reported to me, his mother had already contacted me in private. She told me in a sort of roundabout way that this son of hers was gentle and mellow, maybe a little too soft-hearted sometimes and hoped that enlisted life in the Silver Fortress could train him well to become a Civil Service Officer in the future when he returned to the Military Council’s Secretary Office.”

Even if he never stepped on a battlefield and spent his years in the Silver Fortress sending and receiving mail, he could still earn some merits and recognition as Lin Jingheng’s Vice Admiral for his future career.

“I’m sure any parent like that would wish for their children to live the most stable and best life, which can be said for commoners as well. Why are there always people who want to force their ideals onto the world?” Lin Jingheng’s voice was low, like a whisper that could disappear at any moment, “......I was too focused on the battle with those people back then that I arrogantly thought putting her in the hands of the Committee was for her own good. I’m the one that pushed her to this point.”

Lu Bixing placed a hand on his waist and listened quietly on the side; he didn’t interrupt nor did he offer any consoling words like ‘this isn’t your fault.’

Because a silly question like ‘who’s fault is it’ was not important. Whether it was family or lovers, the conflicts between individuals were always equally shared by the closest people around them regardless of who was in the wrong, like a burden of pain and anguish.

If possible, Lin Jingheng wouldn’t even hesitate to redo everything again. He would return to their childhood and jump down from the railways in midair to hold that little girl’s hand, even if it meant breaking his legs. They wouldn’t need anyone else and could live together by each other’s side; when she grew up, he could even call up all the little bastards that would try to take his precious sister’s hand for a beating.

Then perhaps he would lose Lu Xin, lose the most carefree time of his life in his teens; but perhaps Lu Xin wouldn’t have died and the person beside him wouldn’t have been exiled to the Eighth Galaxy. The young man wouldn’t have suffered so much pain and carried such heavy burdens. Perhaps that Lu Bixing would grow up to be like a Lorde, a gentle and kind little boy that got set up to be his underling by Lu Xin pulling strings in the Council on the day of his graduation. Maybe Lin Jingheng would get upset but still arrange for the young man’s future career as he complained outwardly...

Lu Bixing’s hand rested on Lin Jingheng’s body, the warmth in his palm seeping through the thin layers of clothing into the other man’s cold flesh. As if that palm had opened up a small, worry-free corner inside his heart, the commander allowed himself a moment to let his mind run freely with the rare taste of weakness and regret.

A few hours later, he put his armor back on and walked toward another inevitable fate of harsh winds and storms.

The First and Tenth Squadron’s cooperation was flawless; the group utilized their fake identities as guards inside the supply station and easily obtained a complete map of the station.

Lu Bixing passed through the identity check and snuck into the database containing the schedule of patrols, quickly scanned the names on there, and smiled: “Jingheng, switch up your identity a bit, the person you chose is on shift tonight.”

Lin Jingheng was used to these kinds of jobs and had already prepared seven to eight different false IDs; without any complaint, he immediately changed his identity through his personal device.

“Sneak into the patrol team first,” Lu Bixing said. “I haven’t dissected a First Galaxy military-grade mech yet.”

Wang Ailun had been putting on a whole one-man show the entire day while the group was still sneaking around a border supply station; his hand trembled and eyelids drooped as he cried. He sent off his subordinates, walked quickly into the restroom, and splashed a handful of cold water on his face. He stared into the mirror for about two seconds before he finally laughed like a maniac.

A woman’s voice rang out from his personal device: “A heavy burden is off your shoulders now, Secretary General, shall we move on to the next step?”

Wang Ailun ground his teeth: “Let’s go.”

“Then it’s time for you to play the pitiful character,” Lin Jingshu said. “The more pitiful the better. You need to let those Generals in the Central Militias believe that you’ve completely lost your position in the central government now that Woolf is dead, that you’ve become a punching bag for everyone else. Didn’t you say they all looked down on you anyway? They’ll believe it.”

Three days later, under heavy grief, the central government of the Union announced that they would risk everything to investigate the truth and let the culprit pay for their crimes. Immediately after, all the generals of the Central Militias waiting by the border of the First Galaxy received a notification that the Union would be hosting a public funeral for Chief Woolf.

The funeral was scheduled to be held in two weeks; the hesitant generals didn’t give a clear response at first.

Yet soon after, the central government began to shake up from the inside. It started off with the government using the excuse of ‘investigating Chief Woolf’s cause of death’ to temporarily suspend Wang Ailun and everyone the late Chief had close connections to from their positions. In addition, all incomplete orders the Military Council had on their backlogs were also temporarily on hold.

Sniffing out some conspiracies behind everything, the Wolto Daily sneakily posted an article discussing militarism throughout history with a vague conclusion that said: “The war is over and everything is ready to be rebuilt, but in contrast to this, isn’t the government’s budget for the military by the Union at this time a little too high to justify? Will the military continue to control the Parliament for a long time into the future?”

It was as if all the demons in the shadows were released at once immediately following Woolf’s death. With Wang Ailun in the lead, the representatives of the military were suddenly stripped of their rights to speak in the Parliament, obscuring the power imbalance and struggle of the central government in the eyes of these Central Militias from outside the First Galaxy.

Day six after Chief Woolf’s death, the ‘anxious’ Wang Ailun finally snuck onto an illegal private mech to meet up with the generals of the Central Militias waiting in the border of the First Galaxy, as if he were desperate to look for a new ally.

At the same time, a small mech tossed away its navigation map and swiftly made its way out of the planet’s gravitational zone, avoiding the customs in the First Galaxy and sailing towards Wolto.

“The capital planet.” Lu Bixing peeked from the mental network and let out a sigh of relief, “I’m finally able to see your true face.”

Meanwhile, the target of all hatred from the Union, Prophet Harris of the AUS---also known as Hope, sailed quietly on an unarmed starship towards the City of Angels.

On Neverland, Lin Jingshu leaned on a swing and flipped through the ancient tale of Peter Pan on her personal device; she was at the part where the pirate was threatening little Wendy to become his mother and scared away a little fairy with her cold laughter.

## Ch 159 - …. Goodbye, Steak.

May 25th, Woltorian Time, was the Union’s Peace Holiday. It began as a celebratory day for the construction of the Memorial site, but it later became a memorial holiday for the lives lost during war. There were five consecutive days off and was the most important holiday in the first half of the Woltorian year. Families and friends would often gather during this time to celebrate with feasts and parties.

The year started with the Glory Troop pirates officially surrendering and retreating from the First Galaxy. The star of the Union, planet Wolto, brushed off the ashes of war and returned back to its glorious position as the center of the universe.

Lin Jingheng and the Silver Ten’s appearance in the Heart of the Rose was a flash of light like a shooting star gliding past the backdrop of the night sky, becoming the cornerstone of countless legends and myths of modern times.

The first half of this year was filled with miracles and hope; the distressed and desolated human society awoke from a long nightmare as they grasped the faint light of hope and vitality.

Yet the hopeful times didn’t last long. The latter half of the year took a completely different turn. The Freedom Corps pirates once again appeared on-stage and knocked down all other pirate groups to become the new cancerous terrorist group of the world.

The new orders and laws from the central government grew more and more nonsensical as the ambitious Central Militias began nourishing their own agendas. Now, the two almost unbelievable assassinations dropped like torpedoes onto the tranquil surface of the First Galaxy and triggered another violent wave of events.

The perilous undercurrent of unrest made this Eve’s night feel extra cold.

“Can we stabilize the signals a bit more?” Lu Bixing asked. “Otherwise we could miss out on important information.”

“Prime Minister, we’re floating in space right now, don’t be so insistent on HD quality.” A soldier from the Tenth Squadron had been working as his subordinate during this trip and managed to get used to hanging around this superior. After this long trip across the galaxies, the soldier had grown familiar enough to chat casually, “The surveillance on the transfer portals around Wolto are very strict. We’re already stealing long-distance signals here and need to be careful of not exposing our coordinates. We should be thankful that we even have signals.”

Even the smallest mech wasn’t like a fly; if they didn’t go through passages legally, they couldn’t even close in and sail into the atmosphere. Of course, there was no way they could simply land on Wolto like that, so they could only watch from a distance.

“Careful,” Lin Jingheng said, “Woolf’s public funeral is scheduled to be held tomorrow. Captain Liu from the Heart of the Rose just sent me a message earlier and said that the generals of the Central Militias are already on their way; they should arrive by today.”

The now-jobless Wang Ailun successfully earned some pity and connected with the generals of the Central Militias like a powerless stray dog. He managed to even earn some trust over the last few days with his acting and smooth tongue, convincing the generals that gathered in the First Galaxy to attend this public funeral service.

Lee frowned: “And they believe Wang Ailun so easily? They should be more cautious than that.”

“It may not be that they believe his words. According to Liu, they only decided to come to the funeral service yesterday and left last night. Can’t you see? If they want to make it to Wolto within a day, they’ll have to completely ignore the galactic safety laws of the First Galaxy and sail through transfer portals with their mechs. With the Central Militias openly disobeying the laws like this, they aren’t here to share afternoon tea with the Union; it’s impossible for them to not bring in some arms.” Lin Jingheng took off his wristband and pulled a new box of condensed nutrients from the small fridge, splitting it among everyone for breakfast. “The Central Militias and Wang Ailun must’ve come to an agreement: one wants to lure them into the First Galaxy, the other fearlessly brings in their guns in hopes of looting some profits for themselves from the complicated political games within the central government.”

Lu Bixing quickly said: “I saw some steak in the storage of this mech, someone must’ve snuck it in and left it here the last time they got on.”

Lin Jingheng lifted an eyebrow at him: “Mid-sized grade mechs and below ban any open fire and all forms of sprays. Mister Engineer, did you swallow the safety manual whole into your stomach?”

The all-knowing AI Zhanlu chimed in: “What a nostalgic scene. Sir, the last time you said something like this, you turned on the humidifier inside a separate training room for Headmaster Lu.”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

*Since when had this little shit’s talking ban expire?*

Lu Bixing shook his head dramatically: “See that? Before he won me over, he’d call my name seductively and even turn on the humidifier in the mech for me like a yes-man that pampered me all the time. And now? He’s so well fed and satisfied that nothing’s refreshing anymore, so he’s giving me this kind of attitude instead. Look at your boss folks, this is the kind of man he is!”

A group of soldiers from the Tenth Squadron joined in the laughter and complaints.

Lu Bixing: “Isn’t it the Peace Holiday? Why do we still have to eat solid snot?”

Lin Jingheng wanted to laugh out of annoyance: “What does the Woltorian New Year have anything to do with you?”

Lu Bixing responded matter-of-factly: “It has something to do with you.”

Lee and Bayer, who were also snickering on the side, felt their hearts jump at this line and quickly exchanged a glance with each other. The Captains of the Silver Ten might have all looked like a bunch of unreliable hooligans on the outside, but they were still veteran soldiers who had once fought on the political stages of the Union’s central government. So of course they knew the hidden meaning of betrayal behind the two calendar systems.

Lin Jingheng wasn’t the only one in the Eighth Galaxy who still hadn’t grown used to the new calendar system and secretly checked the Woltorian calendar, but nobody expected the Prime Minister to suddenly bring this up in an open forum.

Lee didn’t know what Lu Bixing meant and attempted to steer the conversation away by pretending not to understand, beating around the bush with a straight face: “The Silver Fortress only observes the Peace Holiday; people may be celebrating at home but they also expect security to be stricter during this time. Holidays and special occasions are always the busiest time for us, right, Marshal?”

Lu Bixing gave him an understanding smile: “Hey, chill out, I don’t mean anything bad.”

Bayer looked around meekly: “We...to be honest, sometimes we do refer to the Woltorian calendar in private because we’d get days mixed up---do you mind, Prime Minister?”

“Of course I mind!” Lu Bixing answered honestly.

Bayer’s heart skipped a beat.

Lu Bixing’s expression softened up: “But eight billion refugees are using it, and even Jingheng uses it behind my back to the point where I would have nightmares every day. In those nightmares, you all told me this place is awful and no longer want to stay, so you all turned your calendars back and left me--but what could I do? The only thing I could do is find more official holidays on our calendar, ask the culture department to host more memorial events, and encourage big markets and industries to do sales and campaigns. We have to slowly overturn the Woltorian calendar from traditions and our culture. Don’t tell me you all can’t even remember your own paydays?”

Bayer also relaxed subconsciously along with him.

The corner of Lu Bixing’s eyes curled up more: “The Independent calendar is hard to get used to and difficult to remember, right? You all feel like you can’t even calculate your own ages, right?”

Bayer lowered his head and rubbed his nose timidly as the Prime Minister’s words hit the jackpot, unable to openly admit that the Prime Minister was right. Lu Bixing then held out his hands: “But what can you all do? The Eighth Galaxy is so great and your Prime Minister is so handsome, you all have no choice but to get used to it, am I right?”

Both Lee and Bayer laughed out loud.

Lin Jingheng looked at him and strangely remembered the Starry Sea Academy on planet Beijing-β, that con artist of a headmaster that kept pouring out chicken soup to his poor students, then suddenly felt something grow inside his heart--

He had left the noble utopian land of Wolto for the cold Silver Fortress, then fell into the Heart of the Rose and wandered into the faraway Eighth Galaxy; now, he returned to where it all began on a completely different path.

Lu Bixing had walked from beneath the starry dome of the ceremonial hall into the Milky Way City Command Post, and now seemed to have returned under the same starry sky…but the sky above him was now much broader and eternal; it also didn’t cost six billion to build.

Both man and history trudged down the path of time across countless turbulences on this journey, numerous deaths and rebirths…only to return back to where everything all began.

Lu Bixing: “Marshal, the little engineer here thinks that building a temporary insulation layer to contain the fire is a trivial matter, so can we please grill some steak?”

A vague hint of a smile lifted from the corner of Lin Jingheng’s lips: “No.”

Lu Bixing, Lee, and Bayer all asked at the same time: “Why not?”

“Because there’s a limited stock of steak,” Lin Jingheng flipped through the galactic map nonchalantly, “If we finish everything today, we won’t have anything left on the 29th.”

Lee and Bayer looked at each other in confusion, not knowing what was special about the 29th; in contrast, Lu Bixing’s eyes widened.

“49 years old already.” Lin Jingheng’s gaze glossed softly over Lu Bixing’s clean hairdo down to his cheeks, as if giving his face a gentle caress.

At that moment, the alarm inside the mech rang out.

Zhanlu: “High-energy alert.”

The numbers on the mech’s energy detection steadily rose; Lee stood up abruptly as he watched the numbers climb: “It’s probably a heavy mech fleet, be careful not to sail into their firing range.”

Moments later, a fleet made up of hundreds of superdimensional heavy mechs with Central Militias’ symbols imprinted on their mech bodies sailed proudly toward Wolto.

Bayer muttered under his breath: “Are they marching for the funeral or planning on revolting, how did they even get in here?”

“That’s not surprising. Woolf just died, Wang Ailun got suspended from his post, the central government is anxious; I’m sure the Union troops don’t know whose order to take either,” Lee said. “It’s very likely that Wang Ailun used Woolf’s name to let the fleet in…and here I was thinking that with Woolf’s death, perhaps the Central Militias and Union could once again stand together and fight their common enemy.”

“Of course they will work together,” Lin Jingheng said, “but the last time they stood on the same side was because Woolf held the steering wheel behind them. This time, nobody could single-handedly take control of the situation, so the Central Militias might want to take this opportunity to fight for more autonomy and say in the Parliament.”

The defense system on Wolto had already activated during their short exchange. The anti-missile and defense shield on the capital planet were already turned up to maximum power while the Woltorian Guarding Fleets quickly gathered up into space and stood before the Central Militias.

Lin Jingheng: “Can we try hacking into their communication channel?”

“Let me try.” The already retired engineer Lu Bixing mumbled in response, “The protection the Central Militia uses is quite unique, I’ve never seen it before…”

Lin Jingheng frowned slightly: “I should’ve brought some technicians from the Third Squadron along.”

Just as the words left his mouth, the communication channel inside the small mech made a small sound. After a few seconds of noise, the channel quietly hacked into the Central Militia’s communication port. Lu Bixing swallowed his earlier words and performed beyond even his own expectations. The young man stood back up like a belligerent peacock as he gave a proud and slightly provocative look at Lin Jingheng. With his feathers extended proudly, he placed his hands in his pockets nonchalantly: “Done.”

The Woltorian Guard’s warning came from the noise behind the channel: “......Illegally armed fleet, this is a warning that if you come any closer, we will take it as an act of aggression and use force…”

The Central Militias’ side responded: “We are here in response to our invitation to the Chief’s funeral.”

The Woltorian Guards: “Without special permissions, armed star crafts are not allowed inside the First Galaxy, your presence here is already a threat to the galaxy’s security!”

“Who said we didn’t have special permissions?” The Central Militia’s side openly lied through their teeth, “Secretary Wang himself personally handed us a signed copy of the permission from the late Chief Commander. The old Chief’s corpse is still out in the daylight and you folks in the Union are already restless in your seats? Now make way for us!”

Immediately after, the front row heavy mechs on the Central Militias’ side fired a round of particle beams. The Woltorian Guards didn’t expect them to be so aggressive and skip right into the action without even any chance of negotiations. With the leading mechs in front, the entire shield of the Woltorian Guard mech melted under the extreme heat of the particle cannons, immediately breaking up the formation of the fleet. Another wave of particle cannons then crashed into Wolto’s planetary magnetic field, sending a momentary disruption through the entire planet’s network.

Bayer blew out a whistle.

“Commander,” he didn’t catch himself calling the wrong title. “I’ve tried imagining in my head numerous times how things would look if back then, the Committee forced you to go back to Wolto for investigation. I wondered why we all had to disarm, why we couldn’t have just fought our way back from the Silver Fortress; even those useless nobilities in the fortress were willing to follow in your footsteps. Taking over the entire First Galaxy would only be a matter of days for us.”

Everyone--the Committee, Woolf, Lin Jingshu...every single one of them were distinguished and respected individuals, every single one of them were unafraid of using any and all means to achieve their goals. Only Lin Jingheng was the real fool deep down who clung to the baseline of morality, refusing to fall down any further.

He was like someone playing on the same board as everyone else but with his own rules; while everyone else was freely manipulating the rules of the game and extending their influences, he willingly tied himself up and restrained his every move.

Lu Bixing let out a sigh: “My Commander, you surely managed to stay until the end by using up all your luck. No wonder why you’re doomed to randomly choose a half-dead character to roleplay here.”

“Stop the nonsense.” Lin Jingheng stopped their chatter. “Give me the mental network, we’re sneaking in during this mess.”

The Central Militia gave a difficult multiple-choice question to the confused Union troops stationed around the capitol planet. They weren’t sure whether to listen to Wang Ailun and the former Military Council or follow the orders of the Woltorian government as they pondered this dilemma.

The Woltorian Guards were almost completely helpless at this time; they were completely wrecked the moment fire was opened, but neither side dared to use missiles---with a scale this big and a distance this close, once a galactic-grade missile opened fire, Wolto would become a defenseless eggshell under this destructive storm.

The Central Militia fleet’s cooperation during the exchange was flawless; now that first shot had been fired, the others no longer hesitated and fired three consecutive rounds of particle cannons from different angles directly into the center of the Woltorian Guard fleet. The entire Woltorian Guard fleet backed up while a lone mech that couldn’t flee in time got its shield completely melted. In addition, the armory of the mech received a direct hit and self-destructed in mid-air, breaking open a path within their own fleet for the enemy to pass through.

The shards of metal and pieces of broken mech flew off uncontrollably until the gravity of the planet and high-energy particles tugged on them like a massive game of tug-of-war, creating a deadly wave within space.

Despite being slightly unstable, Zhanlu’s mental network was still wide enough to expand silently throughout this mess. A lone Woltorian Guard mech running off aimlessly like a fly suddenly lost its main pilot; the backup pilot frantically attempted to regain control of the mental network only to be knocked unconscious against the wall by the sudden loss of gravity control within the mech.

The mech silently transferred over to a new pilot and dodged a wave of particle beams on the battlefield, sneaking out from the frontlines like a phantom in space.

The Central Militia once again fired a round of cannons; the disrupted magnetic field of the planet destroyed the communication system of the Woltorian Guard fleet. Nobody noticed two small mechs clashing on the edge of the battlefield the moment they passed by each other.

The soldiers of the Silver Ten reacted promptly and transferred onto the new mech within five seconds of the two mechs connecting.

“Marshal, be careful!”

Another Woltorian Guard mech that had been shot down careened full speed in their direction. Lin Jingheng, who was last to get off the mech, felt his arm be dragged by Lu Bixing into the new mech in an instant. Through the mental network, he cut off the connected docks between the two mechs and allowed himself into Lu Bixing’s embrace as he maneuvered both mechs into different directions.

Lu Bixing pulled the man toward himself, the mask on the two men’s space suit colliding under his force. Almost at the same instant, the door of the small mech rolled down while the air pressure inside promptly adjusted. The lone mech left behind crashed violently under Lin Jingheng’s remote control into the burning remnants of another mech and exploded into pieces.

Bayer stared mournfully: “...goodbye, steak.”

Lee had already taken care of the former pilots inside this mech with a shot of strong anesthetics for each person. After tying up all these hostages into medical capsules like shoving corpses into coffins, the small mech that had been stuck in the crossfire earlier swam out smoothly like a fish in Lin Jingheng’s hands. The small mech made its way through the chaotic confrontation of the two fleets without even a scratch on its outer body.

The next moment, the Woltorian Guard’s communication channel managed to recover some signals: “We can’t hold out, retreat!”

While piloting the mech within the Woltorian Guard fleet, Lin Jingheng slowly changed into the guard uniform: “This is the new director of the guarding fleet? I’ve never seen him; where did he come from? He must be a workshop director from the military factories.”

The Central Militias that had been holding in their frustrations for decades finally sent the Woltorian Guards running off like cowards with their cannons, giving a heavy slap to the face of the Union government. Without wasting any extra energy, they completely surrounded Wolto---over half of the heavy mechs took over all intergalactic terminals around Wolto while the other half blatantly landed on the Woltorian Guard fleet’s launching station.

Once the doors of the heavy mech opened, a formidable parade of armed mobiles drove out, straight into the central city of the Union government.

The roads were empty; the army of the Woltorian Guards had set up an electric fence around the outside of the central government area, but in a situation where the terminals on land were already being taken over, the fences were completely useless. The parade of armed mobiles drove slowly through them as the fences backed off obediently like fearsome beasts without a backbone.

The trigger to the outbreak of war in the First Galaxy was at the tip of a finger---

Meanwhile, the Second Galaxy’s capital planet command post had just entered a new day. The soldiers were switching ships as the officials in the command post who had stayed up all night waiting for news were all preparing to order another cup of coffee. Suddenly, the power source of the command post shut down; a patrolling soldier’s eyes widened as he saw a security robot waiting obediently by the side shoot a laser right into the soldier’s head before they could react.

The Third Galaxy, countless armed mobiles suddenly drove into the main city in the middle of the night as powerful biochip humans rushed out of those mobiles like a flood of predators.

The Fourth Galaxy, the Fifth Galaxy….

Those biochip humans hidden within the crowd ripped open their harmless facades and flashed their sharp fangs at the clueless humans; all intergalactic transfer portals fell into the control of these people as they blocked off all long-distance signals.

Yet all the generals of the Central Militias still thought they had succeeded in taking over Wolto.

## Ch 160 - Aren’t You Going to Show Me Your Home?

The piercing sound of the siren rang out, triggering the security robots around the site. This was the entrance to Chief Woolf’s mansion after the assassination.

“No luck,” Lu Bixing, who had been attempting to break through the security system, sighed in defeat. “Lesson learned; Milky Way City’s security is garbage. Let’s retreat.”

Lin Jingheng reached out an arm and pressed him down, “Don’t move.”

A red light shone from Bayer’s personal device; immediately after, an invisible energy field surrounded everyone in the party: “This is an infrared scanner, Prime Minister, look---”

Another 3D screen appeared as Bayer spoke up and scanned their surroundings. After a few seconds, the massive web of infrared lines that covered the entire mountain ranges became visible to the party. It was impossible to tell how many equipment signals were activated from the number of individual rays that wove together perfectly like a blanket; if the party were to retreat immediately after the sirens, perhaps they would’ve already been recorded on camera.

Lu Bixing: “Thermal radiation blocker?”

“Yep,” Bayer said, “We can fool the infrareds, but not the AI security system. The thermal radiation blocker will cause an unnatural spread of heat and energy flow within a given area. The AI security systems nowadays are also quite sensitive to detect the use of thermal radiation blockers, but thankfully the weather on Wolto is nice today with no wind. Otherwise, we might not have been able to escape even if we hid under tree trunks without moving a centimeter.”

Lee whispered back: “Now what?”

“This wave will last about a minute to make sure nobody is passing through the area,” Bayer answered back, confident from experience. “Then all the digital eyes and cameras around the area will be activated without a deadend. We can’t keep going forward; we’ll have to retreat.”

Lee pestered on desperately: “What if the intruder isn’t a person or a machine? Like a robot or armed mobile.”

Bayer: “Then you’ll be detected within a one-kilometer radius from the Chief’s mansion.”

“What about a biochip?” Lu Bixing asked. “Opium biochips can disrupt human brainwaves and communication with AIs.”

“No,” Bayer responded sternly, “The Union didn’t only identify the Freedom Corps as a terrorist group yesterday; remember how Yelvich from the Hummingbird Fortress also died in his own territory? Since then, mainstream security systems have completely abandoned the ‘singular core AI’ model of security systems and transformed into AIs that specifically target opium biochips.”

Lin Jingheng: “In other words, someone would need to destroy the internal security system in order to infiltrate the Chief’s mansion.”

Bayer responded solemnly: “At least that’s what I would do, but maybe the enemy is much more brilliant than I am... alright, we can retreat now.”

Thankfully, the party was filled with experienced people. After a short order from the professional assassin Bayer, everyone left the Chief’s mansion as quickly as they could and fled to the backside of the mountain.

Bayer didn’t know about Lu Bixing’s unique body and shot an impressed glance at the Prime Minister who seemed to still be at ease after running. As he caught his breath in the mountain ranges, he said: “Wow, Prime Minister, can’t judge a book by its cover, huh?”

Lu Bixing responded shamelessly: “I have better soil in my house; even the snake our Marshal raises is braver and stronger than other snakes.”

Bayer: “......”

He recalled little Popcorn’s image at home and was certain it was quite the opposite.

Lin Jingheng gave him a small slap on his head: “Enough nonsense--call up Liu and prepare for battle.”

Lu Bixing’s expression grew grim as he responded in a lower tone: “Are you worried about the funeral tomorrow? The entire area around Wolto’s airspace is being surrounded by the elites of the Central Militias--would anything happen up in space?”

“I’m not worried about space, it’s the ground that I’m concerned about. Even though opium chips can greatly increase mental strength, after exchanging fire with them for this long, I don’t think they have a significant advantage against veteran galactic soldiers who have been on the battlefield all their lives. Their expansion is too rapid and the quality of their members is all over the place. Nor do they have any genius commander on their side; they’re still leaps away from their ideal clear hierarchy of their insect society.” Lin Jingheng said, “But the one advantage the chip carriers have is that they are significantly more powerful in one-on-one battles. An average person--even if it’s someone who had been through proper military training--might not even have a chance against them individually. These generals from the Central Militias were all lured to Wolto by Wang Ailun, which shows that they’re still clearly stuck in the galactic mentality and think as long as they control the air, they’re invincible.”

Lee’s expression also grew grim: “Is Wang Ailun mad? Why did he invite the demon inside?”

“Because he doesn’t even know this is a demon,” Lin Jingheng said. “To him, this is simply a game of espionage. Why? Because it’s like the Trojan Horse. Without the horse inside the city, the enemies could not possibly break the iron defense from the outside. Bayer mentioned earlier that Wolto’s general security system had been adjusted to combat opium chips, so they would need a powerful spy in order to complete Woolf’s assassination.”

Bayer scratched his head in confusion: “Wait, what’s going on?”

“I’m sure Wang Ailun also thought the same.” Lin Jingheng glanced at him. “Imagine if you were Wang Ailun and I’m a pirate; we plotted secretly to take down the Central Militias together. One of the key points of this plan involves assassinating Woolf, so I need you to open the doors for us. What would you think?”

Bayer was taken aback for a moment, then immediately caught up with the logic: “I would think that you needed me to open the doors in order to let the water flow in, and that I’m the key player in this plot.”

“But in reality, you’re not. Once a person steps into a conspiracy, the delusion that they can control the whole game grows as they sink deeper into it.” Lin Jingheng responded airly, “So you plan on pulling some tricks from your sleeves, you arrange for a surprise attack against the generals of the Central Militias by a few chip carriers that snuck past security. Then, you’ll order the Union troops that are stationed around Wolto to surround the Central Militias and let the Freedom Corps show up from the back for a full-on ambush. Are you following this logic?”

Bayer: “Yes.”

Lin Jingheng: “All of this works out because through a series of ‘collaborative work’ with your partner, you firmly believe in one thing: that without you, the chip carriers would not be able to get past security.”

Bayer trembled slightly in response.

Everything had been a chain of traps since Woolf’s assassination.

Yet Lin Jingheng didn’t continue and fell silent like the calm surface of the ocean. That was his blood-related sister; in certain ways, Lin Jingshu was the most familiar and similar person in the world to himself. As long as the concept of ‘if this was me’ existed, it wasn’t hard for him to follow her train of thought.

But it was too late.

He had been too prideful and aloof when he was younger; he had looked down on everything and everyone around him. Whether it was toward Lu Bixing or Lin Jingshu, he arrogantly assigned them the role of needing his protection, egotistically loving them as if they didn’t have their own souls.

He had never met Laura Gordon and always felt like aside from his bad temper, he was much more similar to the cold and subdued Lin Wei.

But that arrogance Laura had from standing at the top of the White Tower also engraved itself into his bones with Laura’s genes.

Lu Bixing felt a tingling sense and chased after him: “Don’t worry, we still have Doctor Hardin’s secret weapon. We can use that against them tomorrow.”

Lin Jingheng gave a complex nod in response.

“Since we’ve managed to come to Wolto, I have one more place I want to visit.” Lu Bixing pulled Lin Jingheng’s hand over and grabbed it tightly in his palm with no signs of letting it go. “Why don’t you show me your home?”

Lin Jingheng responded in a low voice: “I don’t have a home on Wolto...okay, I guess I do have a piece of land here that was taken from the old Lin residence. I...my sister and I each took half of the land after we came of age, but neither of us returned back after it was revamped. It’s also quite far; my father liked peaceful and quiet places and disliked social places, so he refused to live in the central area. You can’t even see it from the mountains this high, and if we go now, I’m afraid it would be troublesome to come back tomorrow if anything urgent were to happen.”

Lu Bixing stared into his eyes: “That’s not the place I’m talking about.”

Lin Jingheng was startled.

The Parliament building could be seen from the mountains--it was already being surrounded by layers and layers of Central Militia troops and arms.

Inside the central area surrounding the building, only one residence had its lights out.

The former mansion of Commander Lu Xin.

The Second Galaxy.

Inside the principal’s office of the Second Polytechnic University, there was a row of photos hung on the walls. Among them, the most iconic photo was that of two young twins: one of them had his hat lopsided as he leaned on his brother’s shoulder, the other brother was moving away with a face full of irritation and annoyance until he heard the voice from behind the camera. He had turned his head in shock and left a bewildered expression to be captured by the camera. They were the Young twins from the Silver Third Squadron.

It was already past office hours as the principal looked up from his pile of work and rubbed his sore eyes. He walked towards that framed photo and spoke to the little robot that was cleaning the windows: “The frames are picking up some dust, come clean this too.”

The Second Polytechnic University used to be on a space station within the Second Galaxy, but the station was destroyed many years ago by space pirates. The principal back then was still only a professor who had taken a group of students and evacuated the school onto a galactic transfer station; he was then a disheveled teacher left with only despair and fear, who then coincidentally found the Silver Third Squadron at the station.

The Principal could still recall the scene back then: that careless and absent-minded looking Captain Thomas Young who gathered them all up and announced sternly: “The Silver Third Squadron will follow our commander’s order to readjust our itinerary and swear to protect everyone here to the best of our abilities. Until our last mech is shot down, until our last soldier falls, we will never give up on our territory and people.”

“All Hail the Pledge of Freedom.”

And thus the Silver Third Squadron fulfilled their promise.

Later, Commander Lin destroyed over half of the fleet of the main AUS forces at the border of the Seventh and Eighth Galaxies at a hefty cost. The Union and Central Militias of the galaxies united on the battlefield and finally overturned the pirates. After the war ended, the Second Polytechnic University was rebuilt on the capital planet of the galaxy; now, the first class of new students were preparing for the first final of their school year as the halls of the dorms were lit up in last-minute study crunching.

Almost two decades later, the surviving people had already grown used to leaving Eden behind and returning to reality.

As a species, mankind was almost pitifully fragile and cowardly, yet revered for their vitality and tenacity.

After Eden broke down, most civilian deaths didn’t come from the war, but suicide. The people that managed to survive were like lost lambs woken up from a long dream of a peaceful world and thrown into a blizzard storm; but instead of waiting for their deaths, they struggled to survive and deal with the new environment. In this turbulent world of unrest and warfare, they slowly grew accustomed to the days without mood-adjustment medication. Some of them even willingly stood up in the aftermath of the war, trudged through the debris and bent down with hope to rebuild their homes with their own two hands.

“Hail the Pledge of Freedom.” The Principal lifted his lips in a smile as he touched the frame of the Third Squadron’s photo. “I wish you all well, my friends.”

A message was received on his personal device before the smile on his face faded away.

Because there weren’t a lot of students in the school, the principal didn’t have a personal secretary to take care of all his daily work, so he picked up the call on his own: “This is the Principal’s Office of the Second Polytechnic University, how can I help you?”

“Sir, it’s me, please don’t say anything and listen to me!”

The principal was shocked and only realized now that the person on the other line was an old friend of his. This was a soldier he’d met on the transfer station back in the day while they took refuge. He had escorted everyone back to the capital planet of the Second Galaxy at the request of the Third Squadron after the pirates retreated. He was now the Colonel of the Second Galaxy Capital Planet’s Defense Forces.

“Colonel?”

“They’re back!” The Colonel’s voice was stiff and hoarse, as if he was speaking through his teeth, “I don’t know where they came from, it’s almost as if they appeared overnight...fuck, there’s too many people, we can’t hold out!”

This whole line was completely broken and made no sense, but the principal, who had survived under the gunfire of the pirates understood immediately: “Pirates? Biochip humans?”

A horrible scream and sounds of gunfire came from the other line, followed immediately by heavy footsteps. The principal felt goosebumps crawling up his arms: “How could it be? Colonel, are you alright?”

“Go, take your students off the ground now, or it’ll be too late! Quick…”

A muffled sound of something getting hit came from the other side as the line suddenly cut off; the principal could feel cold sweat covering his back.

Didn’t know where they came from, as if they all showed up overnight…

Had these biochip humans always been hiding among everyone as normal people this whole time?

The principal turned and ran out of his office. The moment he left, he saw a few staff from the school walk toward him; he froze on the spot, instincts telling him something was off.

Soon after, footsteps could be heard from behind him. Inside the staff building, a group of teachers walked out fearfully with their hands up as their colleagues holding laser guns followed them from behind.

The staff that walked toward the principal gave him a smile: “Mister Principal, here’s an emergency notice from the government.”

Footage popped up from the staff’s personal device.

A man sat expressionlessly inside the Second Galaxy’s Government building facing the camera as he announced coldly: “Good evening, this is the Second Galaxy’s Central Government. I am a ‘second generation’ and temporary representative of the government. I am now announcing to all citizens of the galaxy--from now on, all communications will be temporarily cut off. All public streets and roads will be cleared under martial law, all units and organizations will temporarily suspend all activity. Please remain calm and stay at home; all working individuals in school, hotels, or other public locations, please stay quietly at your current location and listen to the orders of your higher ups as we dispatch the census team. If any citizen refuses to obey the orders and insists on rebelling, we will not be able to guarantee the safety of your lives.”

## Ch 161 - The Memorial Hall

“Principal!” a young professor cried out.

The old principal who was already near retirement age took a step forward with an unfathomable expression, pulling all the younger staff members behind him. His eyes scanned across the faces of the people holding the guns--he recognized every single one of them.

These biochip humans with guns in their hands right now were the same colleagues who had greeted each other this morning while carrying their breakfast trays in the cafeteria. They were no different from normal people; some were even wittier than others or had a friendlier personality. The principal’s gaze fell on the leader of the group: that was his right-hand staff who had just been promoted to be the director of the general medical department. This was also the man the principal planned on raising to be the next head of the university.

“Director Zhao,” the principal looked at this right-hand man he had been foolishly raising with a sunken heart, saying, “do you not remember how the Second Polytechnic University survived under the cannons of the pirates? Why must you betray us?”

“Sir,” the biochip human Director Zhao responded calmly, the gun still in his hands, “this is not betrayal, it’s a choice. I chose to side with the trailblazers in the history of human evolution; we followed our great master to discover a bright future for mankind, then turned back to invite our fellows to join us in the new world.”

The principal didn’t realize there was such a shameless way of speaking and could almost feel his brain boil in rage. He quickly forced himself to calm down as he calculated how to deal with the situation in his mind, then questioned back: “So does this ‘new world’ you all speak of involve injecting biochips into everyone? In my opinion, you don’t even need to waste so much effort in injecting these chips; all you guys have to do is to destroy humanity and nourish new humans from your own wombs.”

“Principal,” Director Zhao responded earnestly, “perhaps you have a great misunderstanding about us. We’re paving the roads to a new frontier with ragged clothes, our ultimate goal is to let all of humanity live in greater harmony and happiness. You may not accept some of our ideals, but that’s okay; remember, it was also difficult for our ancestors on earth to accept the fact that the earth was not the center of the universe.”

The principal was a man who had lived through war; he knew from his first glance that the Second Galaxy’s government might have already fallen into their hands, so calling the police would be useless. It was unclear what the military was like right now but judging from the phone call earlier from the Colonel, it was likely that the enemies had already seeped into the active fleets as well.

These biochip humans would undoubtedly lock down the long-distance transfer portals around the Second Galaxy and block off all signals to stop anyone from calling out to other galaxies for help...and behind him was a whole school of unarmed students, a majority of them still minors.

What should he do?

A young teacher suddenly forgot he was still being held at gunpoint after listening to the words from these Freedom Corps pirates and shouted back: “Nonsense!”

This young man of culture glared, face red, somehow able to stop himself from spewing out obscenity. Even while enraged, his words were logical and sensible: “You evil cults, barbarians, and criminals that destroyed the Pledge of Freedom, you guys will never succeed! Even if we die, we won’t die with a dog collar on our necks like you all, who are still living on your knees like cattle to your superiors!”

Director Zhao responded cordially: “The biochip can evolve your body and increase your cognitive abilities; aside from that, it won’t affect your everyday life or your individual choices. Unlike Eden, it won’t intercept your thoughts and emotions. In essence, it does not conflict with the spirit of the Pledge of Freedom. The chip is more like an ID, to call it a ‘dog collar’ seems to be a bit of a stretch.”

“Tsk!” That enraged teacher said, “You all divide people up into clear hierarchies where lower level chips have to obey higher levels without question, and you’re saying this is an ID? This is an ideological prison!”

Director Zhao smiled faintly and lowered his laser gun: “So are you saying ‘freedom’ is absolute freedom? My goodness, you’re also someone that went through higher education, you can’t possibly say such uncultured words--are you saying that you don’t need to listen to the orders of your higher ups if you don’t have a chip? Even if you don’t have a superior, are you not going to obey the laws of society just because you can?”

He didn’t wait for the young professor to rebut and continued: “In the new world, the orders that are given to you by higher levels are like the law. These orders are not made out of his or her own selfish desires, but a command passed down through various levels of chips to build the model of a unified society. We can control the actions of people through chips rather than relying on punishment to perpetuate change; there will no longer be anyone who knowingly breaks the law nor half-hearted compliance from people, and thus no more corrupt law enforcement personnel.”

“That’s plain absurdity!”

“It is not, your thinking is simply too limited, my friend. In your narrow mindset, ‘law’ is a cold and soulless written list that can only be allowed into existence through the consequences of punishment and criminal acts!”

Director Zhao turned back to the principal: “We all know that the reason why mankind can defeat other species and stand on top of the food pyramid is because of our unique social collaboration; this collaboration is rooted in the concept and ideology of fiction that exists in our cognitive thinking. It can be said that the fundamental concept of an ideology is the core component that allows human society to function as a system.”

“From things as great as a person’s faith in life, a governing system, or a religious organization, down to the culture of a given territory or even the admiration of a celebrity...these are all forms of ideologies born from freedom. They’re like flourishing wild grass out in an open field, full of vitality but also uncontrolled; this is because every single one of our brains is an independent entity, so we can always develop new ideas in our minds. Different ideas may clash or become unable to coexist, which will create endless internal conflicts that will gradually grow into hatred. Then, the world will once again be shaken up and collapse--this is the flaw that we’re all born with, the obstacle blocking our way into a higher form of civilization,” Director Zhao said. “We are all defective species.”

Everyone was stunned by his long speech on the spot; it was difficult to tell whether they were convinced by these words or simply thought the man had gone mad. Yet all eyes were wide as they stared at the proud Director Zhao like countless spotlights on a stage.

“The ultimate goal of the biochip is to put a sheath on freedom’s double-edged sword. This will then create a much better and accepting society; if we can stop the internal conflicts among people, technological advancement will accelerate much faster than it does today. I implore you to step out of your stubborn frame of thought and think about it carefully.” Director Zhao persuaded the principal in a calm tone, “Also, for the safety of the school, I suggest you show up as soon as possible to maintain order among the students and calm everyone down as we step into the new world.”

A sudden inspiration flashed within the principal’s mind as he pretended to be hesitant: “You’re starting to convince me a little, but...I can’t guarantee that I will be able to calm the anxious students. If you’re willing to rephrase what you said earlier and repeat it to the children in a clearer and simpler way, perhaps that would be helpful.”

Director Zhao took it as the principal yielding and agreed solemnly: “Of course, we will fully support your work here.”

Even as a biochip human, Director Zhao was still an educator at his core and was dedicated to maintaining a professional work ethic. An inspiring speech came out the moment he opened his mouth, and soon after greeting their superiors, a group of chip carriers set up a temporary stage on campus. The speech didn’t simply address the Second Polytechnic University, it also expanded to the entirety of the Second Galaxy like the spreading of a gospel; Director Zhao proudly explained the ideology and future of the Freedom Corps’ biochip empire in the new world.

Meanwhile, the principal received rather respectful treatment after bowing down at the right time. All of the guns that had been pointed at him earlier were taken away and his office was also returned to him. He was allowed to connect his personal device to the internet to listen to the speech live, and was even served a proper dinner by the chip carriers.

He listened to the propaganda of the pirates while quietly checking the network of the Second Galaxy--as expected, the long-distance signal port was closed. The Second Galaxy was now fully cut off from the outside world, however…

The principal picked up his teacup and swiftly inputted a long line of secret code behind the cup.

Back when the SIlver Ten was fighting a guerilla warfare with the pirates in the seven galaxies, they all left a little secret in each galaxy: a very simple long-distance communication signal port. It worked like a transfer portal without the hardware that allowed actual people or objects to pass through, but long-distance signals easily could.

This had been built by the Silver Third Squadron many years ago in order to leave an open route, in case these pirate cockroaches fully controlled a certain area and blocked off all the transfer portals, to allow people to at least send out an SOS signal before it was too late.

It had been so many years--would this relic left behind from wartime still work?

The principal didn’t know.

Even if it still worked, the Silver Ten had already passed through the wormhole and settled in the Eighth Galaxy; how long would it even take for them to receive the SOS?

The principal also didn’t know.

But he had no choice; he could only gamble on this.

He finished coding the SOS message and took a deep breath. Once the signal was sent out, chip carriers who were sensitive to human-machine communications would find out in real time. However, they didn’t know where the secret port was connected onto the network of the galaxy nor the signal destination. With the speed of electromagnetic travel, it would be impossible to block off the signal with human power.

“Mister Principal,” Director Zhao’s speech ended while the principal’s mind was elsewhere, “please also share a few words.”

The principal lifted his head to see a lonesome and cold podium before him. He couldn’t see his audience but could feel that all of his anxious students were all looking up and waiting to hear his voice.

“Yes, it’s me, my fellow students.” The principal opened his mouth and sounded out each word with caution, “I was given the opportunity to listen to Director Zhao’s reasoning and ideals before you all. Many things he mentioned were very unique and new perspectives that I’ve never thought of before, so I asked him to share his thoughts with everyone--”

The biochip humans saw that he was surprisingly cooperative and all let out a sigh of relief.

“Our environments and experiences are what differentiate us from each other. The ancients once said ‘hell is other people’; without similar experiences, it would be difficult to understand someone else. The clash of values is inevitable; people are often fighting in real life, debating on the internet, brawling in political activities, and even waging bloody warfare on a large scale. Yet even if these conflicts are endless, it will only allow the side with the loudest voice to win temporarily, not give an answer on what is just or wrong.”

Director Zhao smiled and chimed in on the side: “Even the modern worldview we know of today is continuously being challenged, proven wrong, and rebuilt; justice is non-permanent.”

“But what I want to say is, having different viewpoints or even sets of morals is natural and not at all something to be feared,” the principal continued sternly. His personal device at this time showed that he had successfully connected to the secret port. “What’s truly frightening is the fact that you will be fighting for a certain ‘belief’ for your whole life; yet even on your deathbed, you still don’t know why you believe in this faith nor why you even have such a moral perspective.”

Director Zhao’s expression dropped.

The SOS message had been sent out successfully.

The next moment, the Freedom Corps received an alert while a group of biochip humans knocked down the door and burst into the principal’s office. The framed photo of the twins from the Silver Third Squadron fell to the floor in the commotion.

The principal sat unmoved behind his desk: “The third level of freedom is the right to choose; you can choose and make a decision on what you like or dislike, and even how you want to live. The second level of freedom is the freedom of thought; thoughts can pass through spacetime, which can be either good or evil depending on your mood. The first level of freedom is the ability to stay with yourself and be true to yourself at all times; even if your thoughts were to be imprisoned temporarily, you will be able to wake up one day and reflect on everything through a conversation with yourself…”

This last line didn’t even get the chance to be broadcasted. Once the biochip humans discovered they had been fooled, they immediately cut off his connection and took him into custody.

The old principal didn’t have the power to rebel and was dragged out of his office like a dead cat. He stared into the eyes of his kidnappers: “....You have the right to know why you are angry, anxious, filled with hatred, jealous; you have…”

His voice was cut off abruptly as a hand grabbed his throat while an opium biochip was injected to his nape without hesitation.

His body immediately reacted to the chip; the old principal’s whole body spasmed as he curled up into a ball, sounds of distress coming from his throat. Five minutes later, he dropped to the ground and stopped moving.

A chip carrier walked up and turned him over, noticing that the principal’s pupils were already dilating, indicating that the biochip that had been injected had lost its effect.

“He’s dead?”

When a chip was injected into the body, it would quickly take over the body like a parasite finding a host and controlling the individual. There was a 1% chance the host might die during this process; those that died were all people that had steely rejected the chip before, where their strong consciousness took over their bodies and used the body’s last strength to destroy the biochip.

“What now? We can’t pull the message back now,” a biochip human whispered to Director Zhao, “it was passed through an unknown terminal. It would be difficult to locate the receiving end now that he’s dead.”

“Don’t worry,” Director Zhao said, “I’ve already reported to the higher ups earlier. According to their analysis, it’s very likely that the receiving end is the Silver Ten; they’re in the Eighth Galaxy right now and are blocked off by the wormhole, they won’t receive this message in a hundred years.”

The message ‘that won’t be received in a hundred years’ travelled at near light-speed into the opened signal port and then was sent off to a further direction. It passed through heavy blockage within the galaxy and arrived in the First Galaxy about ten hours later...into Poisson Young’s personal device.

Wolto.

The central area of the capital planet was simply rebuilt on the ruins of the old site, so it was not much different from the time when Lin Jingheng had left, many years ago. Lu Bixing followed their lead and passed by the Union’s Parliament building.

“After Commander Lu Xin passed, this area was locked down and returned to the Military Council,” Lee explained. “Normally they would completely take down the old buildings and split up the land to others as they remodel it into something else, but Woolf didn’t let them touch the place. It used to simply be under indefinite lockdown, but after Commander Lu Xin’s reputation was reestablished and the Union reclaimed Wolto, I assumed they also remodeled this place--look.”

A few security robots patrolled the front door to the mansion. There was a stone statue of Lu Xin by the front gates that was decorated with plenty of fresh flowers by his foot, indicating all the respects paid during his memorial service.

Lee: “That place next to the statue might be the reception, it looks like they turned this place into a memorial hall open to the public.”

Thankfully, the memorial hall’s security wasn’t particularly heavy. Engineer 001 didn’t drop the ball this time and successfully stopped the few security robots as he let Zhanlu control the surveillance inside the yard.

“Alright, we can go…Jingheng?”

Lin Jingheng pulled himself back to reality and responded lightly as he quickly pulled back his unfocused gaze.

He hadn’t returned to this place for as long as how old Lu Bixing was right now.

The technology of rebuilding and recreating something in modern times was so advanced that they could recreate virtually anything with the proper references. Lu Xin’s home was identical to the place in Lin Jingheng’s memories; even those tree branches that looked as if they had been chewed on by a dog were the same. He took a step inside and almost had a delusion---he felt as if he was still in the Black Orchid Academy, busy as a bee and reluctantly returning for a few days during vacation.

Lu Bixing held his arm and asked: “What happened?”

“Auntie...your mom, she would always pick me up over here,” Lin Jingheng said quietly, “no matter how late it was.”

Lu Bixing was taken aback for a moment and then followed his gaze: there was a small room inside the large entrance hallway that was decorated with a simple desk and chair. There was a small tea set resting on the desk, the floor covered with a soft carpet flooring.

“There was one time I came home very late; I’d already told her before that she didn’t need to wait for me. But when I came back, I saw that room was still lit; she had a jacket over her pajamas as she worked on her new class curriculum while she waited for me to return.”

Bayer thoughtfully asked Zhanlu to turn on the light inside that little room.

Ever since Lu Bixing learned that his ‘mother’ had been a fabricated tale by Monoeyed Hawk, his impression of a ‘mother’ had been a blurry image in his mind. Even after seeing a photo of Madam Lu on Zhanlu’s database, he still found it difficult to connect himself to her.

But Lin Jingheng was like a key to his unknown past; within a short instant through those mundane words, that strange woman living inside the photo finally materialized as a real person in Lu Bixing’s heart.

## Ch 162 - Was She A Kind Person?

"Was she a kind person?"

"....She was very kind, but had a strong personality. She kept all her words in the classroom, so she seemed rather quiet most of the time; she was also an expert in galactic communication theory." Lin Jingheng asked, "Have you read her publications before?"

Lu Bixing shook his head--that uncultured Monoeyed Hawk, perhaps he had never actually understood what Madame Lu's research was and would always stutter saying "that space equipment and stuff," successfully pushing Lu Bixing down the massive pit of mech engineering.

He never studied this field and purposely blocked off all information relating to Madame Lu after learning of her identity to reject her. He was completely clueless as he stared into the empty room inside the hallway and suddenly felt a bit guilty.

"You should take a look sometime, especially at the rebuttals against all her colleagues' irrational essays; she had a knack for using sharp words. " Lin Jingheng spoke softly, "She rarely showed anger, but often gave off the vibe of 'your slow mental development is pitiful so I refuse to waste my time with you' to others."

Lu Bixing: "......"

He couldn't imagine anyone speaking to Lin Jingheng in that manner, so that 'poorly developed child' must be...

Speaking of which, he recalled Doctor Laura Gordon also referring to Commander Lu Xin as a 'gorilla' in some of her messages, and in Zhanlu's 'spicy rabbit hot pot' song as well.

The attentive Lee nudged Bayer standing beside him; the rest of the soldiers from the Silver Ten also caught on to the mood and backed off cooperatively, leaving space for the two men before them.

"This is the reception room, there are guest rooms in the back." Lin Jingheng took Lu Bixing through the hallway continuing, "Those plants and tree branches in the yard were all personally designed by Lu Xin; he didn't like keeping his yard all uniformed and standardized.”

 The Union had rebuilt the site with exceeding attention to detail, to the point that the recreation of the mansion looked as if it was a model frozen in time. It easily awoke the spirits of the past from their slumber as they glanced over at Lin Jingheng with a familiar yet strange light in their eyes.

*What kind of person was Lu Xin?*

Lu Bixing had been the one curious about the place Lin Jingheng grew up in and had suggested this visit, but when they finally arrived on site, he was consumed by an unexplainable anxiety that made him unable to ask this question stuck in his throat.

The inside of the mansion was usually temporarily closed off to the public with a glass door blocking the entrances, allowing only a peek inside the rooms. Luckily, Zhanlu's temporary control of the surveillance in the mansion allowed him to open the glass door for them.

The setup was the same as it had been many years ago, clean, and dustless.

Behind that tall sofa chair, it seemed as if the master of the house was still sitting on it, jolting up in his seat to look around when he heard footsteps closing in.

The turbulent stream of memories pushed open the doors to the past that had been closed off for decades, almost drowning Lin Jingheng. Time rewound to the past, creating a strange vertigo in his head.

Lu Bixing heard Lin Jingheng let out a deep breath of air. Lin Jingheng suddenly turned around, as if he wanted to leave, but finally stood still in silence with his back facing the glass door.

Lu Bixing didn't rush him and quietly stood beside the man. His gaze fell on the row of tree branches by the front of the yard; he had thought it looked like a bunch of branches that had been bitten by dogs at first and couldn't understand the aesthetics behind this fine abstract art. Until he saw from this angle and discovered that the row of dog bite branches was actually letters of the alphabet: "What....home? Lu and...."

 "Muller, the letter M," Lin Jingheng said, "her family name is Muller."

 Lu Bixing trembled slightly.

 "The Home of Lu and Muller" on the crown of the tree.

 "The Home of Commander Lin and Engineer 001" on the wooden plank.

Lu Bixing stared with mixed feelings at those uniquely styled branches on the tree, unsure how Lin Jingheng felt when he first saw that wooden plank in front of his own house.

As if he knew what the young man was thinking, Lin Jingheng responded: "I'm glad you didn't take on his unique aesthetics."

Lu Bixing could hear his heartbeat echoing inside the empty mansion in the serene night on Wolto.

The stone statue in the central plaza of Milky Way City seemed to have come to life as it gave him a quick look across hundreds of lightyears through the galaxies.

"I was taken in by him before I turned ten," Lin Jingheng said. "It was my first time at his residence, and I didn't know Lu Xin that well either. I was confused and reluctant to come in, so he dragged me all the way in while I looked down at the ground. Then I walked over here and saw that there was a little face on the floor...it's still here.”

The white marble flooring leading to the front door of the private residence was simple yet regimented. Lu Bixing's eyes followed the direction of Lin Jingheng's gaze to see that there was indeed one piece of the flooring that had a cartoonish face drawn on it; that piece of marble was also made of different material from the rest of the building, sticking out like a sore thumb in midst of the mansion.

"I was startled and looked up at him; that's when he made the face at me. " Lin Jingheng's hand skimmed over the door to the living room. "Let's go inside. "

The inside of the private residence was rather familiar to Lu Bixing.

There were multiple videos of young Lin Jingheng that had been taken inside this house; all of those scenes had been engraved in his mind, so it wasn't hard to find a sense of familiarity within the residence.

Lu Bixing's fingers gently swept across a piano in the corner of the living room, a thin layer of dust collected at the tip of his finger: "Whose is this? Did any of them like playing instruments?"

"Nobody did, it's never been played since it was bought. " Lin Jingheng said, "It was supposed to be for me. "

Lu Bixing: "......"

He almost dropped the cover of the piano on his hands.

"Between the ages of six to ten, children in the Union have to go through different stages of preliminary education. After that, they have a few years to experience different types of professions and decide between ages ten to twenty what career path they want to take. When Lu Xin first took me in, I was barely done with my preliminary education. He was very excited to plan out all kinds of futures for me, and these weren't the worst of them. There were more ridiculous plans than this. "

Lu Bixing looked at the old and heavy piano as he imagined how Lin Jingheng would be if he didn't enlist in the military and was instead playing classical music under a dome in a fancy suit. The imagination quickly got out of hand in his mind as he forced himself to focus on the situation before him, then cleared his throat: "I thought he'd send you to the Black Orchid Academy. "

"No," Lin Jingheng fell silent for a few moments, "aside from giving me a toy mech as a present, he never suggested the Black Orchid Academy as an option; I enrolled in it behind his back."

Lu Bixing lowered his gaze and looked at that piano that seemed out of place inside this household, experiencing a sudden epiphany.

The Lu Xin that had reclaimed the Eighth Galaxy, the Lu Xin that billions had followed behind, the Lu Xin that insisted on fighting with the Committee for his promises and ideals, the Lu Xin that held the forbidden fruit system and refused to have his name listed on there even until his death...

When the man took that little boy from Woolf's hands, he never planned on letting the little boy carry any of these burdens.

*Maybe Lu Xin was born a protector*, Lu Bixing thought; at the edge of the turbulent storms, he carried everything he could on his shoulders. He even built his own house in the central area of the Union and loved the Union as if it was his own home. Lu Xin wasn't like him, who was forced to lug around the burden of the world and finally found his own method of interacting with the world after countless trials and tribulations.

"That was Lu Xin's seat," Lin Jingheng's voice pulled him back to reality. Lu Bixing lifted his head to see Lin Jingheng pointing at a small sofa. "When there were guests in the house, he would sit there properly like a person. When the guests left, he would lift his leg up and rest it on the coffee table beside it as he dangled around like a manchild."

"Lu Xin would take me out with him sometimes because auntie had a lot of academic events in her schedule and would often leave on business trips. He was afraid that nobody would look after me at home...he really didn't need to do that, I wasn't a kid anymore so I could take care of myself. Besides, there were also digital butlers and Eden, so it didn't matter if I was home alone, I didn't need someone to look after me."

*How could anyone leave you here alone?* Lu Bixing thought, *even if we gathered up and force fed you all of the love and emotions in the world, everyone would be afraid that you wouldn't even open your mouth.*

Unlike Lin Jingheng who often stayed on the Silver Fortress, Lu Xin was obsessed with going home. If given the opportunity, he would run back home, even if he only had time to take a nap. The whole world was his stage but nowhere was quite like home; it was only when he returned here that he could finally rest at peace.

Lin Jingheng used to live upstairs. The staircase was exceptionally familiar to Lu Bixing--he remembered that Lu Xin gifted him a toy mech on his tenth birthday and even filmed the event. The person behind the camera had run right up the same stairs as in the footage.

Lu Bixing's footsteps stopped abruptly by the staircase and asked: "Lu...was he about the same height as me?"

Lin Jingheng didn't understand the question and lifted an eyebrow in confusion: "Hm?"

"......It's nothing. "

The perspective and view overlapped perfectly with the image in his mind, so familiar that it almost felt like Lu Bixing was the one revisiting the mansion.

The second to the last step of the staircase was a tad shorter than the other steps; Lu Bixing subconsciously took an extra step like the man that had carried the toy mech and skipped over that lowered step.

He felt as if an invisible soul passed by him the moment he jumped up the last step.

There were countless frames on the walls of the staircase; most people would decorate the area with paintings and artworks, but this place was filled with photos. Family, friends...it was like the master of the house had so much passion and love that a small room wouldn't be able to contain them.

Lu Bixing stopped suddenly and saw a familiar person near the corner of the staircase.

He saw the heterochromatic eyes of Monoeyed Hawk.

The young Monoeyed Hawk looked nothing like the old arms merchant of the future. He was a little heavier in the past, wore an ill-fitting, ragged collared shirt with buttons undone; his hair looked as if it hadn't been brushed in ages, strands of dry and frizzy hair exploding in all directions in an unsightly manner. His fist reached out and bumped with Lu Xin, his wide and silly grin exposing his white teeth toward the camera.

Yet his eyes glistened and shone.

*Why are you so good to me?* Lu Bixing thought.

"Lu Xin was like a god that descended from the heavens and lit a fire of hope for the entire Eighth Galaxy." Lin Jingheng looked over in the same direction. "The admiration and emotions Monoeyed Hawk and Minister Edward had for him were something that other people would find difficult to understand."

"Did he let them believe that the Union hadn't given up on the Eighth Galaxy?"

"In the eyes of the Eighth Galaxy, Lu Xin was the Union, and even the Pledge of Freedom itself," Lin Jingheng said, "it was the Pledge that led them out of the abyss of the Rainbow Virus and defeated the totalitarian regime of the Cayley family. Lu Xin was the first person to make them feel that they had another chance in life to live as a person. "

Lu Bixing shrugged: "The Union burned their own bridge."

"The Union had disappointed the Eighth Galaxy countless times; thirty years later, the fire that Lu Xin lit up also extinguished into ashes," Lin Jingheng responded, "the second person that relit that fire is you."

Lu Bixing turned his head abruptly in shock and locked his gaze with Lin Jingheng's eyes.

Yet that gaze seemed different than before; it almost resonated in a strange way inside this special place. That gaze turned to him along with the Lu Xin and Monoeyed Hawk inside the photo...this rebel who once tried to uproot and destroy the Pledge of Freedom.

Lu Bixing felt something choking his throat, unable to speak momentarily.

"He would be proud of you," Lin Jingheng said, "even if you don't acknowledge him...if that old Persian cat hadn’t left so early, I'm sure he wanted to introduce Lu Xin to you. If that had been the case, perhaps it would be easier for you to accept him. "

"You two think you're both so almighty that you can shoulder the burden for me even if the heavens fell, so neither of you wanted to tell me anything." Lu Bixing gave a little flick to Monoeyed Hawk's forehead in the photo and felt the corner of his eyes warming up. "Now what, your lies are all exposed."

Lin Jingheng: "......We were wrong.”

Lu Bixing lifted a finger up and interrupted him: "Too late."

The corner of Lin Jingheng's mouth twitched a little in slight panic.

Lu Bixing walked past him up the stairs. After a few steps, he suddenly turned his head and gave a playful but angry comment from the top: "What's the point of apologizing now, where's my compensation? Don't you remember what you promised me before you left for the Seventh Galaxy that year?"

Lin Jingheng was taken aback.

"You said that you'll let me order you around for as long as you didn't come back home. You'll have to listen to whatever I say without questioning," Lu Bixing said loudly, shamelessly, "it's been so long and you won't bring it up if I don't mention it. What now, Marshal, are you planning on keeping this tab forever?"

The countless Lu Xins inside the photo frames stared as if they were gathered up to ridicule or cheer on the two men's quarrel.

Lin Jingheng could feel his ears reddending as 'this shithead Lu Xin' stared at them through the photos: "You were the one that decided on your own, when did I ever agree to it?!"

Lu Bixing ignored him and swiftly made his way up to the second floor.

The long night of Wolto was about to come to an end; a small beacon of light rose from afar, greeting the tall attic in the mansion from the horizon.

That attic had a unique and almost outlandish decoration, brushed in a layer of candy colored paint. Lu Bixing peeked in out of curiosity and pushed the door open--

The attic was still empty with no furnishings, but there were plenty of small doors and wooden tunnels that were clearly the prototype of a child's playground.

"He designed this himself, I remember......" Lin Jingheng traced back his memories and followed along the walls, then found the innermost hidden door in the corner of the attic. He reached his hand out and pushed the door, revealing a tunnel inside. "There's a slide here that connects from the attic all the way down to the first floor. "

Lu Bixing's heart jumped, an answer surfacing in his mind: "This is...."

"This was made for you before you were even born."

"It's his proudest design; he even slid down this thing joyfully multiple times after he finished it. Every single person in this household had once looked forward to your birth, like looking forward to an important holiday. " Lin Jingheng asked softly, "Do you want to try it?”

## Ch 163 - A Fatal Mistake

The hardness on the surface of the slide was adjustable, covered in soft material all around the tunnel, making it safe even if the speed down the slide was too fast. The soft part that touched the person sliding down was the perfect smoothness for comfort and could also be adjusted based on voice control at any time. The fresh scent of oranges suddenly swept out of the tunnel and greeted Lu Bixing: “Zhanlu?”

“The mist inside the slide will automatically choose your favorite smell when you slide down,” Zhanlu’s voice rang out, “but it didn’t recognize you earlier and failed to load the data, so I reloaded the new data into it.”

Lu Bixing had already reached the bottom floor by the end of this short conversation. His speed suddenly dropped as a soft obstacle arose within the tunnel, like countless hands protecting him, letting him land safely. Right by the exit, a 3D projection appeared.

It was almost as if Lu Xin had sprouted up from the ground as he gave a wide grin at the young man exiting the slide: “You’re speeding a bit here, little one.”

That projection was life-sized with a visual that was almost identical to a real person; Lu Bixing’s heart jumped in shock as it suddenly appeared. He pulled his legs back a little before slowly standing up and discovered that the legendary Commander Lu Xin was indeed about the same height as him. Every little action by the projection made it seem as if they’d known each other for decades.

Lu Bixing held out his hand; the Lu Xin in the projection also held out a hand and touched the tip of Lu Bixing’s finger gently. The young man was startled as he turned his gaze back up in disbelief, almost thinking he had touched a real person.

“It’s a technology created by nano electric waves that made it seem like real touch.” Zhanlu explained, “He considered that perhaps you wouldn’t know how to control your speed down the slide as a young child and would be scared falling off the slide, so he created a virtual replica of himself. That way, you could hold your own father’s hand even when he wasn’t home.”

Lu Bixing stared into the eyes of the projection for a few moments: “He...won’t move anymore?”

Zhanlu explained: “This is a pre-recorded projection like the default start screen on a computer. It’s not an AI, Headmaster Lu; but there’s another pre-recorded action, you can try holding his hand.”

“Ah, no it’s fine, that’s a little too childish.” Lu Bixing waved his hand off awkwardly and walked out on his own.

Lu Xin’s gaze from the projection followed him as he walked off; those dark brown eyes reflected a hint of warmness that was almost too real, almost as if he really was sending off the young man with a gratified yet proud hint of loneliness.

Lu Bixing: “......”

He let out a sigh, turned his head slightly to exchange a glance with Lu Xin, then finally turned his whole body around in defeat and grabbed that virtual hand. The realistic touch brushed against his skin, almost making him feel as if he really was holding the hand of Lu Xin himself. That man before him stood proudly with broad shoulders; a few little strands of hair stuck out from the back of his head as he led the young man out the door with his large silhouette and said the last recorded line.

“Dad’s here, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

The door at the end of the slide tunnel opened up and let in the light from outside. Lu Bixing stood bewildered as the touch to his hand and the projection before him both disappeared; he subconsciously turned around while still gripping that warmness from the hand earlier……

There was nothing left.

Lin Jingheng waited by the elevator for him. It was breaking dawn outside as the light of the Woltorian sun cast brightly over his shoulders. Lin Jingheng stood a few steps away and looked quietly at Lu Bixing.

Across timespace, all feelings merged and moved a cold heart.

Lu Bixing’s smooth talk, smooth words, had all malfunctioned at that moment as he stared in awe at the man before him, unable to even make a sound.

He truly had known this man before he was born.

Yet at this time, Lee jolted over and broke the strange atmosphere between the two: “Prime Minister, Marshal!”

Lin Jingheng pulled his thoughts back and turned: “What is it?”

“A message from Poisson,” Lee explained in a hurry, “the Freedom Corps launched a massive all-out attack throughout all the galaxies; the number of hidden biochip humans among the masses is rising exponentially. They didn’t even bother with galactic troops this time and went straight to kidnapping all governments and important political organizations within the seven galaxies.”

Bayer, who had also received the message, ran over by the time Lee finished his report.

Lu Bixing and Lin Jingheng asked in unison: “What’s the source of the information?”

“It’s all from the secret communication ports the Third Squadron left throughout the Union many years ago,” Lee said. “From what we’ve gathered so far, it seems like the capital planet of the Second Galaxy has already fallen.”

Bayer didn’t catch on fast enough and asked: “Why did they choose to act in the Second Galaxy? Is there some strategic reason for it?”

“No,” Lu Bixing responded lowly, “it may be because the Second Galaxy is the closest in distance, so news from the other galaxies hasn’t had the chance to make it over yet.”

Lin Jingheng: “It takes a longer time for a signal for a secret port to transmit than through a standard long-distance port; it would take at least ten hours for the message to be received if it was sent from the Second Galaxy. There is only one scenario where someone would willingly choose to send messages through the secret port: the network and long-distance communication signals are completely blocked off within the galaxy. I’m afraid the Second Galaxy Central Militia on Wolto right now hasn’t received any news about it yet.”

Lee’s eyes widened in shock while Bayer trembled fearfully as a horrifying image all flashed across their minds--

Friends and colleagues beside them suddenly unleashed the terrible faces beneath their disguises while the biochip consumed the entire seven galaxies like an unstoppable virus. These biochip humans were all-powerful superhumans, exponentially more powerful than the average man. They could hack into human-machine ports at any given time, rendering all digital equipment useless. They would take over natural planets, space stations, and even military fortresses…every corner of the universe where humans lived. The injection process of the biochip was swift and easy; once a body fully accepted the opium’s modification, the host would willingly kneel before the Freedom Corps pirates.

Wouldn’t that turn the entire Union into a biochip empire overnight?

Who or what else could possibly stop them?

On Neverland, Lin Jingshu stood before a massive galactic map after a restless night. Aside from the First and Eighth Galaxies, all places of human habitation were being consumed by a black void at a fearsome speed.

Some of these changes were quiet and discreet while most people were still asleep.

Yet others were like a storm overnight--

“Are the funeral guests preparing to enter the service?” Lin Jingshu asked. “Contact Wang Ailun and tell him that we’re ready.”

Most funerals for important figures on Wolto were held in the morning, so guests would often begin preparing before sunrise. By the time the sky was bright, they would be ready to attend the service; for a funeral on a scale as large as Woolf’s, the preparation time was much longer than usual.

Inside the Union Parliament building that had been on lockdown for a whole night, a few small robots walked out cautiously before the sun rose to distribute the formal attire and white flowers to each guest. They originally wanted to mark down a list of guests attending the funeral, only to be shooed away by the guns from the Central Militias.

An exhausted and disheveled Wang Ailun received the signal, a flash of light crossing his spiritless eyes. He stood up nonchalantly and walked towards the generals of the Central Militias as he lowered his head to announce: “My friends, it seems like we should be heading out now.”

The General of the Second Galaxy’s Central Militia was a thin middle-aged man by the name of Zheng Di who always looked stern due to the sharpened features from his sunken cheeks. He lifted his head up to give Wang Ailun a quick, distasteful glance--a secretary was a good position for a career. It was a great opportunity to gain some experience when one was still young, and the tough tasks given to secretaries were often good foundations for future careers in both the military and politics. However, to be a personal secretary for someone for most of one’s life and spend one’s days like a caretaker seemed a little too easy and not deserving of respect in Zheng Di’s eyes.

He thought the secretary before him was an unpolished blob both inside and out; the more Wang Ailun kneeled and begged them, the more he loathed his pitifulness. He finally chose to ignore the secretary by giving an arrogant snort in response, ignoring the ragged Secretary General like air and turned his head back to announce: “Let’s send off the old Chief!”

With the single command, all the armed mobiles behind him flashed their miniature cannons and fired compressed air up into the air like bullets.

The loud shot pierced through the skies, scared off even the early birds of Wolto, and shook the entire Parliament building. Wang Ailun’s ears buzzed in discomfort as he continued to maintain a forced smile on his face, tasting a bit of blood as he ground his teeth beneath that smile: “After you, Officer Zheng.”

The moment Zheng Di raised a foot to step onto the stage, his Vice Admiral quickly made his way through the crowd and reported something into his ear in a whisper.

The expression on the face of the Second Galaxy’s Central Militia General was that of disbelief: “What did you say? Who’s contacting me?”

The Vice Admiral’s gaze scanned past Wang Ailun on the side; Zheng Di’s eyebrows scrunched up slightly as he turned to leave the Secretary General out in the cold and walked back to his own armed mobile.

“Jing...Lin…” The moment Zheng Di saw Lin Jingheng’s face through the long-distance communication screen inside the armed mobile, his jaw dropped in shock as he stuttered for a few moments. After struggling to decide whether he should call the man on the screen by his full name or show some courtesy and call him ‘Commander’ or ‘Marshal,’ he finally asked: “Aren’t you supposed to be in the Eighth Galaxy? Isn’t the Eighth Galaxy supposed to be closed off already?”

“It’s me,” Lin Jingheng skipped over the small talk, “Old Zheng, is the long-distance communication in the Second Galaxy blocked off?”

Zheng Di was startled for a moment before he turned his head abruptly.

The soldier beside him responded, confused: “It’s not...there’s still a signal; the internet time of the Second Galaxy is still accurate.”

Lin Jingheng: “It should be around noon time on the capital planet of the Second Galaxy already. Did you receive today’s daily headline notification?”

The soldier: “......”

Who would even care about their hometown’s news headlines at a time like this?

Yet Zheng Di immediately realized what was going on: “You fool, who would openly cut off all your signals and announce to you that they had blocked off your communication channels? Connect me to the Second Galaxy’s Central Command Post right now!”

The soldier ran out of the mobile.

“It’s too late,” Lin Jingheng explained quickly, “it’s very likely that the capital planet of the Second Galaxy has already been taken over by the biochip humans of the Freedom Corps. We’re not sure how many of these same biochip humans exist on Wolto, but you’ve all fallen into the enemy’s trap; retreat immediately!”

At the same time, Wang Ailun stood alone back on the stage and realized something had been off with that Vice Admiral’s expression before they left.

Soon after, Lin Jingshu received a message from Wang Ailun: “High chances we’ve been exposed already, move on with the plan.”

A handful of fifth generation chip carriers held their breaths as they waited for her orders.

Lin Jingshu lifted a hand, the fifth generations stepped out from hiding--

An eerie and heavy air spread throughout the Central Militias at the funeral. Soon after, the generals and soldiers that were ready to step inside the Parliament building all turned around without a word and returned to their armed mobiles ready to retreat.

That was when an unexpected event happened.

A row of laser guns shot into the crowd of people waiting to attend the funeral service; cries and screams of horror quickly consumed the entire hall. A few of the guests in the mix suddenly took off their clothing to reveal bodies covered in guns and explosives, firing at the Central Militias that were about to flee.

Those assassins were like the superhumans depicted in ancient sci fi films, their actions so fast they were almost impossible to see with the naked eye. Every single one of them had the ability to wipe out a whole team of professional soldiers and were completely unfazed by traditional weapons. Multiple little explosions of blood leaking out of gunshot wounds did not slow them down a single bit, making it almost seem like a horrifying real-life zombie chase.

Yet while the civilian crowd panicked all around, the Central Militias held their ground and quickly pulled up their shields in seamless cooperation. They artfully switched between offensive and defensive tactics as they escorted their superiors’ armed mobiles outside of firing range.

Wang Ailun was already hiding in his safe zone and felt a layer of cold sweat rolling down his back as he watched this exchange. He then pulled his personal device back up and called out: “I wanted to wait for them to enter the hall and lock them inside to destroy them, I didn’t expect them to notice right before they stepped foot inside. Jingshu, we can’t go on like this, your handful of biochip humans can’t hold out against a full fleet and take the head of their commanders; we’d be done if they all manage to retreat back up to space!”

Lin Jingshu consoled him half-heartedly: “Don’t worry, Uncle Ailun. The backups are on their way.”

Wang Ailun was a bit shocked: “You have backup?”

Lin Jingshu let out a light chuckle. The next moment, all the armed mobiles on site rang out in a high-energy alert; another group of close-range armed mobiles closed in and surrounded the Central Militias seemingly out of nowhere. It was difficult to judge their numbers at a glance, but these mobiles didn’t even give a second thought to the unarmed civilians on the streets and fired a round of particle cannons right into the Central Militia fleets.

The aftershock travelled past the Parliament building, which then trembled under the threat of these large weapons of mass destruction. Wang Ailun cursed under his breath as he took his own bodyguards down to the shelter space inside the building. A shade of unease flashed over his mind--he didn’t know where or how Lin Jingshu had managed to get all of these armed mobiles behind his back.

Conspirators were always like this; when their partner didn’t have a backup plan, they would think their partner was foolish and lacked adaptability.

Yet when their partner did keep a backup plan in case of emergencies, one would fall into another spiral of suspicion and wonder if their partner hadn’t truly shown their cards.

*“I really can’t keep this madwoman around,”* Wang Ailun thought to himself, *“it’s one thing to use pirates short-term, any long-term cooperation would be like teasing a monster, they’ll easily bite back at you.”*

The important politicians of the Union all gathered up inside the refuge space and didn’t even bother with their political panderings as they all pulled Wang Ailun over: “Secretary General, are these pirates?”

“I’m afraid it’s the Freedom Corps.”

“My goodness! How could there be pirates on Wolto!?”

“What are those Woltorian Guards doing?! First they let the Central Militias forcefully land on the planet, now these pirates are almost breaking into the Parliament building and they’re still completely clueless! Are we going to be forced to flee to the City of Angels again?”

“Don’t mention the Central Militias, we should be glad they’re here--how many of those pirates are there, can the Central Militias hold out?”

Wang Ailun reached his hand out to calm the restless politicians. The moment of holding absolute authority in his hands once again filled him with confidence as he said: “Ladies and gentlemen, please remain calm. Do not worry, for I already contacted all the Union Troops stationed around Wolto before daybreak, they should be arriving soon. By that time, regardless of the Central Militias or the pirates, nobody will be able to stop us; our troops are known to be one of the most powerful fleets in the universe, we’ll promise everyone’s safety.”

A message was received on his personal device the moment he finished his short speech.

Wang Ailun lifted a faint smile: “Our troops have already arrived at Wolto’s atmospheric zone.”

Regardless if it was the arrogant and crude Central Militia or the foolish Lin Jingshu, everyone was doomed to become his stepping stone--

At that moment, the security team of the Parliament building finally arrived as soldiers took teams of security robots into the refuge space Wang Ailun and his politicians were staying in. The anxious politicians finally let out a sigh of relief as they saw the security arrive.

Lin Jingshu put on her jacket on Neverland, ready to reap her fruits of victory.

She reached over to give a little fairy a pat on the head, “The surprise is here, Uncle Ailun.”

Inside the hall of the Parliament building, Wang Ailun fixed his suit and walked out of the crowd, ready to take command of the security team: “You all are too late.”

The captain of the security team gave him a strange look: “Our bad, Secretary General.”

A split second later, Wang Ailun caught something off about the captain and stopped his footsteps abruptly. He saw the captain smile eerily, pull out his laser gun and pull the trigger after aiming the gunpoint at his chest.

Wang Ailun was pushed out of the way immediately by his own bodyguards and flew out a whole two meters away, almost feeling like his lungs were going to be thrown out. Inside the refuge space, all of the politicians began running in all directions for their lives like a pen of headless chickens. The security robots pulled out their guns and fired at the crowd as if they were being controlled by an invisible power; a corpse covered in gun wounds fell by Wang Ailun’s feet, the eyes of the victim still wide in shock.

Under the pressure of the situation, Wang Ailun pulled out his special permission as the Secretary General and ordered the highest-level danger alert. But his personal device did not react to his orders.

That ‘security team captain’ slowly walked over to him, following a trail of blood, and lowered his gaze to look at the Secretary General. The captain’s knee had a visible open hole from a shot from Wang Ailun’s bodyguards earlier, but he walked as if it didn’t affect his movements.

Opium...biochip humans.

But how could it be?

How could a biochip human break through the Parliament building’s security check without his knowledge?

How many people did they have?

Lin Jingshu...had she been using him this whole time?

The captain took off his hat and opened his mouth. An eerie female voice came out of that mouth in a horrifying manner, the voice of Lin Jingshu: “Ding ding, surprise, Uncle Ailun.”

Wang Ailun’s pupils shrunk in shock, but he no longer had the ability to fully digest everything that was happening in his mind as a laser gun fired right through his head between his eyebrows.

An unprecedented massacre began inside the Union’s Parliament building, the symbol of civilization of the New Sidereal Era.

A massive signal disruption was sent out from Wolto as the generals of the Central Militia realized they lost connection with their mechs up in space, along with all landlines on the planet.

Soon after, a new disruption shook the grounds of the capital planet as more and more pirate armed mobiles drove over, followed by crowds of anxious and fearful Woltorian civilians.

Early in the morning on the capital planet, many people didn’t even get the chance to be properly dressed. Some ran into the streets, others drove off like headless flies in their personal vehicles, but everyone all crowded near the central area in hopes of seeking help from the government.

Even if the Central Militias wanted to revolt, they were still a proper military unit and could not open fire on unarmed civilians. The useless Woltorian Guards were like dead fish in the water, so the Central Militias had to take on the job and open up the doors to let these civilians inside the central area.

Little did they know that was another fatal mistake---

## Ch 164 - The Mastermind is Lin Jingshu

Due to the countless particle cannons shooting aimlessly in the air and severely damaging the highways on Wolto, all mid-air terminals and highways were forced into lockdown.

Both the pedestrians and vehicles on land that should have been divided up in an orderly fashion all merged in the narrow streets in a chaotic manner. Even the organized troops of the Central Militias were suddenly caught in this mess as they attempted to redefine order.

That was when a vehicle that had driven into the central area seemed to suddenly malfunction and stopped traffic in the middle of the road, forcing all the pedestrians carefully to make their way around the car. Even during a state of crisis like this, the good-natured Woltorians still knocked on the door, asking if the driver needed help even when they were barefoot on the road.

But that car window never rolled down.

Inside General Zheng’s mind, Lin Jingheng’s earlier warning of ‘you’ve all fallen into the enemy’s trap’ repeated like a siren; his eyes twitched in anxiety.

Then, a voice beside that stopped car shouted out: “There’s a bomb!”

The Second Galaxy’s Central Militia forces were the closest to the car; General Zheng felt his goosebumps rise the moment the cry was made. An armed mobile was far more sensitive than a human as it immediately detected abnormal energy waves from that suspicious car, revealing it to be a disguised armed mobile.

The alarmed crowd quickly backed off from the car as Zheng Di called out an order: “Open the shields--”

The closest Central Militia armed mobiles charged toward the suspicious vehicle directly and shot out a web to hold down the suspected explosive. Immediately after, all shields were turned to max defense as the soldiers inside the mobiles got ready to jump off.

At that moment, a soldier noticed that there were signs of hacking into his armed mobile while the shield that was set up shook violently.

The soldier hesitated for a second before he finally turned and returned inside to switch off the autopilot system and cut into manual. The alarms inside the mobile were almost creating a new noise pollution as the wavering shield finally stilled. Yet, before the soldier could let out a sigh of relief, following a large blasting sound, the disguised vehicle exploded.

The shields shattered instantly while the rest of the armed mobile broke into countless pieces.

Raging flames swept the grounds, leaving a trail of ashes behind.

A few comrades on the side felt their eyes warming up but there was no time for them to mourn.

After the first sound of an explosion, countless disguised vehicles that had already driven into the crowds blew up simultaneously on the spot. The heavy barricades by the Central Militia forces were broken amongst the flying rocks and pieces of cement from the explosion; ashes were covered in blood, human limbs mixed in with the explosions while a corner of the Parliament building broke down.

The survivors inside the Parliament building rampaged right into the explosion before they could even see the sunlight.

The outermost circle of people surrounding the Parliament building were biochip humans that wouldn’t hesitate to kill at the blink of an eye; they spread out from the center of the Parliament building and crashed into a crowd of unarmed spectators all dressed in formal attire for the funeral. Everyone, regardless of if they were chip carriers or not, merged into a chaotic swarm of refugees.

In front of the Central Militia forces was another barricade of pirates with armed mobiles. Behind them was a bunch of civilians and nobility mixed in with their enemies; the Central Militias were trapped from all around, the connection to their main fleets up in space completely cut off.

This wasn’t even the worst--

The entire planet of Wolto had all signals blocked off and was temporarily turned into a massive galactic prison. The main Central Militia fleets waiting in space couldn’t receive anything and wouldn’t dare to act on their own; on top of that, they had no idea what was going on down on the ground. As they were about to send someone to investigate the situation on land, the rats behind them that had been previously arranged by Wang Ailun had arrived. The Union Troops that were ready to loot off the battle between the Freedom Corps and Central Militias already sailed into the outer layer of Wolto’s atmosphere.

The Central Militias couldn’t receive any signal from Wolto, likewise, the Union Troops had no way to contact their superiors on land; they still didn’t know that Wang Ailun had already left them and followed in Woolf’s footsteps into the afterlife.

Since there were no new orders from land, they naturally must follow the original plan.

The First Galaxy had always been directly under Woolf’s control and been the Union Troops’ home ground, their headquarters based on Wolto. If the heavens gave the Union Troops this perfect opportunity to turn the tables while the generals of the Central Militias were stuck on ground and perhaps already sent off to visit Lu Xin, the Union Troops certainly took the opportunity and opened fire fearlessly at the Central Militia fleets.

From the skies down to the ground, the shadows of fear inside the fragile human heart were like puppets in Lin Jingshu’s hands as she skillfully led them through the script she had written for humanity.

The Union Troops were dispatched by Wang Ailun with the promise that they will be able to kill two birds with one stone: capture the Central Militias and strip them of their military autonomy. They mobilized all their forces with one goal in mind, completely unaware that they had left their backyard open.

At this time, all other planets within the First Galaxy had their communication signals taken over discreetly as the viral spread of the biochip finally opened its bloodied mouth to consume the First Galaxy.

On the galactic map in Lin Jingshu’s hand, the area indicating the First Galaxy looked as if someone had poured ink onto it as a heavy blackness slowly consumed it. Countless heavy mechs slowly rose up from the oceans of Neverland while she stepped onto the commanding ship.

Years ago, the small and fragile little girl was forced to leave her home and her only family to stay with the Committee. She also left behind her heart, her body, and her soul as she imprisoned herself in the hands of those politicians; she carried her hatred and forced herself to play the role of an elegant flower vase in order to survive in the crevices of this rotten world.

Today, almost 60 years had gone by; she followed a trail of blood one step at a time towards the peak of the world.

She had always been more sensitive and mature than her twin brother since they were young; she understood the familial love Chief Woolf had for their father and had once hoped that Woolf would step in to take her away from the terrible place that was the Committee, but he never did.

She had once carefully enjoyed Doctor Hardin’s companionship and listened to him talk about her mother Laura; she had once hoped that Doctor Hardin would take her away, and even daydreamed that Laura had once loved her, but both of them had failed her.

She no longer dared to place her expectations onto anyone else and cautiously packed her last emotions deep down. She couldn’t even trust her own heart and placed it on Lin Jingheng as her last hope, making him the very last safe space in this universe for her...but he refused her.

Fate had never shown her pity. She was the one who gripped the necks of the past and future with her own hands, then forcefully pulled fate down its high and mighty throne so that it could kneel before her.

Lin Jingshu looked at the beautiful cerulean sky of Wolto through the windows of the heavy mech: “I think it should rain today.”

Wolto was a planet that peaked in the technology to create a suitable and relaxing environment; it was possible to completely control the weather and climate. At this moment, the biochip humans on land had already fully taken control of the climate control station. A simple line from her summoned heavy rain clouds within an instant, all floating towards the central area of Wolto carrying violent storms and lightning.

The biochip empire was only a step away from realization, but she could already control the heavens like a god.

The moment the first raindrop hit the ground, an unknown disruption wave suddenly covered the entire Parliament building as all biochip humans froze on the spot.

Biochip disruption signal was an invention from Doctor Hardin. He had once made one for Lin Jingheng back in the galactic prison, but due to the limited resources they had, the old man could only manage to create a tiny numbing effect on biochip humans. Luckily, his partner back then was Lin Jingheng; the few seconds of disruption was enough for him to sweep through a small fleet of mental networks.

After arriving on planet Qiming’s Milky Way City, the available technological equipment also made it possible to upgrade the signal disruption to a much greater scale.

The new upgraded disruption system would be effective against biochip humans within a diameter of ten square kilometers; it would send off a strong numbing effect against chip carriers, and lower-level chips might even be completely frozen on spot for at least 30 seconds.

For an elite military group like the Central Militias, 30 seconds was more than enough time to act!

The back row of armed mobiles locked on the biochip humans with high precision as hundreds of laser guns opened fire simultaneously, piercing directly through the chip injection spot on the target’s napes and crushing their necks. Within an instant, all biochip humans within the Parliament building were cleared.

At the same time, the front row armed mobiles pierced through the barricade of their enemies with a blast of particle cannons; the Freedom Corps’ barricade collapsed like messy dominos. While the biochip humans further out were not affected by the disruption signal, they were blocked physically by the massive traffic jam up front and unable to move, giving the Central Militias some time to finally let out a sigh of relief.

“Officer!”

Zheng Di lifted his head: “Captain…Lee?”

“It’s me,” Lee responded. “There are too many injured people here; our disruption won’t last for too long either, so it’d be pointless to remain here. The Union Parliament building has its own defense system--we successfully activated it earlier when we snuck in and cleaned up all the biochip humans inside. Commander Zheng, please ask your comrades to cooperate for a bit here and send all injured personnel and unarmed civilians inside the Parliament building.”

The Parliament building that had trembled amidst gunfire earlier shook once more as soon as Lee finished his request. The sounds of the sirens covered the rolling thunder in the background while the entire Parliament building sank into the ground, about two meters deep. A heavy-mech grade shield was set up around the building while the exterior began transforming, flashing numerous cannons outwards.

This was the highest-level defensive system of the Parliament building during wartime; from the outside, it looked almost like a super heavy mech that rested on land.

Zheng Di nodded at Lee without hesitation and announced: “Line up!”

The Central Militias of the other galaxies followed along with his orders; they reorganized quickly and in an orderly fashion, the armed mobiles with abundant energy surrounding the entire Parliament building while other civilians rushed inside the building fortress.

“It’s not supposed to be a rainy day today,” Lee mumbled as he sniffed the muddied smell in the air.

“It’s not supposed to be a day for war either.” Bayer licked the corner of his lips. “Hey old Lee, did you know that the Silver Ten and Commander Lu Xin’s old generals haven’t fought together on the same side since the late commander died?”

Lee gave a complicated smile: “Is this supposed to be a good thing?”

Rather than forming a temporary heart-to-heart alliance, they’d much rather peacefully bicker and fight like children.

At this moment, the Central Militia Generals that retreated back inside the Parliament building were gathered up wide-eyed as if they saw the same ghost, staring with their mouths open at Lu Bixing who was currently attempting to adjust and fix the defense system inside the Parliament building.

“I know it’s the first time we’ve met, but I’m sure I don’t need to introduce myself, right?” Lu Bixing gave a courteous smile amidst his work. “Just one moment please.”

Zheng Di asked dumbly: “What...what are you doing?”

“Installing the biochip disruptor on this building’s defense system so that we can use this entire building to amplify the effects of the disruption signals,” Lin Jingheng walked over to answer. “The environmental adaptability of the biochip is very strong, so the disruption signal works best within the first 30 seconds. After that, their bodies will adapt to the numbness; but the most important part is that it can reduce the combat abilities of our enemies and help us determine who’s a chip carrier.”

The General of the Third Galaxy was still in awe and blurted out a mouthful of questions: “Why are you here? Didn’t they say the Eighth Galaxy had been closed off? How many people did you bring? What’s the situation outside? What exactly is going on?”

Lin Jingheng: “The situation on land is as you’ve all seen, we only have this many people on our side for mobility. It’d be too troublesome to bring any more, as for space---”

The main fleets of both the Silver Third and Sixth Squadrons were on standby, ready for battle.

The Central Militia fleets were forced into battle after the first shot from the Union Troops; luckily, they were close enough to Wolto, where both sides unanimously agreed to be careful. They were both fearful that a single misfired missile would fall onto this natural planet with a population of two billion people, so both sides fought with great caution, giving Captain Liu the perfect opportunity to break into the fight.

Captain Liu Yuanzhong was nothing but lowkey while on the space battlefield. The Eighth Galaxy Galactic Defence--the Silver Sixth Squadron’s main fleet swiftly cut its way in between the Central Militias and Union Troops like a violent butcher knife. The vanguard teams on both sides were swept immediately with a mental network hack, and within an instant a few dozen mechs completely lost control and sailed off to the side.

After being harassed by countless disruptions and interceptions along the way, Poisson Young finally managed to pull up a stable communication platform and gifted both sides a cold and insulting greeting that shared his boss’ trademark sarcasm: “Do you fools all want to turn around and check out your burning asses first before fighting among yourselves?”

“Look at what’s happening on Wolto right now, can you all not imagine what it's like outside?” Lin Jingheng wanted to be courteous, but as the words reached the tip of his tongue, he still couldn’t change the arrogant attitude that was engraved into his core. “I think maybe you all should consider switching careers to be theater actors specializing in ad-libs; no need to rehearse, you all can just step on stage and follow someone else’s prewritten script without any problems.”

Lu Bixing put his hand on his forehead and quickly stopped him from continuing to play with fire: “Jingheng.”

Lee stepped up and opened up his personal device to show the SOS message from the principal of the Second Polytechnic University of the Second Galaxy to the generals present: “This was an SOS message the Third Squadron received through our secret port before our signals were cut off.”

Zheng Di almost tripped over himself as a siren rang inside his head.

This was the Union’s Parliament building during Chief Woolf’s funeral service; the security check was practically useless as they let in this many biochip humans, what would it be like for other places? Wouldn’t it be unsurprising how many biochip humans could sneak into places outside Wolto?

Bayer added in a stern voice: “The Freedom Corps’ biochips have gone through multiple upgrades already and are no longer that ‘illegal drug’ we knew of back when it first appeared in the Union. Also, whether the injection was voluntary or involuntary, once the body accepts the chip’s modifications, the person will become one of them. I did a rough estimate; once the percentage of biochip humans exceeds 10% within a crowd, a crisis will occur where society would fall into their hands within a matter of time. Over 30%, they will have the ability to trigger a coup within the local government and overthrow existing authorities within a short period of time. If their population exceeds 50%...”

Zheng Di could hear his own hoarse voice question: “What?”

Bayer’s large eyes looked like a void of darkness as he stared: “They would have the ability to completely turn all of humanity into puppets of their biochip empire.”

“You’ve asked why we’re here.” Lu Bixing finished setting up the disruption amplifier and stood back up. “We could easily close off the wormhole and hide from all of this to live in peace for a few decades…”

Lin Jingheng suddenly chimed in: “No, we can maintain peace for at least a whole generation of people, two hundred years. Almost half of the population in the Eighth Galaxy are vaccuocerebrals, making them unsuitable hosts for biochips. In addition…the mastermind behind the Freedom Corps in Lin Jingshu.”

Lu Bixing was shocked; he didn’t expect Lin Jingheng to reveal this fact at a time like this.

The entire group of Central Militia generals felt their souls leave their body simultaneously; Zheng Di opened his mouth like a broken record: “Which…which Lin Jingshu…”

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” Lin Jingheng showed no intention of respecting his elders and cut him off coldly. “The one who was taken away and raised by the Committee years ago; the one who married into the Gordon family, the one who murdered the entire family to take all authority of the Committee and suddenly disappeared after the Committee’s crimes were made public, my sister Lin Jingshu. Do you want to look at a photo of her and check with your own two eyes again?”

Lu Bixing and Lee exchanged a quick glance with each other; Lee was clearly a little uneasy, but Lu Bixing hinted at him to remain calm and stay put.

Lin Jingheng’s attitude was indeed bad, but it wasn’t rash; even if it was jarring to the ear, he would never speak up without thinking. There must be a reason why he chose to expose Lin Jingshu’s identity here at this time. After the initial shock, Lu Bixing realized that this was actually the best time to reveal the truth.

He was using the situation ripe with the looming crisis over their heads to pick out the hardest pills of truth to swallow. The conflict outside would nullify the conflicts within, which would minimize the damage and friction for the temporary alliance. It was better than revealing the dirty truth after working together to fight a common enemy for a while.

Lin Jingheng’s lips and expression carried that familiar asshole attitude as he continued: “As long as I’m alive, Lin Jingshu wouldn’t be so dumb as to touch a hot potato that she can’t fully control like the Eighth Galaxy. Too bad I’m not a damn turtle; I can’t live for tens of thousands of years, so I have to take the Eighth Galaxy’s future into consideration. Nobody knows what kind of monster this biochip universe would become in the future, and we don’t want to one day reopen our closed doors to see that we can no longer find comrades of the same species amidst this vast universe.”

The generals of the Central Militia were dead silent.

“I also don’t want to see you all that Lu Xin had protected with his life until the end to become the last humans in the Union.”

Zheng Di lifted his head. Back when Lu Xin fled the Union, countless hot-headed subordinates had once followed his footsteps. In the end, Lu Xin protected them with his own life under the fatal blast of the cannons. Even after his death, he still protected their identities and kept that list of traitors who followed him a secret. Aside from Lu Xin himself who jumped out to take the blame, everyone else had lived until this day with a reputable position in the Union.

“You…” the General of the Sixth Galaxy said softly, “you knew…”

Lin Jingheng’s voice choked up a little: “I’ve seen that list from Doctor Lance.”

Zheng Di mumbled: “You’ve always known, that’s why when you took over the Silver Fortress, you sent all of us off to other galaxies away from the center of the Union...Jingheng, you…”

Lin Jingheng didn’t want to continue dwelling on the past and once again blurted out some ugly words: “Stop with the nonsense. If I knew it would turn out like this, I wouldn’t have wasted my energy on you all back then.”

Lin Jingheng lifted his chin and held out a hand as he spoke: “Now that we’ve all been forced to the edge of the cliff, gentlemen, suck it up and cooperate with us.”

That hand still covered in those familiar white gloves raised in solidarity in mid-air with no response.

Lu Bixing was about to open his mouth to ease the tension when he saw Zheng Di take a step forward, pulling that glove off and dragging Lin Jingheng into a big embrace, pounding hard on the young commander’s back: “You little bastard!”

## Ch 165 - Big Brother

Despite also being a touchy-feely person, Lu Bixing knew the line between an intimate private relationship and social etiquette. In addition, the young man wasn’t shameless enough to break the atmosphere in a public place like this.

This playful iron fist from Zheng Di completely knocked the senses out of Lin Jingheng for an instant as the latter totally forgot to struggle out of this unexpected skinship. The rest of the soldiers watching on the side felt as if their souls had escaped their bodies in shock.

Yet Zheng Di didn’t seem to be satisfied with just one pound; he gave the young commander a few more punches containing all of his frustrations over the last few decades. Lee’s eye twitched as he heard the pounding sounds coming from inside the building.

Zheng Di: “You should’ve at least said something during all these damned years! Are you mute or dead!?”

Lin Jingheng felt as if his organs were about to be pounded out of his body. Lu Bixing stared at him from the side, witnessing the commander’s face turn from pale white to red then back; his heart almost stopped beating in fear that his commander would snap on spot before all these people and shoot General Zheng right in the head.

Lin Jingheng clenched his fist and pushed Zheng Di away with his hand. Lu Bixing was ready to break up the fight, only to see that Lin Jingheng had fallen silent for a few moments and didn’t show any sort of extreme reaction. The latter simply said airily: “You’re saying you’re not useless?”

Zheng Di: “......”

This child here was a real ass; he wasn’t pretending to be difficult, he certainly deserved more than those few punches earlier.

“I don’t intend to look down on anyone here, but...did any of you have military autonomy back then to dispatch and summon your own fleets? What about a say in the Union Parliament? Did anyone have a powerful family background? Did anyone have a dependable ally to work with?” Lin Jingheng’s blank gaze scanned across the colorful faces of the Central Militia Generals as if he was simply stating a fact. “The answer is no. Regardless if that list was ever exposed or not, you all were dangerous personnel in the eyes of the Committee that carried Lu Xin’s name. Even if nobody died, you would all eventually be forced out of the main political stage. I was different; I hadn’t even graduated back then and had a ‘clean’ history. In addition, Lu Xin was my legal guardian appointed by the Military Council. It was never my own idea to be his adopted child.”

Because he was Lin Wei’s son, the honorary graduate of the Black Orchid Academy.

Even though Chief Woolf never personally adopted him, they all knew that for the next two centuries, whether Lin Jingheng became a young soldier of high potentials or an average joe, the Union had a position at least in the ranks of a Fleet Admiral reserved for him--both in name and in a literal sense.

As for the Eden Committee, a young and noble-born man who was hot-headed and rebellious enough in personality to climb up the ladders of authority for his own ambition was the perfect guard dog in their eyes. The young man was a natural politician and soldier who was willing to cut off his connection with his own adopted father, and his ability to beat up space pirates like play toys was the icing on the cake served to the Committee.

“This was all only a part of the game I played with the Committee of out-witting each other. As for why I sent you all down to the Central Militias...tsk, can’t you all look at the time now, why am I supposed to join you old men in your afternoon tea chats?” Lin Jingheng sneered the insult without hiding but removed his gaze from those eyes filled with complicated emotions hastily. Then, as if purposely distancing himself from the uncomfortable atmosphere, he continued in a tone a few degrees colder, “Stop writing your own sob stories and forcing your silly tragic hero scenarios onto me. How old are you all anyway, these imaginations….”

Lin Jingheng’s expression hardened as he got ready to turn around and take a few steps back from the crowd, but these words that were about to be shot out like ice were suddenly cut off with a muffled sound.

Lu Bixing came up from behind and pulled the commander over; Lin Jingheng couldn’t turn his head in time and felt a force from behind that pushed him back to face the generals.

Lu Bixing’s grip was strong, but his voice soft and gentle: “Then was I also assuming things when you came to the Eighth Galaxy to look for me, stayed on Beijing-β with me for five years, then decided to keep me in the dark after the situation outside changed and even deleted all the relevant data in Zhanlu?”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

Zheng Di let out a sigh and turned to study Lu Bixing for a while before shifting his gaze to Lin Jingheng’s awkward standing position: “I remember...I was with Commander on our way back to Wolto that day when he received a call from the principal of the Black Orchid Academy. That was when he first found out that you applied to the First Military Academy of the Union behind his back and got accepted. I can still clearly see his expression from back then: his eyes widened like his eyeballs were about to pop out of his socket as he repeatedly asked the principal multiple times, ‘are you sure? He’s still only fourteen’.”

Children in the Union finished their primary education at around ten years old and then spent the next decade under the leadership of Eden to explore various career opportunities. They experienced professional training for each career and then discovered their own paths along the way; after they decided, they could apply to the higher institution of their choice and would take the necessary entrance exams.

For a top class institute like the Black Orchid Academy, the number of applicants every year was only as abundant as that of snowflakes in fall; only applicants that really knew their paths and had a clear outline of their future career and understanding could write an application that truly satisfied the admission officers.

“The Commander probably never told you that the old principal showed him the personal statement you submitted in private. It’s the Black Orchid Academy, so of course many people would mention wanting to be a ‘guardian’ of the Union, but you were different. You wrote that if a flood like the ancient apocalyptic myths was to threaten the world as everyone ran for their lives, you were willing to be the one that stood against the current and become the first person to be swallowed by the flood.”

Lu Bixing’s original intention was to break the stage and not let Lin Jingheng miss this opportunity to come to terms with these old generals.

But after hearing about how the young commander wanted to be ‘the first victim to be swallowed by the flood,’ he felt as if something touched a chord inside his heart.

Lu Xin wiped out the nest of the pirates within the Eighth Galaxy all by himself and earned an honor that would go down in history at a young age. He would have been the future Chief Commander of the Union if he had shown even the slightest interest in working toward the greater good and had played by Wolto’s game rules, to be a little less reckless, rather than constantly thinking of flipping the tables for those hopeless vaccuocerebrals in the Eighth Galaxy.

The first time, he gave up the Silver Ten. The second time, he gave up the opportunity to have his name recorded on the forbidden fruit’s list.

Lu Xin was born in the utopia of the grand unification dream and didn’t have to worry over various ideologies like the people of the last generation. His duty was to protect the starry skies. Perhaps he never had as many worries as those people who stood on top of the White Tower.

Lu Xin was, simply, the man who willingly became the first person to be swallowed by the flood.

He was the one that once took Monoeyed Hawk, William Yu…countless people against the currents, fighting against those malignant storms and raging waters.

He was one of Lu Bixing’s two fathers.

“The old principal said that while childish and naive, it made him think of the Commander.” Zheng Di’s voice softened, “I always thought that you grew up and forgot those childish words over the years, but now that I look at it, it was actually us old folks here that couldn’t let go of our heart’s unease and froze up over time. We only thought about how we wanted out payback from the Union after all these years of oppression and forgot who we really were. Jingheng, everyone’s guilty for pushing the Union down this wretched path today except you. I’m sure that if Commander was still alive, he would say the same thing.”

Lin Jingheng’s body subconsciously stiffened.

Lu Bixing’s heart was suddenly filled with pride as he blurted out: “I acknowledge on behalf of the Eighth Galaxy…big brother.”

*You took me home, you let me touch the hand of the father I’ve never met.*

*So in the place of this father I just met, am I allowed to say to you that you are my pride and joy?*

This sudden ‘big brother’ was more effective than any biochip disruption and immediately froze the struggling Marshal of the Eighth Galaxy on the spot, turning him into a statue.

Back when Lin Jingheng returned to the Eighth Galaxy after a decade of imprisonment and discovered that Lu Bixing had dug up his own family history, he once jokingly asked the young man to call him by those words to no response. He could also feel Lu Bixing’s silent reluctance at the time; later, Lin Jingheng read the atmosphere and didn’t bring it up again. When he finally heard Lu Bixing confess his own hesitance to accept his true family background, the Marshal even thought that this little wishful thinking in his heart would become a fleeting dream for the rest of time.

Finally, Lin Jingheng turned his head back in disbelief. A single ‘what did you just call me’ was stuck in his throat, unable to come out. Before he could even recollect his thoughts, he felt another push on his shoulder by the Third Galaxy’s General: “You’ve had this bad habit of not saying what you feel since you were little, and this shitty attitude surely didn’t get fixed over these last decades.”

“What, do you get high off being forever alone or something?”

“You little brat, who do you think you are? Who do you think we are?”

“Who asked you to shoulder all the burden by yourself?”

Lu Bixing used his biochip to cheat and secretly held the Marshal down so he couldn’t escape. It was unclear whether Zheng Di pulled off a single glove or some sort of invisible barrier, but within a few seconds, that large ‘do not touch’ banner that had been hanging over Lin Jingheng’s head for most of his life was suddenly dragged down by the crowd. These old generals that had been pointing their guns and fighting with him over the last years finally stepped over that personal boundary surrounding the young commander, dragged that tough-skinned and stubborn little wolf out of his cave and gave him countless slaps and pounding like friendly banter.

Lee and Bayer exchanged a quick glance, feeling the corner of their eyes warming up.

The City of Angels.

The Union had once used this fortress as a temporary command base during the war, but once Wolto was reclaimed, the refugees also moved back to their homes.

According to Chief Woolf, the City of Angels was one of the founding cornerstones of the Union that also served as a powerful fortress of protection during wartime. Its value as a memorial site was unparalleled and was planned to be remodeled into one open for public visitation.

The current City of Angels served mostly as a military fortress rather than a space station for residential purposes; the basic structures of the public museum site were currently under construction around the corners, with only very few workers around the quiet fortress monitoring the construction progress.

The Great Prophet Harris of the AUS made his way through the supply station of the City of Angels inside a disguised starship, sailing through the same secret terminal that the AUS pirates had once used to visit Chief Woolf during the war.

Prophet Harris chose to revisit this site because the ‘Night Empress’ mentioned in Woolf’s interview sent an uneasy feeling through his heart.

The backyard garden of the Chief’s temporary mansion in the City of Angels, filled with black tulips, was called the Night Empress Garden. A wordless stone tablet rested amidst the garden, supposedly in memory of a certain individual. The old Chief was growing senile, so out of respect nobody dared to ask or discuss this in public. But it also didn’t seem to be that big of a secret.

Harris once asked Woolf what was buried under the stone tablet.

Woolf placed the seed of a black tulip into his hand at the time and said, “Nothing much, just the seed of a flower.”

The automated AI system and cannons that guarded the entrance were kept active, scanning every entry loyally to this day.

Everyone beside the great Prophet held their breaths.

The Prophet chose to remain silent for the greater good even after realizing he had been used by Woolf during the war, but he had always been repulsed by everything the late Chief had done. After regrouping the AUS, Harris single-handedly cut off connection with Woolf to quietly rebuild his organization over the years. Nobody knew if this terminal was still safe to pass through after all this time, and nobody knew if Harris’ wishful thinking was simply a waste of time.

Perhaps Woolf’s body really was declining before his death and the Night Empress was simply a symbol of his impaired consciousness.

The AI poked out a detection needle and scanned the disguised starship; those five seconds of waiting felt like an eternity while Harris held his breath, feeling as if those cannons around the starship moved to take aim.

Moments later, a small ‘ding’ rang out followed by a green light, indicating that they passed the security check.

Harris let out a heavy sigh of relief as he followed the rest of the supplying merchant ships into the terminal.

Inside the terminal was another secret terminal that connected directly to Woolf’s temporary Chief Office; it was protected by ten layers of passcodes. The small team was already stuck on the first layer.

“No luck, Prophet. It seems like the old passcode’s permissions were cancelled.”

Harris strolled over: “Let me see.”

“Prophet, Wang Ailun should also know about this secret passage as Woolf’s right-hand man back then. We don’t know what role he plays in this at the moment, could it be possible that he betrayed Chief Woolf?”

Harris frowned; his mind was unsure as well. Suddenly, something flashed before his eyes.

“Prophet, be careful!”

Harris was shocked, but before he could react, a little signal that showed ‘passcode verified’ popped up for a few seconds and opened the secret terminal before them.

“It’s a DNA check! Prophet, you were right!” A follower of the AUS spoke up joyfully, “Woolf purposely mentioned the Night Empress for this reason, he even set your DNA as the passcode to the terminal, which means this was set up for you!”

Harris gave a weak smile in response while his heart that had dropped in relief once again gathered up cautiously. He never knew whether he was walking into one trap or another when it came to dealing with Woolf.

The rest of the journey was smooth and easy as they made their way to the temporary Chief’s mansion, where Harris led his team into the Night Empress Garden.

It seemed as if the blooming season had passed; all of the Night Empresses in the garden were withered lifelessly, revealing the solid stone tablet in the center. Harris’ throat rolled gently as he said: “Dig it up.”

The followers beside him walked up and pulled out their engineering robots, digging up the stone tablet within a matter of seconds.

“Prophet, look!”

The side of the stone tablet buried under the soil was revealed to be a safe.

“Prophet, it looks like an activator inside. It’s currently asleep and needs a password for activation.”

Harris asked: “Can you tell what it activates?”

The followers all looked at him and shook their heads without a clue: “Not sure...but if it’s an independent activation key, it must be some sort of large-scale AI network, right?”

Harris entered ‘Night Empress’ and received no reaction.

He frowned and attempted a few more times with ‘black tulip’, ‘Lin Ge’er’, ‘Woolf’, ‘Harris’, and more with no luck.

“Prophet, the City of Angels is still part of Union territory and it’s unsafe to stay here for long. How about we take this thing out and go back? We can ask a specialized decoding team to help us out.”

Harris nodded and asked his followers to carry that safe disguised as a stone tablet back.

Suddenly, he stopped and recalled something: “Wait!”

*It’s nothing much, just the seed of a flower……*

Harris swiftly entered the word ‘seed’ on the activator--

After a muffled buzz, a strange feeling ran beneath his feet. That instant, Harris almost thought the entire City of Angels was about to ‘come alive.’

The digital butler AI system inside the temporary Chief’s mansion was instantly replaced by an unknown program; a familiar sigh rang out through the sound system playing the gentle music inside the garden.

Harris was startled; chills crawled up his spine.

That ghostly voice said through the speakers: “Long time no see, Harris, you’re here.”

Harris’s trembling lips responded: “Woolf….”

Wolto, inside the Parliament Building---

“Are you all done yet?” Lin Jingheng finally pulled his cold but visibly exhausted face back up after a while of messing around. “Get back to business!”

Bayer cleared his throat and stood up to help his boss sweep the stage clean: “Marshal, if everything goes smoothly according to our plan, Liu and Poisson should have already arrived at Wolto. As long as they’re here, the Union Troops and Central Militias outside the atmosphere should be able to sit still for now.”

“Oh thank heavens,” the general of the Fourth Galaxy said. “In other words, even though we’re stuck down here, the battlefield in space is still in our hands, so it’s actually not as bad as we thought? If the Union Troops and Central Militia don’t fight and are able to team up with the Silver Ten from the Eighth Galaxy, I doubt the Freedom Corps will be able to cause any big trouble up there.”

“I’m less optimistic,” Zheng Di admitted in a stern voice. “The majority of the population still lives on land. Fellows, it would still be dangerous even if we flipped the situation where we took over land and left space in the hands of the pirates. These pirates would not hesitate to blow up planets while we would; our soldiers have this weak spot and will never fire a missile on the ground, so we’re stuck in this stalemate.”

If it did end up becoming a long stalemate, it would be impossible for galactic soldiers to outlast the unrest on ground.

Lu Bixing let out a sigh: “To be honest, if it did end up becoming a long stalemate, I actually do have experience building small ecosystems inside mechs. I’d be even more concerned if the enemy refuses to even maintain a stalemate…by the way, did the fire outside stop? It’s significantly quieter now, what happened?”

## Ch 166 - Disarm and Accept the Biochip

The most Doctor Hardin’s signal disruption could do was to buy them some time to take away all the unarmed personnel on ground. Letting Lu Bixing install it on a large-scale amplifier didn’t mean it could dramatically change the situation of the battlefield. The front-row armed mobiles from the Freedom Corps pirates were completely crushed by the Central Militia amidst the chaos and turned into a physical barrier for the incoming biochip humans at the outer layers. The Central Militia soldiers were simply hiding behind the barricade to shoot down any enemies charging forward; the sounds of gunfire from outside had never stopped for even a second while the generals reorganized inside the building.

It wasn’t until Lu Bixing brought it up that everyone realized it was dead silent outside; the only sound was raindrops, slowly consuming the building with an eerie pressure.

Suddenly, Zhanlu’s voice rang out inside the Parliament building.

“Everyone,” Zhanlu began, “the signal disruption is weakening and the communication on land is currently under repair...repair completed. An unknown connection request is asking to call into the Parliament building, should the request be accepted?”

The crowd was shocked for the first second, then immediately realized it was a call from their enemy.

“Connect them,” Lin Jingheng answered through his teeth.

A three-meter-tall 3D screen rose up from the middle of the parliament hall the moment Lin Jingheng made his command. The screen flashed momentarily until a man wearing the uniform for the Freedom Corps showed up on screen. Everyone noticed that not only the style of the uniform, but even the soldier’s salute was completely on the opposite side of the Union standard. From the crowd’s perspective, it looked as if soldiers were staring at a mirror man.

“Good morning, fellow generals and members of the Parliament, as well as soldiers and citizens. I am a generation five chip carrier, it is my honor to greet you all on behalf of my master, I…”

This unfortunate soul didn’t even get to finish his opening speech before Lin Jingheng interrupted mercilessly: “Who the fuck do you think you are, piss off! Let Lin Jingshu come out and speak to me herself.”

His gaze met Lu Bixing’s for a short instant as he spoke, and Lu Bixing immediately caught the message---the communication that was fixed was only the signal on land. If Lin Jingshu could really be forced to come out to speak, it would mean that she was very likely hiding on Wolto. On-land networks could not pass through transfer portals in space, so in theory it was traceable.

The generation five, because of the chip, was loyal to his own master of his own volition. The expression on the man’s face visibly twisted in disgust as he heard such offensive remarks: “How dare you……”

“Let Lin Jingshu come talk to me herself,” Lin Jingheng repeated each word, crisp and clear. “What, she dared to lock me up in a galactic prison for fourteen years, dared to say she wanted to turn me into a living model, but won’t even come out and talk to me?”

The angered expression on the soldier’s face suddenly stopped as if someone had pressed the pause button; the next moment, an unexplainable change arose on his face. His physical appearance didn’t change, but the demeanor and air of his expression shifted drastically as if he were possessed. The man lifted the corner of his lips, opened his mouth and spoke with a woman’s voice: “Jingheng.”

The whole scene was so bizarre that everyone watching in the building felt goosebumps crawling over their skin, even if they weren’t the person mentioned.

Lu Bixing’s pupils contracted in shock--what kind of technology was this?

Doctor Hardin had only ever mentioned that the biochips within the Freedom Corps were categorized into hierarchical levels. Due to his old age and deteriorating body, he couldn’t accept chip injection into his body, so Lin Jingshu could only keep him around her without killing him despite his clear opposition to her biochip empire. She imprisoned him and even kept him out of the later half of research for the chip. The most Doctor Hardin ever involved himself in with the research was up to generation two of the biochip, so he could only make educated guesses on what an even higher-level chip could do.

Lin Jingheng shot another glance at Lu Bixing.

The latter’s gaze sank deep into thought, and he shook his head discreetly in response. He had absolutely no idea how this ‘possessing’ function worked and couldn’t trace back its source.

“It’s been a while.” Lin Jingshu’s voice was clear but gentle, slightly deeper than her normal range when she spoke in public, with a hint of reservation in her calm tone. Yet this calm reserve sounded strangely distant and cold when she spoke to her one and only family, almost making the scene seem like an awkward reunion.

Lin Jingheng’s hands clenched into a fist behind his back: “I’m the one who hasn’t seen you in a while.”

“The Eighth Galaxy had never been recognized or treated fairly after a century of returning to the Union, but didn’t it already announce its independence?” Lin Jingshu said, “You’ve closed yourselves off for almost two whole decades; why can’t you all stay in your lane and move on without bothering each other? A storm is about to sweep through the Union and I’ve already given you all enough warnings to make the smarter choice; why do you all still force yourselves to join in this mess?”

Lin Jingheng sneered lightly: “Right, sorry to disappoint you again.”

“This is the third time.” Lin Jingshu’s gaze pierced through the shell of the generation five she wore, like a light of a raging fire beneath a frosted surface. “You were powerless and alone in the Eighth Galaxy during those years, and these people---these useless pieces of trash in the Union that only knew how to quarrel amongst themselves over political power, the conspirators that wrote their own names on the forbidden fruit while continuing to lie to the masses, every single one of them wanted to drag you out to be the sacrificial lamb. Only I worried for you; I sent you arms and supplies, a stage to help you resummon the Silver Ten, I even messed up the situation further to keep them from bothering you again, but you…”

“I was the one who let the Silver Ten stand on the frontlines in the battle against the Freedom Corps; a decade of warfare cost almost half of the entire Silver Ten fleet, almost making your biochip empire dream a fleeting one.” Lin Jingheng’s voice was calm, his expression showing slight hints of fatigue. It was as if he knew he was trudging down the path of no return and had no energy left to look back, recounting everything they could’ve done better to change the future. “Hm, that was the first time. The second was when you saved me from the hands of the AUS with all of your resources and kept me alive for two whole years with an elite medical team. I woke up and lied to you with fake amnesia; I lied to you for over a decade. Then, the first thing I did after I broke out of your imprisonment was to mess with your kidnapping plot near the border of the First Galaxy.”

Inside the silent Parliament building, the twin siblings finally faced each other beyond their countless facades and disguises.

“So what do you want me to say to you...that I wasted all your efforts and that I’m sorry?” Lin Jingheng’s voice was stuck in his throat like a fishbone piercing inside, “I’m not apologetic, I’m not sorry for a...space pirate that walked through trials of corpses, covered in blood from head to toe. The only one I’m apologetic to is the little Jingshu that once chased after the car and tripped on the road. What did you do to her?”

The generation five listened expressionlessly and suddenly lifted their lips in an eerie smile: “Her? You can’t find her anymore, Jingheng. You came late. Weakness is a sin; everyone that cried and waited for salvation deserved to die.”

After the twins were physically separated and cut off from each other by the Committee, the older brother that was in the First Military School worked hard with one goal in mind; he thought that one day when he finally had power, he would take her back from that wretched place. But as he ground his teeth, swallowed down the taste of blood in his mouth and finally reached that place of power to ask her “did you want to move back home with me,” he couldn’t say it in time. Instead, she told him: “I’ve already accepted Secretary General Gordon’s proposal, should I send the invitation to your house or to the Silver Fortress?”

If you came late, you missed your chance; it didn’t matter how hard you worked before.

Lu Bixing reached over and held onto Lin Jingheng’s wrist gently but firmly, carefully releasing that tightly clenched fist. He let out a sigh; Lu Bixing was never one to open his mouth and interrupt someone else’s personal business. He might be a smooth talker, but he wasn’t necessarily a smarter persuader, so he had always remained a respectful bystander until now: “Miss Lin, I also know someone who was always late. He made me wait a whole sixteen years-- by the time he came back, all others had already left me thousands of lightyears away…but this was someone who touched my soul and lived in my dreams, so what could I do? Thousands of kilometers away, hundred thousand, or even millions of lightyears away, I have no choice but to turn around and bring him back. If he’s the most beloved person to you, why can’t you put your hatred down for a second and give him another chance?”

Any words that were too emotional could be understood by the listener as true words from the depths of one’s heart; for someone that refused to listen, it was the lowest form of desperate begging.

Lin Jingshu clearly didn’t listen to these words and gave Lu Bixing a fake smile as she switched her tone to a courteous and professional manner: “I remember you, we met last time in the Heart of the Rose. You’re the Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy, right? You’re correct, though I don’t know what the Eighth Galaxy has that could make him give his life. But now that Jingheng has chosen you all, I shall also graciously give you all another chance--your Silver Ten fleet has already arrived outside of Wolto’s atmosphere; I can escort you all back home. Prime Minister Lu, I can send a small mech over to take you all out of Wolto right now as long as you swear to close up the wormhole and stay out of this. I can also promise in return that I will never touch the Eighth Galaxy while I’m alive, how does that sound?”

Lin Jingheng could almost laugh at the peak of his outrage: “You…”

Lu Bixing knew that every word that came out of this mouth now would become sharp double-edged blades that could leave an open wound in the heart of the speaker. He quickly pulled a hand up to interrupt: “Miss Lin, now that Wolto is being surrounded by the Central Militia, Union Troops, and the Silver Ten, I don’t think we’re the ones in this particular situation that need to be escorted out.”

Lin Jingshu let out a small laugh and responded: “It looks like Prime Minister Lu still hasn’t received the latest news.”

Her gaze scanned past all the generals of the Central Militias in the room as she spoke. She waved a hand, the image of the generation five chip carrier on screen disappearing, immediately replaced by a few live footage videos on-screen.

Everyone’s expression changed within that instant--all the footage was from the capital planets of each galaxy in the Union.

The flags of the Freedom Corps took over all public areas, heavily armed robots filled all corners of the streets. From the footage, one could also clearly see all the mechs on standby just below the ozone layers of the atmosphere, cannons and missiles all pointing directly at the natural planets.

“This is my territory in the future, so I’m just as heartbroken as you all,” Lin Jingshu said. “But I have no choice, gentlemen. You all hold military autonomy in your hands, so I could only bring up these things to threaten you all---General Zheng of the Second Galaxy, I recall that there are about sixteen billion people on the capital planet, your girlfriend and daughter are still waiting for you to return...oh, your daughter is quite adorable. General Nagus of the Third Galaxy, a population of twenty-one billion on the capital planet; I like this traditional big family of all three generations under the same household, it’s lively…”

The general of the Third Galaxy ground his teeth and cut her off: “What do you want from us!?”

“You either disarm and accept the biochip,” Lin Jingshu smiled, “or I could fire three hundred missiles on your capital planet. I hope you decide soon; of course, if you want a bit of time to think about it, I also understand. I can fire the missiles one by one until you make up your mind.”

“I can blow up Wolto right now--”

“You could also do that; there’s only two billion people on Wolto anyway, I’d call it a steal.” Lin Jingshu didn’t even bat an eye. “I know you aren’t afraid of dying, but if you die, the Central Militia would be left without a leader and the Third Galaxy would be the physical blueprint of my biochip empire. As for me, I’m also not afraid of death; my flesh is worth next to nothing. If my flesh perishes, my consciousness will merge with an AI as my subjects continue to create more biochips and a new species of mankind that will last for generations to come.”

At that moment, an old and ghostly voice rang out: “Really?”

Even Lin Jingheng could feel a chill crawling down his skin when the voice rang out. Everyone inside the Parliament building turned their gazes simultaneously in the direction of the mortuary that housed Woolf’s corpse inside its coffin. The corpse of the old Chief was supposed to sit quietly inside until the funeral was over, but everyone present clearly heard it talk just now!

## Ch 167 - What Did I Activate?

The first man to feel goosebumps was the man who had snuck into the City of Angels moments earlier, Harris.

Logically, as the advocates of ‘life and nature’ who embraced the natural sciences of human civilization, the followers of the AUS should be the last ones to fear the supernatural. Yet the concept of death was still an unconquered territory of human life; beneath the dark curtains closing over the stage of life was fear of the unknown, which became especially more terrifying under the silent moonlight of the night. Harris trembled subconsciously under this environment.

Woolf wasn’t dead yet?

Impossible. The absence of the newly wed during a wedding wasn’t uncommon, but nobody had ever heard of the deceased calling in absent for their own funeral. The Union spent so much time and effort to host this funeral, they couldn’t possibly ask everyone to complete the ceremony with an empty coffin.

Then...was this a recording?

That didn’t seem likely either.

Woolf was a man with many tricks up his sleeves; would he really lure Harris and his crew to the City of Angels simply to pass a recording to them? He certainly couldn’t be too tired to even lift a finger to send a protected message to them. Right?

As Harris frantically pondered this, all the lights in the City of Angels quietly vanished.

A blackout.

A complete blackout on an artificial fortress was a terrifying scene. The entire City of Angels looked as if it was a massive chunk of space waste floating amid the stars of the universe; the next moment, gravitational changes on the fortress began to unfold as the artificial system lost control.

Fortunately, the foundational ecosystem on the City of Angels was powerful enough to repair itself within five minutes. The third backup energy source was activated and the vanished lights on the fortress gradually returned as Harris saw everyone else around him let out a sigh of relief. Along with that, the eerie voice that had sounded far too similar to Woolf also disappeared as the rest of the world returned to normal.

Only Harris felt a drop of cold sweat rolling down the side of his face.

The City of Angels had a main energy source that was backed up by a secondary energy supply if any malfunctions were to occur. The transition between the two energy sources was seamless; it would never have let anyone suffer a blackout, even if the main source was shut down. It was only if the backup source also faced problems that the automatic repair system would be triggered to activate the third power source.

In other words, there was something...something that passed by earlier that was powerful enough to overload both power sources on the City of Angels within the blink of an eye.

Harris stared back at that seemingly harmless activator and felt his heart jump: *What exactly did I just activate?*

“Prophet…”

Harris held up a hand to cut off his subordinate’s words, his mind quickly turning as he processed everything within an instant and said: “Wolto!”

“Wha….”

“We’re going back to Wolto, try and contact headquarters immediately! Let our brothers who are closest to Wolto make their way over first!”

Wolto.

General Nagus from the Third Galaxy pulled his head back like a turtle hiding inside its shell, then carefully gave Zheng Di a nudge on the arm: “Wh... what’s going on? Why don’t you...you go take a look…”

Zheng Di pressed his eyebrows together and pretended not to hear, thinking to himself: *Why don’t you go check yourself?*

Captain Bayer of the Silver Tenth Squadron was the first to react. He pressed his hand to the gun at his waist as he cautiously made his way toward the mortuary, then lifted up the flag of the Union above the coffin--Woolf’s cold corpse was still resting soundlessly inside. Even after embalming, it was still clear that it was a lifeless piece of flesh inside the coffin.

Bayer held his breath and pressed his fingers near the old Chief’s neck to check the pulse, then asked softly: “Zhanlu, can you do a DNA check for me?”

Zhanlu: “Confirmed, the identity of the deceased is indeed Chief Commander Woolf.”

“He’s certainly dead,” that strange voice that sounded identical to Woolf once again responded. “Hello there, Zhanlu.”

This time, everyone could hear it clearly. This voice was like an AI that resided within the Parliament building, coming from all around.

“Hello there, mister unidentified program.” Zhanlu was perhaps the most calm and collected among everyone present inside as he reasoned aloud, “According to the Union’s AI management laws, it is against the law to develop AIs that are highly representative of a real human in physical form, voice, and even personality. Once discovered, the AI will be immediately destroyed and the original creator can be sentenced upwards to life imprisonment.”

“You won’t be able to serve justice, my creator is lying beneath everyone’s eyes right now. As for destroying me...” That voice was unlike the robotic coldness of Zhanlu and was extremely similar to the voice of a real human. It even made a little laugh as it spoke and said, “You all can try.”

Zheng Di asked: “What’s going on?”

“His core program isn’t here,” Zhanlu said. “I believe the Parliament building only left a backup program that was triggered into activating by the main body--to put it simply, this one here is like its clone. This clone also has the ability to bypass the Freedom Corps’ network interception; I am unable to locate his main body.”

“You all can continue to address me as Hubert Woolf.” That voice, down to the nuanced tone, was terrifyingly similar to its human creator, creating an even more eerie atmosphere than the lifeless corpse near the corner. “It’s alright; I can tell you all that I exist within all transfer portals in the First Galaxy, inside a system that can only be accessed by the Chief Commander’s permission. I retained all memories of Woolf as a human and replicated his personality--Jingshu, when you said that your consciousness will merge with an AI, are you referring to a product like myself?”

Lin Jingshu’s strongest professional asset was the ability to mystify and appear as if she herself was Pandora's box; she didn’t expect to summon a real ghost and was at a loss for words.

Even as the most senior member of the crowd present, Zheng Di was born after the founding of the Union. Nobody had ever seen such a horrifying AI in their lives. Zhanlu was the most human-like AI they’d ever interacted with, but even this super-AI spoke with a unique emotionless robotic tone that could be easily differentiated from a real human after careful examination.

The truth was that modern technological advancement had reached a point where replication of human characteristics was not a difficult task, as normal AIs were already advanced enough to carry out complicated tasks. It was only due to the trauma of the higher-ups in the Union from the old Sidereal Era that the law had been written during the Union’s founding, successfully influencing the perspective of future generations regarding AIs.

The AI version of Woolf chuckled and said in an almost gentle tone: “My child, your idea of using a super AI to retain your memories, replicate your personality, then letting the supercomputer overtake all aspects of society so that you can become an eternal ruler and live on forever...this concept might have already been realized before you were born. If it wasn’t for your grandfather and the rest of us old fossils that overthrew that machine empire in the old Sidereal Era, perhaps everything would have been different now. Did you really think you were the first to come up with this idea? You can’t claim to be the first in history simply because you are mad enough to make your imaginations reality.”

The face of the generation five carrier twitched slightly on the screen as Lin Jingshu flinched back: “Now that you mention it, Chief Woolf, your life has surely been boring and repetitive. You claimed you were loyal to the Union and were the guardian of the Union, only to nourish the AUS pirates behind everyone’s backs. You invited the devil into your house then took the head of the devil, giving yourself a pat on the back through your own schemes to retain authority in the central government. You claim to be furious and disgusted by the works of the Eden Committee, only to have your own name written on the forbidden fruit. Then, in order to keep this dark secret buried forever, you didn’t hesitate to sacrifice two whole galaxies to get rid of Lin Jingheng, the only person that knew of your crimes. You call yourself a founder of the Union, the forerunner of overthrowing the old Era, then turn around to make yourself an AI for an eternal life...hah!”

Every single word from her mouth was like a torpedo firing into the ocean, blowing up all the generals of the Central Militia until they were nothing but clueless lambs. These lost lambs had no choice but to turn their heads back to Lin Jingheng to find an outlet to direct their frustration and confusion towards.

Lin Jingheng didn’t know how to respond---he had originally kept the secret for Woolf in fear of accidentally reigniting the fire of conflict within the finally peaceful seven galaxies of the Union. But now that the Union was virtually crushed down into shambles, there really was no point in hiding anything anymore.

Lin Jingshu: “Congratulations, Grandpa Woolf, for winning the best actor of the century…”

AI Woolf quietly cut her off: “Are you planning on buying time to escape? Sorry, but your target is too large, so I’ve already located you.”

Lin Jingshu’s eyes widened in shock; the next moment, the alarms inside the mech she was on rang out to the AI’s words. The pilot’s reaction wasn’t particularly fast, but he knew to activate an emergency warp while they were still on the ground.

Without a launching deck on the ground, a heavy mech’s energy storage was only enough to activate one emergency warp. Of course, this was not something normal people would choose to do, due to the effects it created on its surrounding environments and the toll it had on the mech itself and its passengers. This was especially dangerous for Lin Jingshu when space was also currently filled with her enemies.

But the missile was already pointing at her; she had no choice.

An artificial tsunami was triggered by the heavy mech’s warp, massive waves consuming the serene Neverland within moments after the mech left. The little fairies on the beaches fled for their lives but were too slow to escape the raging ocean waves. Priceless transformable materials were soon swallowed up by the merciless waters.

The next moment, the anti-missile systems installed near the edges of Wolto’s central continent rose from the ground. Yet this time, its cannons were not pointed at the missiles shooting down at the ground and instead at Lin Jingshu’s heavy mech fleet.

“Master, our emergency warping signal is being intercepted!”

Warping disruption, a trademark tactic of the AUS, clearly saw an upgrade in the hands of Woolf.

The heavy mech that couldn’t successfully warp out into space was still stuck about two kilometers above the ocean, not too far from its original position, and let out a mechanical sigh as it charged up its energy inside. Even though it had successfully dodged the missile, the damage to the main body was still quite severe. Lin Jingshu was thrown to the other side of the cockpit inside the mech, covered in a protective airbag that separated her senses from the rest of the world. For a short moment, she could hear nothing but silence around her and her own beating heart.

The crowd stuck inside the Parliament building couldn’t see the thrilling scene above the ocean and only witnessed the generation five chip carrier suddenly leaning down on-screen. As if he had suffered through unbearable pain, his voice returned back to his normal state as he struggled: “M...master…”

“Did you really think you took over the entirety of Wolto?” AI Woolf asked softly, “Did you really think Wang Ailun had the authority of the Chief Commander simply because he could control the Union Troops? My child, the Military Council was founded by my hands. They’ve operated under my control for over three hundred years, far older than your own father; can’t you see that you’re being too arrogant here?”

As everyone stared in awe at this scene, Lin Jingheng finally understood what Woolf wanted to do and grabbed Lu Bixing’s hand: “Contact the galactic fleets!”

Nagus’s mind was still stuck in a void of confusion: “I thought the communication signals from ground were…”

Lu Bixing interrupted before he could finish: “Lin Jingshu isn’t stupid, she took down the signal barrier just now. Marshal, send in your orders!”

Nagus: “......”

He quietly picked up the dunce hat and placed it on his own head.

Lin Jingheng: “Young, land on Wolto immediately!”

Poisson’s choppy voice rang out in response through the unstable channel: “Yes, sir.”

“Turn on all biochip signal disruptions and share them with all ally troops to pick out all biochip humans. Land the mechs in the refuge area and take in as many people as you can, quick!” Lin Jingheng ordered without hesitation, “Lee, go and gather up all the refugees in the central area…”

“Understood, the on-land Central Militia troops will open up the roads for you all!” Zheng Di exchanged a quick glance with Lin Jingheng in acknowledgement, then gave another pound on Nagus’s back. “Follow up, don’t you get it yet? Woolf’s physical body is dead but he put himself inside an AI, so now he’s virtually everywhere around you! Nobody knows how high this damned AI’s permissions and accesses are right now! Woolf’s death was a plot to lure out the queen bee of the Freedom Corps, then capture the rest of us old rebellious folks while he’s at it! This crazy old man won’t hesitate to blow up Wolto if he has to!”

Nagus, who had been threatening to blow up Wolto and die with Lin Jingshu earlier, was stunned. He could even feel his own voice crack in shock: “Blow...blow up Wolto? There’s two billion people on here, not even those Glory Troops had the guts to blow this place up!”

Lin Jingheng gave him a long gaze.

There had been more than two billion people back then between the Eighth and Seventh Galaxies.

Woolf’s tactics always played out like a game of chess; he was willing to sacrifice the lesser pieces to control the game, making him the most merciless player when it came to throwing away his pawns.

Nagus: “Crazy old man!”

“Isn’t it?” Lu Bixing let out a complicated laugh. “Though I admire his tenacity here to die if he needs to die--do we have time to gather up the citizens?”

“Of course,” Bayer said. “Don’t worry, Prime Minister, you’re not familiar with the Woltorian culture.”

There were sixteen emergency refuge sites on Wolto--the central area where the Parliament building resided was one of them, which was why floods of citizens had fled over when the pirates invaded. During states of emergency, everyone would flee to the closest refuge centers based on their locations so that rescue teams could pick them all up in a timely manner.

No matter how others laughed and joked about Woltorians being the cancer and parasite of Union nobility, it was undeniable that they were still the elites among elites as the residents of the capital planet. Especially during times of crisis, while they would still panic and cry in terror, they were still able to maintain their strong self-sufficient nature and retain civilized order even amidst chaos.

Lu Bixing looked carefully at the crowd lined up behind Lee and noticed that they were all lined up in order of age: the first in line were all children and the elderly, all the able-bodied adults stayed behind without any conflicts. The cooperative crowd allowed Lee to arrange for the evacuation of all refugees into armed mobiles within a matter of minutes.

Lu Bixing was stunned momentarily; he suddenly remembered that this was the Wolto that he had heard about when he was little, and the reason why he had wanted to step out and see the world outside.

Since when had he begun to develop heavy biases and treat the Union like a deadly virus that must be kept away?

“Prime Minister!” Bayer hollered, “Let’s go!”

Lu Bixing pulled himself out of his daze and let himself be dragged inside an armed mobile by Lin Jingheng the next moment. The outermost vanguards from the Central Militias opened fire on the pirate forces that were surrounding them without a second word. Perhaps Lin Jingshu didn’t have time to care for them, or perhaps she wanted to spare their lives to further disrupt Woolf’s plan, but the pirates backed off quickly as the Central Militia ripped open a path to safety for the refugees.

“What were you thinking of?” Lin Jingheng asked.

“I’m thinking about the importance of universal primary education,” Lu Bixing suddenly turned to Lin Jingheng as he spoke and looked at the latter in surprise. “By the way, aren’t you also a pure-blood Woltorian? How did you manage to grow out of a fresh pond with so much dirt on you that you could blend in seamlessly with gangsters on the street, completely fluent in street fighting and bad mouthing?”

As a mutant plant that grew out of Wolto’s soil, Lin Jingheng had nothing good to say. At that moment, the armed mobile charged out like a tornado as it shielded itself in layers of high-energy particle beams.

“Sir,” Zhanlu’s voice rang out suddenly, “there's bad news.”

The rain on Wolto had stopped as the rain clouds slowly dispersed, yet the light of the sun was still nowhere to be seen…

## Ch 168 - A Familiar Scene

Lin Jingheng’s expression looked as if he was about to give himself a heart attack: “......I don’t really want to hear that right now.”

The roof of the armed mobile gradually turned transparent; Lu Bixing could see the sky above his head.

At first, the sky only looked heavy with dark clouds. It wasn’t until moments later that Lu Bixing’s exceptional vision, powered by the biochip, finally made out the silhouettes above his head: “What are those...a fleet of mechs?”

Zhanlu said: “Those are my siblings.”

Lu Bixing: “......”

They had just witnessed a supernatural incident of a ghost possessing an AI and developed varying levels of trauma against these supercomputers. Little did they expect that Zhanlu, the completely oblivious AI who could not read the atmosphere, would fuel the fire at this moment to make such a tasteless joke.

Seeing all the complicated expressions within the vehicle, Lu Bixing had no choice but to attempt to ease the atmosphere and remarked dryly: “I thought I was your bro, Zhanlu.”

Nobody laughed this time. Lin Jingheng responded sternly: “The leading mechs are the Great Swords of the Union--they’re super mech models that were designed in the same batch as Zhanlu. Originally, they were assigned to the most exceptional veteran generals of the Union, but as they grew old, retired, or died, the super mechs were left without successors. Due to the scale of their mental networks and harsh requirements to fully control them, it was difficult for the average galactic soldier to pilot them. So aside from Zhanlu who was left in Lu Xin’s hand, the rest of these super mechs were downgraded to be decorations and show pieces for the military technology showcase every year.”

Lu Bixing stared at those remarkable mech bodies and mumbled: “I’ve been blown away once by the blueprints, I didn’t expect the actual mechs to be…”

The nine mechs of the Great Swords led fleets of mechs behind them like mythical demigods overtaking the heavens.

Yet, as the leading mech of the Ten Great Swords, Zhanlu’s new job was now a professional housekeeper in the Eighth Galaxy.

Lu Bixing offered consolations from the bottom of his heart: “I’m sorry for dragging you down, Zhanlu. But...it’s been so long already, and if they weren’t damaged during the war, why hasn’t the Union brought them out yet?”

Lee’s voice was a little hoarse: “No... Prime Minister, if the First Squadron’s information is correct, I remember that some of the major military factories in the First Galaxy were taken over by the pirates back during the war. Large batches of mechs never made it out in time and among them were the Great Swords. Due to the low average of the pirates’ mental strengths, they couldn’t even reach the minimum threshold to control the super mechs when they obtained them. For the rest of the war, the super mechs were kept in storage. The official news sources later announced that these mechs had been destroyed within the military factories they resided in during battles between the Union Troops and space pirates…”

Lin Jingheng interrupted: “Official announcement? Then why are these broken mechs still here? Who’s piloting them?”

“My apologies, sir, due to hardware limitations, my mental network is unstable,” Zhanlu said. “But if my system is still operating correctly, there are no human-mech port connections on the enemy mechs.”

The only possible explanations for not having a human-mech port connection would be either those incomplete ‘biochip idiots’ that the Freedom Corps had created in its early experiments or…

An AI.

Back when Lin Jingheng left the Silver Fortress and Ares Lee frantically took over, the Military Council and Eden Committee were in the midst of an unprecedented political struggle. The entire Silver Fortress rebelled against the Committee; after the Silver Ten left the fortress, the remaining staff and soldiers further ignored Commander Lee and refused to acknowledge him as their new superior. In order to maintain his position, that boot-licking Commander decided to bring in a group of AI soldiers to hold his authority within the Silver Fortress.

These AI soldiers ended up playing an important role in the war: they were easily hacked by the pirates and contributed to the breakdown of the Union.

A full AI troop was only good for intimidation in numbers, virtually useless on the actual battlefield. This was a widely accepted concept surrounding AI soldiers. Even Lin Jingshu acknolwedged that those highly robotic chip carriers were not ideal pawns on the battlefield; for this, she later gave up the research on 100% human-mech connection and instead graciously left cognitive abilities for her biochip humans.

But...what if it was the Woolf that spoke to them earlier that was controlling these mechs?

What if it was an AI so powerful and humanlike that it could not be hacked that controlled the highest military authority and permissions of the entire Union?

The hidden super mechs and the fearsome artificial intelligence.

Since when had Woolf begun plotting this terrible game?

Lin Jingheng’s eyes widened: “Notify all refuge sites, get into position within ten minutes and flee Wolto!”

Outside the Parliament building, a team from the present Silver Ten squadron fleets had already landed and forced the powerless pirates to temporarily disperse. Swarms of armed mobiles flooded swiftly into the mechs of the Silver Ten, but the situation on the battlefield was filled with surprises. Before all the mobiles were able to transfer onboard, a strange high-energy alert rang out within the mechs.

“Missiles!”

“Shields! Turn on all the shields--”

“Hurry up, let’s go! We won’t make it in time!”

“All fleets prepare to take off!”

Lu Bixing’s sharp eyes locked on a ray of beaming light from afar on the horizon. That shine was like the early spring light on planet Beijing-β, but unlike the ray in his memories, the light before him was followed immediately by a boiling nuclear cloud and powerful aftershock of high-energy waves. The invisible assassin and a circle of mech shields clashed within an instant, shaking the grounds of the capital planet.

Nobody would’ve expected that Woolf wasn’t only threatening verbally, he actually dared to blow up Wolto!

“Mad old fart!”

The heavy mech from the rescuing fleet extended its massive capture net and swept up all the armed mobiles still left outside. At this point, nobody cared if this could cause injuries for people on the armed mobiles; it was still better than dying.

Protection gases that solidified quickly sprayed out from inside the armed mobiles. Lu Bixing grabbed onto the safety handles as he saw the world around him turn upside-down. Missiles outside began dropping like a violent rainstorm, the sirens from the mechs in the refuge sites screeching in horror as people inside the captured armed mobiles rolled around like juice inside a mixer. Lu Bixing’s forehead crashed into the side of the vehicle.

The young man didn’t dodge the impact; his body had been strengthened by the chip inside him and wouldn’t suffer any damage. Yet the expected pain never arrived as he noticed that his forehead had fallen into Lin Jingheng’s palm. He opened his eyes in bemusement and felt Lin Jingheng pull him into a gentle embrace the next moment; the hand resting on his forehead slid down to cover his eyes. Lu Bixing didn’t see how the placid ‘Home of Lu and Muller’ branches collapsed under the aftershock of the nuclear explosions, how the carefully trimmed trees crumpled to the ground, how the mansion that enclosed countless memories and secrets broke down from the inside...finally, as if revealing the deepest part of its heart, the mansion exposed the slide that was hidden inside the walls.

Lu Bixing opened his mouth: “But he’s still…”

That type of virtual projection would be activated with a touch to the slide.

So... would those shattered stones also summon him?

Would he stand amidst the ashes of destruction and smile obtusely at the broken slide as he spoke those indulgent words to the child that was no longer there?

Would the disruption of energy from the explosion blur his figure?

The sirens inside the armed mobile devoured Lu Bixing’s voice; not even the person standing beside him could hear what he was saying. The heavy mech finally pulled in the armed mobile and closed its door the next moment, survivors of the catastrophe still feeling the buzz in their ears. For a few seconds, Lu Bixing choked on air as he curled up quietly in Lin Jingheng’s cold hands and felt as if something tugged painfully on his heartstrings.

Lin Jingheng let out a soundless sigh and leaned down dumbly to drop a kiss on Lu Bixing’s neck while the frown on his face remained still.

Lu Bixing pulled his consciousness back and dragged that hand down his face: “Hey, I’m not…”

Before he could finish, the vehicle shook violently as Zhanlu’s voice rang out the next moment: “Emergency warping has been disabled--sir, the warp earlier was unsuccessful.”

Zheng Di’s heavy panting rang out from the communication channel: “Is that crazy old man determined to bring all two billion residents on the planet down to the grave with him?”

Bayer: “Marshal, the mech fleet of the Great Swords are blocking the path outside the atmosphere…”

“Hah,” Lin Jingheng sneered. He didn’t care what was going on outside nor did he make any safety arrangements as he pushed the broken door of the armed mobile outward and stepped onto the heavy mech. “Zhanlu, connect to this mech’s mental network and give me pilot’s access. Blocking off our way and our warps? Who the hell do they think they are?”

Zhanlu reminded him calmly: “Sir, my mental network is still unstable.”

“It’s enough,” Lin Jingheng said, “follow me.”

After peeling off the layers of conspiracies and calculations, the veteran Union commander of three hundred years reappeared before his successors in this fearsome form.

The first principal of the Black Orchid Academy and the honorary graduate of the academy carried their swords against each other in the most gruesome graduation ceremony.

That mysterious and terrifying AI nestled within the First Galaxy seemed to have let out a small sigh amid the boundless void of the universe.

The mech fleets on the ground pierced through the sky like a sharp blade simultaneously from the refuge sites. A row of missiles fired towards the enemy fleet above the atmosphere in an attempt to break through the physical barricade; the massive storm of ashes gathered into deadly clouds in the skies of Wolto, forcing the enemy above to retreat temporarily. At that moment, a wave of particle beams fired into the opposing fleet as Lin Jingheng sailed the heavy mech through the opening of the enemy mechs. The heavy mech’s cannons rolled out swiftly like freshly oiled gears and knocked down three enemy mechs within the blink of an eye.

“Why does it feel like I haven’t actually opened fire with my own hands in ages?” a general from the Central Militia murmured in the back.

Zheng Di laughed: “Are your cannons getting rusty?”

“Attention please, everyone,” Lu Bixing’s mollifying voice rang out from the communication channel, “the enemy may not have a human-mech port connection, but we do. So please beware of your mental networks--”

As the allied Silver Ten, Central Militia, and Union Troops were about to physically rip open the barricade in the sky, a sudden mental network invasion swept through the fleets.

The newly reorganized fleet was shaken by the attack.

At that moment, one of the super mechs from the Great Swords sailed out quietly and closed in near Lin Jingheng’s mech. Its mech body was decorated with a complex design that flashed as it sailed out; a communication signal then automatically connected into their channel: “Hello, Zhanlu.”

“Hello, Longyuan,” Zhanlu responded. “I did not expect us to reunite on the battlefield someday; I remember that your former master was a revered veteran general. If he was still alive, I’m sure he would be very disappointed to see you like this.”

“Indeed,” the mech named Longyuan answered. “Thankfully, I no longer have a master now. My mech core has been secretly modified to be the pilot so that I can freely control my own mech body. As long as my mental network is within range, all mechs without a pilot can be under my control. In contrast, you look as if you have certainly fallen down and out.”

“Yes, my mental network has been damaged and still has not been fully repaired; my mech core is also made from experimental materials while my mech body was picked up from space,” Zhanlu admitted honestly. “But from my master’s evaluations, he has determined that we can still beat you all up despite our shortcomings.”

Lu Bixing: “...Are all the top AIs of the Union all this honest and direct?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t really want to answer this question.

Longyuan said: “Oh, if that’s the case then I won’t hold back anymore.”

The next moment, the suffocating mental network hack from the super mech dropped viciously onto all existing human-mech ports within range. Lin Jingheng felt as if a sharp needle had pierced through into his head while Zhanlu’s unstable mental network trembled under the attack.

The former Top Commander Lin of the Silver Fortress had always maintained a human-mech sync rate at the maximum for humans. He was always the one that swept the battlefields with his powerful mental strength; this was the first time he experienced the indescribable feeling of being the victim of a mental network invasion.

If he was already having a hard time with the attack, it was even more painful for everyone else.

The majority of pilots in the allied fleets were knocked off their mental networks within the first wave of invasion. Backup pilots quickly reconnected in response; fortunately, experienced galactic soldiers were used to picking up the connections as everyone swiftly passed around relaxants to their colleagues inside the mechs. The soldiers were not discouraged by the attack and instead held their ground desperately to protect their homeland they could no longer see.

“Commander Lin,” Longyuan said, “your fleet is very strong, but humans can never overpower machines. We do not have a human-mech port, thus proving that we cannot be defeated.”

Lin Jingheng’s response was a missile right towards the enemy.

Wolto had already become the frontlines of battle among multiple forces. Nobody noticed that a small fleet of starships had already sailed towards the outskirts of the capital planet and entered the mental network range of the super mech. Yet the enemy mechs took notice; with a quick scan, they immediately determined that it was a mech fleet disguised as a civilian starship fleet. Yet despite being another fleet of mechs, the team was made up of small mechs that posed no threat to the super AIs. Anyone that took notice of them during this heated battle would perhaps think they were a fleet of refugees from a small planet within the galaxy and not pay much attention.

But in the next instant, this inconspicuous small mech fleet suddenly dispersed and circled the closest transfer portal around Wolto.

Soon after, all mechs on the allied side received the same message: “Emergency warping terminals are now open, best wishes to you all--for life and nature.”

The entire communication channel exploded.

“AUS?”

“What is this!?”

The Union’s Chief Commander Woolf had stolen the AUS’ methods and blocked off emergency warping in space, only to see the real space pirates come in to break open the blockade.

The surprising events of the last 24 hours could be written into a high-fantasy novel.

“Retreat!” Lin Jingheng sent out the order right before Zhanlu’s mental network completely broke down under Longyuan’s pressuring attack. Yet as if he was already prepared, Lin Jingheng disconnected from Zhanlu’s mental network the moment before it broke down and reconnected seamlessly into the heavy mech’s own network. Longyunan’s heavy fist missed its target while the heavy mech activated its emergency warp and disappeared on the spot.

Countless missiles dropped on Wolto. The biochip humans and wildlife left on the planet all perished into ashes; the Union Troops that carried billions of refugees finally managed to make an emergency warp at the last minute through the opening created by the AUS pirates and escaped the hellish frontlines. Political enemies and allies all gathered together as differences among them suddenly became blurred; everyone faced each other near the transfer portal in a daze from the chaotic events earlier.

Before anyone could catch a breath, an abnormal energy wave near the transfer portal was captured as the heavy mech fleet carrying the symbol of the Freedom Corps appeared out of the blue.

“Marshal!”

Lin Jingheng didn’t hesitate to order: “Take them down!”

The two opposing forces that had jumped out of the same pit of fire earlier immediately engaged in another brief round of fire. The Freedom Corps quickly realized they were outnumbered and prepared to flee. With their high human-mech sync rates, the biochip carriers initiated another mental network attack to the opposing forces.

The alliance troops that were still bathing in the trauma of the AI fleet earlier jolted back in unison--

Only Lin Jingheng’s cannons were locked on the enemy’s commanding ship.

Heavy mechs were incredibly sensitive to attack; the moment they were locked on, Lin Jingshu received an alert inside the mech. At this time, the commanding ship she was on had already shattered its shield on land. She lifted her head abruptly and glanced through the military-use camera; her gaze shot out as if it was piercing through the galaxies, through the mechs, into the eyes of her own brother with a feeling that couldn’t be described as excitement or hurt…

*Will you kill me with your own hands?*

The missile slid out of the cannon. Lin Jingshu glued her eyes to the screen masochistically--she wasn’t someone who would willingly sit and wait for her death even at the very last moment.

The sharp siren inside the mech rang out as the mech body trembled violently; she flew out from the impact and was caught by the protection airbag in mid-air.

“Mech body damaged, alert, engine system damaged.”

“Automatically dismantling damaged parts, activating the first backup energy source.”

The missile had missed.

Would the unrivaled Top Commander Lin of the Silver Fortress miss a shot from a trembling hand?

What a familiar scene.

“Let’s go,” Lin Jingshu muttered, “emergency warp out of here.”

1. A reference to the English fairy tale *Jack and the Beanstalk.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *1984* - George Orwell, *Brave New World* - Aldous Huxley. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “There is a type of bird without legs in this world. It could only keep flying and flying, and sleep in the wind when it’s tired. These kinds of birds only had one chance to land on ground, and that is when they die.” - Reference to 1990 Hong Kong film *Days of Being Wild*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)