Can Ci Pin | The Defective

Author: Priest

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

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# Book 5 - Tower of Destruction

(TL Note: The book title can also be translated as “The Shattered Tower”. I chose the translation that stayed consistent with the rest of the books here but please keep in mind the double meaning is intentional.)

## Ch 119 – An Unfortunate Accident

“Top-end defense technology and arms had always been a tradition of the Union. It was precisely these that allowed us to unify the Union today…”

Someone was speaking through his ears; it was a familiar voice, deep and slow, with a hint of old age.

Who was it?

“But in recent years, I’ve been thinking…was peace through unity truly a good thing?”

“When the lion stops hunting, its fangs will grow dull. We know that the military spends incredible amounts of money every year on those useless mechs and missiles while the factories continue to increase production numbers and roll out new models. They would then roll out these weapons of mass-destruction every year during Memorial Holiday as displays in a parade to awe the media as if they had actually been working. Every industry is in overproduction including the military.”

“But they don’t make anti-missile systems nor do they study military theories; why not? Because there is no direct impact, no pretty data to show off, and they can’t bring it out for display.”

“We live in a world too peaceful with no threats from the outside. Do you all know about the ancients? The old Earth Era was a horrifying time; billions of people all lived on a tiny planet while the limited lands were divided up among countless nations and countries. They were divided into the East, West, China, America…hundreds of governments coexisted on the same planet. They would spend days and nights fighting over their limited resources. People would work a hundred hours a week to make ends meet, befriend each other one day then turn on another the day, while others might not even make enough to meet basic needs. Our ancestors at the time would go to bed every night worrying about their calculating neighbors. Perhaps when you all visit the history museum next time you can ask our ancestors if they dare to bring their nation’s ‘weapons of defense’ out to play like toys.”

“As for us, we don’t have the concept of a ‘nation’ and therefore no such thing as ‘national defense’. If I must say, the Union’s failure came from your honorary alumni Lu Xin. He crushed the space pirates and instilled enough fear for them to stay away from the Union like the demons and creatures of mythology that would never descend upon earth. Would any of you build traps around your houses and defend yourselves from demons at night?”

“Hey there, young man, is my lecture really that boring? Why are you so sleepy? Wake up…Yes, I’m calling you in the corner of the back row, Jingheng…”

“Lin Jingheng!”

Right, that was the History of Military Theory class in the Black Orchid Academy. For the first lecture, the school principal asked Chief Commander Woolf to come in as a guest speaker at the school’s ceremonial hall.

A theoretical course is fine, but why history too? As a stubborn student with very clear interests in his subject areas, Lin Jingheng obviously chose to take this time for a nap. Unfortunately, because he knew the guest speaker, he couldn’t escape the old Chief’s eyes. A student beside him hit him with his arm to wake the boy up, the metal pin on the uniform sleeves poking into his temples and waking the sleepy student up immediately.

A sharp pain came from Lin Jingheng’s temples. The blood coming from his forehead already blurred his vision as he vaguely felt that he was inside an ecopod. The throbbing pain and numbing sense on his body were the last strings that pulled his consciousness weakly back to reality—the scale of the explosion near the portal was too large and too unexpected, virtually the entire fleet of the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy forces were dragged into it. The massive energy created by the explosion pierced through all the shields, bodies of heavy mechs…virtually everything turned into ashes.

At the very last moment, Zhanlu had activated his top danger mode and turned himself into an ecopod against his master’s orders as he wrapped Lin Jingheng inside.

“Sir…”

“Sir…”

Lin Jingheng wanted to move but couldn’t; he couldn’t feel his body below his chest, nor could he answer Zhanlu's call, only able to give a weak response to the AI through the mental network.

He was in a state between conscious and unconscious as if his soul were flying out of his body. He couldn’t distinguish the past and present, yet ironically, many things became crystal clear in his mind.

He remembered that open lecture where he was called up in front of the whole class.

The old Chief was purposely picking on him as he asked the young student to talk about how he felt about the “Great Unification” theory. If he didn’t give a satisfying answer, he would simply fail the class and retake the course.

A fourteen-year-old Lin Jingheng was still sleepwalking when he stood up, his mind still blank, not having caught anything the Chief said earlier. He had no choice but to bullshit his way through.

“The Great Unification…there’s a lot of social issues with the Great Unification,” the fearless young man spoke up arrogantly, “for example…for example, gorillas are closely related to us…”

The class broke out in laughter.

“…What’s so funny? This is a fact, did you guys all inhale too much helium? The desire to destroy and fear death is engraved in our genes so naturally that we side ourselves into a community against our enemies, even risking our lives to fight. This is one of the most fundamental characteristics of humans. When ancients talk about ‘patriotism’ and ‘fighting for our people’, not only do they have political and economic reasons, it is also human nature. In theory, internal and external conflict within a government body are two sides of the same coin. A society without enemies from the outside would be like a reservoir that only reserves water until it’s filled, then grows unstable and cracks when it gets too heavy...”

The students in the lecture all gave their rebuttals before the young man could finish: “Where do you see instability in the Union?”

The young Lin Jingheng was still in a daze from getting woken up from a nap when he randomly caught onto something to give an ad-lib show on. Most of what he was saying didn’t have any basis, so of course he wouldn’t be able to discuss anything deeper when questioned. In frustration, he could only bring out his usual arrogant attitude and turn toward his fellow classmates: “Do you all not know what a ‘theory’ is? Even if the Black Orchid Academy is an elite school in theory, there’s no way they would enroll a bunch of idiots like you guys.” Thanks to his potty mouth, the classroom discussion escalated into an uncultured verbal fight as everyone jumped into this mess.

Only the old Chief on the podium remained silent. He let the young man’s misdemeanor in class slide and quietly put an A on the section of the student’s classroom performance.

What part of the Union is unstable?

The stability of the Union was built on two pillars; the first was the cradle of the Eden system that was determined to pamper everyone in a false sense of comfort. The second was the “false Pledge of Freedom” that the Union held up high as the pampered babies looked up to it to find their sense of control and belonging, giving them a lucid dream about freedom and bravery.

The Lin Jingheng 30 years later turned around abruptly. His gaze passed through time back to that afternoon class in summer and met with the old Chief standing behind the podium.

He understood: “It was you.”

*It was you who had been behind the AUS.*

Eight whole galaxies away, the man had carefully controlled the battlefield…the man was the teacher of Lu Xin, and his own teacher as well.

But why? Lu Xin never revealed the list on the forbidden fruit even until his death, was it because he’d also seen your name on there?

This wasn’t a result of Ankur trying to play smart and taking the hand of the demons.

The existence of the forbidden fruit came to light by accident, and Woolf wanted it gone; he wanted it completely gone with no traces left behind.

As for the people of the AUS, perhaps they were also people that had sworn to change the world in the past but turned into a bunch of fools that sought destruction. For the Chief in the City of Angels, these madmen lost their value as pawns and had grown out of control.

In this script, the AUS were the mad villains. Lin Jingheng and Ankur were the “heroes” that protected the people. The two tragic heroes worked together in the end and faded away along with the forbidden fruit while the AUS rebuilt itself from the inside by sending off the dangerous pawns to the frontlines.

Woolf killed and silenced people, but the Union was drowning in anger and frustration. The blood of the Eden Committee and the battle in the far galaxies would once again unite the Central Militia and the Union troops. The foolish mad dogs of the AUS would have their legs cut off on the frontlines of the Seventh and Eighth Galaxies, which would then make it easier to put a leash on them in the future; what a truly happy ending.

*Old Chief, is this the script you wrote for this world?*

*Did the Union you built betray you, or were you the one that betrayed it?*

That was the founder of the Union; but if someone like that could also give up on the Pledge of Freedom and turn his back against all his dreams and hopes for the future, Lu Xin, the Silver Ten, and everyone else who had shed blood in space…who or what were they all fighting for?

For a short instant, Lin Jingheng felt his soul shatter into pieces before his own flesh gave up.

Zhanlu’s voice remained calm and robotic as if nothing happened: “Sir, my core processor has been severely damaged and cannot be repaired. The temperature is rising, I expect I will melt down after one minute. My transformable body has sustained over 80% damage during the portal explosion and cannot open a shield anymore. Very soon, you will be exposed to the high-energy particle beams from the aftershock of the explosion. I’m sorry, I will no longer be able to protect you.”

*Zhan…lu…..*

“Please allow me to express my thanks to you during the last minute of my life. Thank you for your generosity and tolerance toward me; I am unable to understand your unique sense of humor a lot of times, which is very unfortunate. If there is a chance, I hope to give a full upgrade for my database. Commander Lu Xin set up a farewell message on me, which is also something he wished to tell you. He wants me to tell you: I love you, my child. I love you like my own son. I wish for the prosperity and peace of the Union to last, and for you to live happily and safely. If my two wishes cannot be granted together, then the latter is more important to me; you are my pride and joy.”

Zhanlu paused slightly after relaying the message. Lin Jingheng wasn’t sure if he was imagining it, but he felt as if Zhanlu let out a small sigh: “…. This is farewell, sir. I hope you will miss me.”

Lin Jingheng mustered up all the strength in his body only to move his finger slightly. Yet the broken bones in his body made it difficult for him to move around as his fingers slid dumbly across the walls of the ecopod…and this time, this rare and precious mech core would never be able to speak to him like a human again.

But he still needed to go back.

Lin Jingheng clung onto his thoughts; he promised someone that he will return no matter where he went, how far he is, he will return as long as that person is still there.

Lu Bixing was still waiting for him. He couldn’t let the same thing 30 years ago inside the medical capsule happen to Lu Bixing.

The commander struggled to get up, but his injured flesh trapped him inside the pod. Even with all his strength he could no longer lift a finger.

*Why does a soul have to be trapped inside the ugly flesh and can’t fly away like electromagnetic waves back to its home?*

Zhanlu’s mental network already disappeared in the vast sea of space, and on his physical remnants, the last layer of his shield dimmed in silence.

Like a weak candlelight blown out by a storm, it vanished.

When he wandered the universe carrying his hatred, traveling through dangerous paths that could cost his life at any minute, the damned string of fate would always manage to bring him back to the world.

But when he finally found a place that he would risk everything to return to, a person that he would cling onto until the last second of his life, that damned string of fate finally snapped.

His life had always been an ‘unfortunate accident’ since the day he was born.

The Union established the first Great Unification Galactic Era of human history. A year and half after the pirate invasion broke the peace within the Union, the glory and spirit of the Union remained as people clung to their last hope. There were people still willing to call others that lived galaxies away their comrades and fight for them with their lives.

At this moment, the great Era of the New Sidereal Calendar perished; along with the last Top Commander of the Union, the last foolish man who loved the Union and lived in the delusion that he could once again bring back prosperity and the last stubborn idiot who refused to let go of the Pledge of Freedom…everything sank in the depths of space with the explosion.

The civilization of the Union—this last mass hallucination woven together by mankind finally shattered.

The news of the ambush at the portal wasn’t sent over to the Eighth Galaxy in real time. After Turan exploded the portals, Lin Jingheng lost connection with the Eighth Galaxy for a short while.

Turan stayed and cleaned up the particle waves caused by the aftershock and minimized the effects of these explosions, all while checking up on the patrolling team beside the underground terminal.

“Commander Lin and the rest of the fleet are expected to arrive within sixteen hours, all teams on standby make their way over to escort them in case of pirate pursuit.” She paused slightly after making the order as an unexplainable feeling consumed her heart.

She looked out towards the mental network on the mech and thought, *perhaps it’s because they are finally here.*

Severing the connection with the Union was like escaping the womb: it was supposed to be uncomfortable.

The Eighth Galaxy Forces followed her orders and made their ways toward the underground terminal.

“I think we’ll probably end up like this from now on,” Weasel spoke through the channel to Monoeyed Hawk and the other teams gathering up near the terminal, “the Defense Force is going to split up into two teams. One will be patrolling this entrance, the other will maintain the safety within the galaxy. Even though we don’t have many people and over half are garbage, it should be enough. Besides, don’t we still have the Silver Ten? We should finally be in peace for a while.”

Monoeyed Hawk mocked back: “Back when I was the king of Cayley, I thought the same. Then guess what? Storms came without a warning and swept every single one of these fools up. What prosperity and good fortune, the old capitol is gone with a blink of an eye.”

Weasel sneered: “Old Lu, I thought we’re all cleared now, didn’t we rip up those receipts at the Old Fart’s place?”

“Yeah, we’re cleared,” Monoeyed Hawk said, “if we weren’t, I’d be sending a missile your way right now instead of chatting. But nobody said I’m not allowed to pick on you even after ripping up the receipts, right?”

Weasel: “……”

Monoeyed Hawk let out a sigh and dropped the topic: “The transfer portals may have been blown up but rebuilding a network across spacetime takes a little less than a century. We might not be able to see the day due to our age, but the younger ones can still wait until the portals reopen. If everyone thinks like you, maybe these kids will be facing more missiles by the time they reopen the doors…why can’t you think about the future for a bit, you carefree old man? Even that little Saturday kid is better than you. By the way, where did Saturday go? He’s not here yet, is he trying to skip out on work?”

Before Weasel could respond, a high-energy alarm came from the entrance of the terminal.

“That was fast,” Weasel was amazed, “these sure are the elites of the Union…”

Monoeyed Hawk interrupted him and yelled: “Be careful, run!”

The ID check for the tunnel near the entrance of the underground terminal rang out before Monoeyed Hawk could finish, but the alarm only sounded off once. The next moment, loads of gunfire and missiles poured out of the transfer portal at the entrance along with a fleet of enemies. The enemy fleet slashed down directly toward Monoeyed Hawk and Weasel, who were the closest teams near the portal.

Over half of Weasel’s team were caught in fire while Monoeyed Hawk dodged the cannons in a panic.

“It’s an enemy attack!”

This turn of events was completely unexpected; nobody could imagine how this underground tunnel’s coordinates had been exposed. The fleet gathered up near the portal lost their composure within an instant.

*How could this be?*

*Where’s Lin Jingheng?*

Monoeyed Hawk howled into the channel: “Connect to the command post, Turan!”

Turan stood up abruptly.

The Eighth Galaxy was like a closed-up cattle barn filled with fearful sheep; what would happen if a pack of wolves barged in?

Monoeyed Hawk couldn’t even begin to think.

The AUS pirates took the opportunity to stay on the offensive as they ripped the fragile protective layer of the Defense Force apart with their sharp claws. Clouds of smoke shot up outside the terminal while the AUS fleet was already thousands of miles away from the frontline Eighth Galaxy Forces, charging right into the main galaxy with no care for the weaklings behind them.

Monoeyed Hawk: “What are you all staring at, stop them!”

“Hold them for twenty minutes, I’ll send backups immediately.” Turan’s order came from the command post. Meanwhile, all mechs of the Eighth Galaxy Defense Force received an enemy attack alert. Turan almost felt her voice stick in her throat as she called out, “Send out a long-distance signal, connect to Commander Lin!”

“Captain, a long-distance signal might expose…”

“We’re already exposed!”

Turan knew the route Lin Jingheng was going to take to retreat. All the transfer portals that the commander would pass through had exact coordinates, and in theory the other side should immediately receive the signal once it was sent out.

But the signal received no response.

Turan’s hands began to tremble as she turned to look at Lu Bixing, who she’d drugged down. Her heart sank as she asked: “Where’s the Prime Minister?”

“The Prime Minister’s mech was hit by particle cannons during their retreat; he wasn’t able to dodge in time and is currently knocked unconscious in the medical capsule.”

“Captain,” a technician from the Engineering department cut in, “the supercomputer inside Professor Lu’s house suddenly shut down and entered an unknown process.”

Zhanlu!

“Captain, we’ve sent out our sixth long-distance signal but still haven’t received a response yet.”

The Eighth Galaxy Defense Force was built on the grounds of the Silver Ninth Squadron, but most of the troops on duty right now were newly enlisted soldiers that they’d recruited from within the Eighth Galaxy. Half of the former elites in the Ninth Squadron followed Lin Jingheng to the Seventh Galaxy, if they…

Turan’s face turned pale as if she were frozen in time, not speaking for half a minute.

Then, she finally said: “Blow up the underground terminal.”

“Captain! Commander Lin and the rest are…”

Turan howled: “Or am I supposed to expect you weaklings to stop the pirate invasion? Send out my order!”

Saturday was still waiting for the mystery person to respond, but the other suddenly stopped responding once the connection was made. When he heard the alarm of the enemy invasion, he felt as if the sirens slashed through his body.

He jumped back onto his mech and quickly gathered up his subordinates as he rushed towards the battlefield. Before he could see the battlefield through his mental network, the mech already detected the abnormal energy level caused by the explosions.

What happened?

He pondered in denial as an answer he refused to acknowledge lingered in his heart. He trembled in fear as he connected to the communication center: “Mint, what happened?”

“I don’t know, the underground terminal’s coordinates got leaked through unknown reasons. The AUS pirates sent a large fleet over, and we lost contact with Commander Lin.”

Saturday’s eyes widened.

*Is it me?*

*Is it because of the signal I sent out?*

Saturday’s group was the first backup to arrive on the frontlines. He watched as the large AUS fleet charged in towards the insect-like Eighth Galaxy mechs. The mechs perished one by one as they closed in on the enemy fleet like helpless ants.

Saturday felt his mind explode as his body chopped up into pieces.

At that moment, Turan’s order to blow up the portal arrived.

“Captain, the AUS has signal disruptions with them, we can’t remote control the explosion of the portal!”

Turan: “Then we’ll do it manually!”

Saturday yelled as he charged right into the pirates’ cannons. His subordinates were taken aback for a moment but followed behind without hesitation. Countless broken pieces flew past as Saturday felt his whole body on fire; there were multiple times where he thought he was hit until he realized he was still sailing forward. The piercing sirens drummed in his ears as the comrades behind him built walls to stop the pirates.

One wall down, another backup arrived.

Saturday passed through the entrance portal of the terminal, disarmed his armory, and activated his self-destruction system—

From then on, the Eighth Galaxy finally became an isolated land.

Author’s Notes: Here are some technical questions from earlier since there seemed to be some issues with JinJiang earlier, so I’ll answer them here

A user by the ID Bapai asked: “So even with airplanes we have today, cellphones are usually required to be turned off due to risk of signal disruption in air, but the connection from the underground terminal has absolutely no protection. Even if it’s highly unlikely, but what if the other person sent you an invite to a group chat and then set up some believable bait for you to click on, kind of like fishing and spam emails we get today…even without being baited like Saturday, what if someone was just tired and accidentally pressed on the wrong link like that?”

So according to my bullshit science in this happy two-man space waltz novel, when long-distance communications are passing through transfer portals, the signal between the sender and receiver are unique in a set. Because of how the portals create a network throughout the galaxies, regardless of if it’s a public or private signal, there would be tons of weird signals stuck onto the portals at any given time; however, only signals that are password protected and set up by two consenting parties can be connected within the sea of noise, so there wouldn’t be a scenario where they would accidentally connect to the wrong one.

When Hope escaped, he only managed to pick up Woolf’s signal after passing through a portal. When Lin Jingheng was still in the old space station and decided to send out a signal to the Ninth Squadron, it was only when the Ninth Squadron connected to the signal that they would risk their signals being detected.

Also, the side sending out the signal would need to know the receiver’s location and coordinates; please check the chapter of the twins from the Third Squadron borrowing Lin Jingshu’s network.

Saturday picked up the passcode when he was near the border of the galaxy, but it’s not guaranteed that he will be able to successfully connect to the long-distance signal because his sender only knew the general direction of his location. However, it didn’t matter if he could pick up the signal or not because most people wouldn’t choose to connect to it. It was only when he was lured over to the Old Fart’s place where he would be much more likely to connect to the signal, and because at that point his coordinates are confirmed, the sender can send out their message with precision.

As for disruptions—during wartime, the Eighth Galaxy portals would be in a state similar to being blocked off to outsiders. Otherwise, even if pirates send out suicide teams into the Eighth Galaxy and send out signals to their comrades outside, the AUS can still detect the location of the underground terminal by the time Turan blows up the portals. If that were the case, they wouldn’t even need to bother using Saturday.

At the same time, enlisted soldiers can’t possibly block their connection with the transfer portals. Because if they block that off, they would be only left with regular telecommunication within the galaxy which would cause significant delays in communication. For example, even with a distance between the earth and Sun, there would still be an 8-minute delay if you sent the message at the speed of light. According to the setting of this little adult fiction, without transfer portals between the center of the Seventh Galaxy to the edge of the Eighth Galaxy, it would take decades for Commander’s message to be heard on the other side. This would be extremely inconvenient in space during wartime.

## Ch 120 – The Long Winter of the Eighth Galaxy

Lu Bixing felt like he’d had a wild dream. It wasn’t a linear dream, but he recalled that he seemed to return to his childhood, where he couldn’t walk around freely and felt as if his limbs were tied down by invisible ropes.

He understood he wasn’t someone extremely obsessive or radical; the nature of fluidity and adaptability flowed in his veins. No matter what he faced, he could always somehow find the good in every situation and wouldn’t dwell too much on the details; it was exceedingly rare that he would have this kind of restraining dream.

Yet something in the dark seemed to keep warning him throughout the dream that he needed to wake up, he needed to wake up…

Lu Bixing struggled and suddenly felt something behind him drop. He was finally free; Lu Bixing turned to see that the thing that held him down earlier was a giant tombstone that crashed onto the ground into ashes. The young man stared in slight shock, not understanding what it meant, but before he could stop and think about it, his instincts in the dream made him run towards the light.

A strong light flashed before his eyes and his foot finally landed on the ground.

The medical capsule already healed up his injured finger and cleaned up all the anesthetics inside his body. He was supposed to be in his best physical state right now, but for some reason Lu Bixing only felt his heart drum rapidly in his chest. The pounding of his heart was quite uncomfortable, like something was stuck in his chest as his heart raced to escape.

“Professor Lu…Professor Lu is awake!”

Lu Bixing turned his head up abruptly and noticed that he was inside the command post of the Milky Way City Military Base.

“Professor Lu.” Turan’s face appeared on the screen before him. She was still inside a mech, her face carrying a color of graveness.

Lu Bixing’s memories returned as he looked at her; that’s right, Turan was the one that drugged him down.

His eyes twitched in anger; he was still human after all, even if he was much more collected than the average person, he could still be upset.

Yet he wasn’t used to throwing around curses, so he resorted to looking coldly at Turan, waiting patiently for her to explain.

Turan didn’t know where to begin and subconsciously avoided the main point as she opened her mouth: “The Prime Minister’s mech ran into a little problem during the evacuation earlier, he was knocked unconscious so he’s in the medical capsule right now. When the capsule performed its full body scan on him, it discovered that there was a tumor in his head…”

Lu Bixing frowned slightly: “Is it bad?”

“Not too bad,” Turan’s voice was soft and reserved. Suddenly she didn’t seem like a powerful Military General and instead like a young nurse on her first day of work. “It can be dealt with in a small procedure, but because the Prime Minister is old and has a history of health issues, he may be resting up for a while. So we’re hoping you can take over his position as a temporary Prime Minister…”

Lu Bixing’s heart skipped a beat when he heard Turan subconsciously change her tone and interrupted her: “How long was I out? The Prime Minister is back, but where’s Lin?”

Turan was speechless.

Lu Bixing stared into her eyes for a short moment before he stood up. At the same time, Turan’s mech also sent out an alarm inside the screen: “Abnormal energy warning, abnormal energy warning—”

“Captain, they’re panicking now that their exit is blocked! They might want to forcefully break through our defense!”

“Break through my ass!” Turan’s expression changed like a flip of a page and finally showed a bit of spirit. “If these pirates don’t die you all are paying with your lives!”

“Captain, a pirate vanguard team is sailing towards us one-fourth of a sailing day away.”

This sudden change of events saved Turan as she didn’t know how to face Lu Bixing, and immediately threw herself back onto the battlefield: “Got it, warm up your cannons. Team Four—Foucault, bring your team to portal number 573…”

Lu Bixing got up and pushed the guard following beside him away as he pulled up all the recent command history recorded in the command post with his permission access.

He quickly scanned through the complicated frontline records—large fleets of refugees from the Seventh Galaxy entered the Eighth Galaxy, Lin Jingheng ordered the explosion of the transfer portals…an unused protected underground terminal’s coordinates were leaked out, AUS pirates entered the Eighth Galaxy…

The AUS fleet arrived too quickly and too suddenly, there were only Weasel and Monoeyed Hawk’s teams waiting by the terminal by the time the pirates entered. A total of 28 small mechs and two mid-sized mechs that patrolled the area held the enemy fleet back for twenty minutes until backup arrived, and virtually all ships by the terminals had lost contact with the command post…

To cut off the road for the pirates outside, Saturday brought his patrol team totaling fourteen mechs right into the pirate fleet and manually blew up the last underground terminal with his own mech…

Lu Bixing’s reading speed was absurdly fast, but at this moment, none of the words pieced together made sense to him even if he could read them.

He stared at each word individually and began dissecting each phrase to formulate the meaning of the lines…

*Monoeyed Hawk…lost contact.*

*Who lost contact? What does ‘lost contact’ mean? Did the signals get intercepted again? That’s bad news on the battlefield, we need to fix that immediately.*

*Saturday…blew up the underground terminal…*

*Blew up…*

*Blew up…*

*So, where is Lin Jingheng? Why didn’t they say where Lin Jingheng was?*

“Professor Lu!” The guard beside him held onto the young scientist.

Lu Bixing was like an AI that suddenly short-circuited and couldn’t struggle out of the guard’s grip, so he subconsciously gave the guard a courteous smile.

The guard trembled in fear at this smile: “You…do you need a sedative?”

Lu Bixing’s mind raced as he thought, *what can I do? I need to do something.*

“I don’t need a sedative,” his voice was almost a whisper, as if he was simply mumbling to himself and answering a question, “Prime Minister…didn’t the Prime Minister ask me to temporarily…what did he want me to do again?”

On the other side of the screen, Turan couldn’t bring herself to look at him and ordered her subordinates: “Open fire!”

The entire Eighth Galaxy’s outrage manifested into gunfire and shot mercilessly onto the fleet of pirates under her command. The pirates turned immediately to retreat, only to be blocked by Foucault’s fleet near the terminal as they got sandwiched in between cannons and missiles.

Didn’t they say the Eighth Galaxy’s elite troops are virtually gone?

Didn’t they say the rest of the fleet was merely newly enlisted weaklings?

The AUS pirates that accidentally stepped into the Eighth Galaxy would have never guessed why these peasants and useless souls that couldn’t even read before enlistment would be able to follow orders without hesitation like veteran soldiers.

They would have never guessed that these people could be like desperate soldiers risking their lives on the frontline with nowhere to return.

“Professor Lu, you…”

“Connect me to the Engineering Department.” Lu Bixing finally grabbed onto something in the sea of thoughts. He was like a child afraid of ghosts, walking alone at night with only a flashlight in hand as he fixed his gaze on the road ahead and nothing else. “Engineering Department, it’s me. Please confirm for me if all refugee starships have landed; if not, contact all surrounding space stations and have all starships prepare to land immediately on the same station. For the next twenty hours, we will be banning all aircraft and spacecraft within the galaxy; all department engineers, please use our Defense Forces’ internal channel passcode as a basis for inspection; shoot down all unknown aerospace objects. The Eighth Galaxy is now an enclosed area, we can’t allow even a single pirate ship in our skies.”

“Connect to the Social Security Management Department.” Lu Bixing quickly gestured toward the guard after giving his instructions and connected to the department team. “It’s me, I need an estimated number of refugees from the Seventh Galaxy.”

The management team responded: “Our quick estimate gave us at least eight billion people.”

“Okay.” Lu Bixing nodded. “Try and give me a plan for collecting personal data and processing immigration as soon as possible; I’ll need everyone to get to work immediately after we remove the aerospace ban. Also, I’ll need at least three more backup plans including refugee settlement for future references and meetings.”

The guard beside him showed concern and asked: “Professor Lu, are you sure you don’t need to res…”

“The Prime Minister asked me to take over, I can’t let him down.” Lu Bixing answered calmly and carefully as if he was holding onto it like it was his treasure, his life…and his last straw of hope. “Are the department managers of the Finance and Planning departments injured? If not, please have them come visit me right now. Closing up the Eighth Galaxy means that we have to become self-sufficient from now on; our economy is still fragile, and now we have an extra eight billion refugees to take care of…”

Suddenly, it was as if his mind finally began to process normally. The young man could feel the weight of the entire Eighth Galaxy pressing on his shoulders; he had too many things to plan and solve, there was no time to rest. Lu Bixing took in a deep breath and stood up. “Don’t follow me. Sorry, please give me something to clear my mind; a cup of tea, coffee, relaxant…anything is fine.”

The sudden change of events in the Eighth Galaxy created an urgent chain reaction that didn’t even allow Lu Bixing a moment to sit down and take a sip of water. He ran around the various departments in the government that were completely dumbfounded by the war, dragging the souls of people back and putting them to work. Following him was like nothing had ever happened and everyone was focused on the problem before them.

Twenty hours later…

Saturday chose the right time to blow up the portal and managed to keep most of the pirate fleet outside the galaxy. The Engineering Department and the angered Eighth Galaxy forces teamed up as they cleaned up the rest of the pirates within the galaxy within the designated time frame.

“Professor Lu.” A soldier on the telecom called him.

Lu Bixing turned his head slightly, the headphones connecting to the neighboring meeting room still on his other ear: “What is it?”

“Captain Turan responded saying that all pirates have been…”

Lu Bixing answered before the soldier could finish and said: “Got it, clean up the battlefield. Don’t let the remnants affect the safety of the terminals inside the galaxy. Send all prisoners to the First Prison and send over a list of casualties as soon as possible.”

Lu Bixing’s heart sank as he said the last line.

He turned his head up as he suddenly realized something and stared blankly at the soldier, who looked back at him in a complicated expression.

Send a list of casualties…he felt like there was a monster hidden behind this line.

*Did I forget something?* he thought.

“Professor Lu, Captain Turan wants to speak to you.”

Lu Bixing took a step back subconsciously, something inside him telling him he didn’t want to speak with Turan right now. Yet before he could reject it, Turan’s face appeared on the screen inside the command post.

The Captain took her hat off; her hair was pressed down from wearing the hat for too long, which was why she hated having short hair. In the past, Commander Lin didn’t like how she would waste her time on something silly like that and criticized her looks after forcing her to cut her hair…which probably would not happen again.

Even if she grew her hair out to her ankles in the future, nobody would insult her anymore.

Turan’s eyes were bloodshot, her lips chapped. After twenty hours, she finally faced Lu Bixing once again across the screen; she stood as Lu Bixing sat, the long silence between them haunting the room.

Turan pressed her hat on her arm to the side and said: “Professor Lu, we received confirmed reports that the first two patrol teams that were attacked by the pirates, along with the team that flew into backup and blew up the portal are completely annihilated. We’ve collected the remnants on the battlefield.”

Lu Bixing’s eye twitched slightly.

Turan: “Professor Lu, I’m sorry, I…”

“Oh.” Lu Bixing forced himself to nod slightly; his neck was stiff like an old robot. “Got it, you mean Saturday, Weasel, and…”

Who was it again? He’d seen the name earlier but couldn’t remember anymore.

“Also…Monoeyed Hawk.”

Lu Bixing trembled as his eyes widened.

Turan finally managed to say this name to him and decided to drop the bomb: “One more thing I wasn’t able to tell you. When Commander Lin was retreating, we lost connection with him mid-way. Then when the pirates entered the Eighth Galaxy, we received the news that the Zhanlu in your house crashed.”

Everyone inside the command post held their breaths as they waited to see Lu Bixing’s reaction. They all mentally prepared themselves to drag him into a medical capsule if the young man broke down.

They waited five whole minutes, but Lu Bixing didn’t give any reactions. He stayed still and calmly spoke to his headphones toward the meeting next door: “Sorry, please wait for me.”

Everything that had happened within the last 48 hours was destructive. Each event was deadly enough to completely shatter a person’s soul and psych individually; yet they all managed to happen at the same time. It was like laying on a bed made of sharp needles that stabbed onto every part of his body, ironically creating a strange numbing effect.

…As long as he doesn’t move, doesn’t think about it, he wouldn’t break this strange balance.

Turan suspected that he didn’t even understand what she’d said and decided to be direct even if it meant crushing the young man: “Professor Lu, the underground terminal’s coordinates were exposed. We suspect that Commander Lin and his fleet ran into an AUS ambush during their retreat…”

Lu Bixing suddenly cut her off: “Wait, what did you just say? Zhanlu crashed?”

Turan opened her mouth.

Lu Bixing got up from his seat as if he were sleepwalking: “How can he crash at a time like this? I have a lot of work for him left, I need to go check on him.”

He turned around and left after this.

Turan shot a glance at the soldier on the side: “What are you doing, where’s the medical capsule?”

The soldier ran towards the medical capsule while the others in the room pondered if they wanted to knock the temporary Prime Minister out again, only to see Lu Bixing suddenly losing balance by the door. The young man instinctively grabbed onto the doorframe but still didn’t manage to keep his balance, finally letting himself fall to the ground as his knee knocked on the hard flooring.

“Professor Lu!”

“It’s nothing, my leg suddenly fell asleep…” Lu Bixing mumbled to himself, “how strange.”

He grabbed onto the doorframe and tried to pull himself up only to fall back down again. It was as if he suddenly lost all strength in his body and his limbs were numb like a puppet, unable to control his own flesh.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to the people that helped him up, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me…”

Turan couldn’t help but cut off the connection.

From that day on, the Eighth Galaxy entered a long winter.

The hope of relying on outside sources for supplies was gone. The refugees needed to be relocated while the residents of the Eighth Galaxy grew more anxious by the day.

As the economy of the galaxy grew more complicated and harder to stabilize, existing social conflicts also grew more heated as time went on. The hatred towards refugees peaked in some areas as small-scale armed conflict sparked in other areas.

The Defense Forces ran tirelessly throughout the galaxy to extinguish the fire, and the supply of nutrient syringes reached closer and closer to rock bottom.

The former smugglers of the Eighth Galaxy quickly picked up on the danger ahead. The newly introduced fiat money issued by the government once again faced rejection from the public, the market once again digressed back into commodity trading.

Soon after, groups of ‘smart people’ created fake nutrient syringes and flooded the market, once again causing a destructive blow to the weak economy as the real stock reached its end.

The Eighth Galaxy was a rare group of people that had experienced famine under the rule of the Cayley pirates in modern times. People knew that nutrient syringes were the trust of the government, so an unstable supply of trust on this isolated land meant instability and fear in society.

For the next coming days, Lu Bixing was busy running around taking care of all existing issues. He needed to check in at the command post on the clock and maintain a sharp mind, stable emotional state, and rationality. He needed to carry the burden the old Prime Minister left for him in these times of trouble; against his style of appeasing both sides, he began to build an iron fist and even ordered martial law a few times.

After work, he would go home by himself, close the door and cut off all communication from everyone aside from work emergencies.

In front of the “Home of Commander Lin and Engineer 001”, the two dancing robots grew rusty and dirty into a pile of junk. The gardening robot got wet from a rainy day one time and experienced a malfunction, making it run around the same area all day without a care for the rest of the garden. One side of the garden turned into a wasteland of dirt while the other side began to grow weeds, making the house look almost like a haunted mansion. Lu Bixing didn’t bother to fix the robots nor the long grass, stepping on them as if he didn’t notice anything wrong.

Turan was afraid that he would die alone in that house and secretly ordered a few guards to patrol around the house, making sure the young man was still alive.

One month later, Prime Minister Edward was finally released from the hospital. Lu Bixing was on a business trip on another planet, so Turan came in his place to escort the old man.

Chills ran down her back the moment she stepped in the hospital—a few doctors walked out of the Prime Minister’s room.

Ever since the medical revolution that completely automated all health checkups and medical procedures, there was only one scenario where human doctors were needed; it was only if machines and technology could no longer handle the situation.

“Captain.” Prime Minister Edward already changed back to his casual clothes and cleaned himself up as he got ready to leave. “You must be busy lately, I noticed that you lost some weight.”

“I didn’t lose weight; my body fat just dropped a little.” Turan said, “I added extra training for myself lately.”

The old Prime Minister looked at her in surprise.

Turan gave him a complicated smile: “I’m a pretty lazy person, I’ve always thought of schedule training as work in the past. I never understood the commander; I thought, if I was the boss, nobody could tell me what to do nor control my training schedule, so I’ll always stay in the command post and give out my orders as I sit at my desk. It must be nice to watch other people train and sweat buckets.”

“What about now?”

“Now my biggest joy is to go to the training grounds every day. Your head empties when you’re doing physical training.” Turan answered and then asked, “Prime Minister, I saw a few doctors walk out earlier, are you alright?”

“Have a seat.” The Prime Minister nodded towards her and returned her question with another question, “How’s Bixing doing?”

“Not very well.” Turan sighed and pulled out a piece of paper from her pocket. “Look.”

The Prime Minister took the paper and recognized Lu Bixing’s handwriting on it: “The nutrition bars inside your fridge have expired, I’ve cleaned it up for you. P.S. please don’t take so much if you can’t finish them, wasting food is shameful.”

The note was dated yesterday.

“He left this inside Monoeyed Hawk’s house; he goes over and cleans up every day without asking where his father is.” Turan said, “I asked that kid White what he does in his free time, and White said that he just spends time trying to repair Zhanlu’s system at home. He sleeps inside a medical capsule and uses drugs to control what time he sleeps and wakes up to maintain his best physical state. He still hasn’t asked about Commander Lin’s whereabouts yet, nor if his father left any dying message. It’s been over two weeks since we told him about the underground terminal being exposed--the system also indicated he’s read the reports, but he refuses to even speak of it. He wouldn’t even ask how it happened nor mention what he wanted to do about Saturday’s situation. It’s almost like he even forgot about how I drugged him that day. I’m scared to even talk to him unless I have something I absolutely need his opinion on.”

Prime Minister Edward said: “Tell him to find time to visit me when he comes back, I may not have enough time left.”

Turan was stunned: “No…it was just a tumor, didn’t the procedure already…”

Prime Minister Edward answered calmly: “They detected a pop reaction in my DNA chain, the tumor was just an early sign.”

There was nothing medical technology couldn’t cure during a time like this: even if someone broke their spine, a medical capsule could completely cure someone. As long as the person didn’t die immediately from brain damage, it was almost as if medical capsules could save anyone from any situation. However, humans will still age and die.

Death is like light, love, and the vast universe: it’s eternal and equal. Every time people think they’re about to overcome the trials of death, they will quickly realize that there will still be more obstacles in the marathon of life ahead of them.

And beyond a mountain was almost always another mountain.

Sometimes it came in the form of a “pop reaction.”

Nobody knew when this reaction would show up. It would always start off with some small issues until the exosome reaction consumed the DNA chain in inevitable destruction. Replacing organs, injecting stem cells, patching DNA strands…nothing could stop the deterioration, as if the patient’s body was cursed by a supernatural being.

Turan looked at him in shock: “But…that’s impossible, you haven’t reached the age of DNA deterioration.”

Aside from his physical appearance, the Prime Minister was only 240 years old, which was right in between middle and old age. If it was during times of peace, he probably still wouldn’t have retired and would have a long life to look forward to.

However, his life was one that had direction but no hope. It was a life that was tormented continuously by his beliefs and morals; it was a roller coaster ride that almost lost to the Rainbow Virus. Its torturous path almost made it seem inevitable that he would age faster than the average man.

The old Prime Minister smiled weakly at her without a word.

Turan lowered her voice and said: “Did you all plan this together to drop the burden? You can’t do this, Prime Minister, he can’t shoulder everything on his own, you’re all being too hard on him.”

The Prime Minister felt the corner of his eyes warm up: “Then let’s all do our best, Captain—no, General Turan. I’ll do my best to live a bit longer, to send you guys off a little later, but you all need to be prepared.”

Three days later, Prime Minister Edward announced his recovery and returned back to work. The first thing Lu Bixing did when he came back was to request a long vacation from the Prime Minister.

“I’ve already arranged for my absence; you can also call me up anytime if there is an emergency since I’ll only be at home, I won’t go anywhere so I can arrive within minutes.” Lu Bixing explained to him, “My request is mostly because I want some time to fix up Zhanlu’s system. You should know that Zhanlu’s database has lots of valuable information, it contains details of the Union’s top technologies. We’re in desperate need of them right now. With Zhanlu, once we rebuild the transfer portals in the future, we can also have him connect to his main body in the First Galaxy and immediately contact Commander Lin and the Silver Ten; this is also to secure our galaxy’s defense.”

The Prime Minister opened his mouth, unsure how to respond.

Lu Bixing pulled up his request form from his personal device and pushed it to the Prime Minister’s device for the old man to sign. He then said, “I’d always flexed in front of Lin without thinking back then, saying how I could rebuild Zhanlu’s mech and even the entire Eden system if he gave me a lab…I was such a fool. Now that I’ve finally touched on the core system, I realize how far behind we are over here; the top line of the Union’s technologies is leagues beyond us…okay, now that you’re back, I can get back to work.”

“Bixing,” The Prime Minister called out to him and struggled to get the words out of his throat: “Some…some things can’t be changed by human power. We don’t have a choice, so we have to learn how to accept them.”

Lu Bixing filtered out the words he didn’t want to hear as if he was deaf, then walked out with no intention of stopping.

## Ch 121 – Born From Faith, and Die From Faith

Zhanlu’s system was extremely complicated; even the backup at home didn’t manage to capture most of his function as a mech core, which was wildly beyond Lu Bixing’s basic understanding of AIs. This wasn’t too surprising—even back on planet Beijing when Zhanlu walked around with Lin Jingheng on the streets, nobody aside from Lu Bixing could tell he wasn’t human.

Rumors had it that a single gram of the transformable material on Zhanlu cost six million First Galaxy currency, and nobody aside from the Union’s central government could afford this price. What kind of high-end technology was required to even build that expensive ‘shell’ of his?

Lu Bixing had once imagined it in his head, only to discover he’d still underestimated the scale of this super-AI.

Zhanlu was like an unsolvable puzzle. Lu Bixing checked all the references and materials he could get his hands on, but the more he researched, the more he began to think it was an impossible task. He felt like he’d stepped into an endless swamp that made it difficult for him to walk in. For three whole months, he made no progress on the project.

This wasn’t the first time Lu Bixing faced failure: he was also once a naïve scientist who’d planned on building a mech suitable for vaccuocerebrals. After countless trials and failures, that experiment also ended fruitlessly. Yet that was only one of many dreams he had as a young man, like a child on ancient earth who admired the stars in the sky. Even if it only brought pain, the pain burned in a beautiful fire.

But this time, he didn’t know what else he could do if he couldn’t fix Zhanlu.

On day 100 of Lu Bixing locking himself at home, the bright sun in the morning woke him up from the sofa. He pulled himself up, but the smart sofa couldn’t understand his intention and wrapped its master back up again like a giant blanket. Lu Bixing let out a sigh as he pushed away the soft fabric under his chin and sat up as he stared at the corner of the sofa with a big yawn.

Suddenly, his blurry vision cleared as he noticed a single strand of hair that had fallen into the cracks on the sofa under his finger.

Lu Bixing shot up abruptly, the sofa also hardening up its material in response. Soon after, he leaned down slowly as if he was praying, carefully picking up the hair with his finger and pulling it out of the crack.

The hair wasn’t long; it was a normal strand of straight hair that was in a very unique dark brown color that looked almost pure black under dim light.

It was left by the other owner of this house.

Lu Bixing held that single strand of hair in his palm and stared at it for three whole hours until the home-use medical capsule sent him a warning. That was when he finally woke up from his long daydream, picked up the strand of hair with a tweezer and sealed it onto a microscopic glass slide. Then, as if he wasn’t satisfied with his work, he pulled up a 3D printer and created a spherical resin cast that wrapped around the single strand of hair. It looked almost like a clear crystal ball from afar, and Lu Bixing placed it in his pocket.

He then got up and brushed his teeth as he went through the notes he took on his personal device last night.

After a night, he felt like all the notes he’d taken a day earlier were senseless babbling and deleted all the notes on his device without hesitation, then splashed a handful of cold water on his face.

This was the 100th time he’d deleted his own notes.

Lu Bixing looked up the mirror subconsciously and suddenly couldn’t recognize the person behind the mirror—small stubble was growing on his chin, his clothes were thrown on messily, there was wet stain on his chest, and the clothes he hadn’t changed for days were all wrinkled. His cheeks sunk in slightly, and his hair that he hadn’t cut was almost grown out to his shoulders. Those natural curls grew even more messy with length as drops of water still rested on them.

Lu Bixing was someone that naturally cared about his appearance, and after seeing his awful state, was speechless for a few seconds. But he couldn’t even muster up the energy to clean himself up so he hit the wall a few times to turn the mirror away.

That was when someone knocked on his door.

The digital butler had crashed, so the furniture at home were only left with the default AIs as it robotically announced the visitor behind the door: “Visitor: Mint. Identity has been set to: Your student. Do you wish to answer the door?”

Lu Bixing let out a sigh: “No.”

He didn’t want to see her, but it wasn’t because he had anything against the little girl. It was simply that after 100 days of seclusion from the outside world, he’d grown to be repulsed by the idea of social interaction.

The door was finally quiet, but it was only a quick moment until his personal device began to make sounds. The light on his personal device warned: “Legal Guardian obligation.”

Right, Mint still had fourteen months before she turned twenty; even though she was already working alongside adults and could be completely independent under these special circumstances, she was still a minor under the law. According to the Union’s minor protection law, a minor’s legal guardian can’t cut off connections and communications with their dependent for no reason.

Lu Bixing’s arms tightened around the sink as he lowered his head, then gave a small mocking laugh: “…The Union’s minor protection law.”

He opened his personal device, went into the main system and deleted all related laws of the Union; his personal device finally went silent.

Lu Bixing closed his eyes and stood for half a minute, then finally decided to open the door for the young girl.

Mint wasn’t the only one waiting outside the door, all four of his students stood there. Mint opened her mouth to call out “Professor Lu”, but her voice already cracked as she started crying in front of the man.

Lu Bixing’s gaze passed through the students and landed on the little garden in the front yard. He saw the gardening robots and the dancing robots all fixed up, oiled, and the garden cleaned. All the crazy weed grass in the front was cleaned up; no wonder he woke up this morning to the sunlight passing through the window. The yard was filled with fresh flowers, almost a little too crowded as various kinds colored his garden.

“Don’t cry.” Lu Bixing tried three times but couldn’t get himself to put back on a smile. He felt a little bad and could only invite the students inside his house. “Did you all clean up the garden? Thanks.”

“Professor,” White said, “we’re here to help you, is that ok? We’ll help you fix Zhanlu’s system.”

Lu Bixing thought, *how could you guys fix anything with your little brains? All you guys can do is fix up some smaller robots and serve some tea, what else can you all even do?*

But before he could kindly reject the offer, Rickhead finished what he wanted to say with red eyes: “I can’t do anything…Professor Lu, let me serve you some coffee.”

Lu Bixing: “……”

These four young children were the only survivors of planet Beijing. They’d wandered the galaxy with him and worked hard to become grown-ups faster. When they gathered up like this around him helplessly, they were like four little stray animals; Lu Bixing didn’t know whether to cry or laugh, he didn’t have any words for them.

He wasn’t like Lin Jingheng, who could get up every day before sunrise to train even if the world was ending, but he had another type of moral: even if he lost everything, he was still a teacher and a guardian. He would rather put himself down than to break the hearts of his students, so he could only agree to their request. “Okay, I’ll have you handle the coffee from now on.”

What he didn’t realize was this soft nod single-handedly ripped open a small crack in his caged-up life. The four students would come visit him every day at a designated time on the clock. Lu Bixing wasn’t comfortable presenting himself like an unclean gremlin in front of his students, so he finally took the time to clean himself up to be more presentable.

These little brats turned into model students overnight to the point Lu Bixing almost couldn’t recognize them. They would come and go quietly as they ordered the little robots at home to clean up the house, then sometimes bring in a few decorations to liven up the house. The students couldn’t read the difficult texts and references, so they ended up dedicating their time to doing things like brewing tea and coffee; they also agreed to not bother their teacher when they didn’t understand something, and discussed amongst themselves in a little room next door. In the evening, they would then carefully report their studies and findings to Lu Bixing before they left for the day.

Of course, four little students couldn’t even compare to a proper engineer. Most of what they brought up not only didn’t help his research, but it was also often filled with loopholes that made Lu Bixing have to free up half an hour everyday to fix their mistakes…though on the good side, this ended up forcing him to speak up and interact with the students.

Very soon after, the people from the engineering department also started visiting the residence along with the students.

It started off with one or two people at first, and Lu Bixing couldn’t really find an excuse to shoo them away. More and more people came in until one day, when Lu Bixing noticed that all the coffee in his house was gone, he also realized the core engineers from the department had all paid him a visit.

Lu Bixing stood behind the small bar by the staircase as he stared at the empty coffee bag in confusion. He opened up the robotic coffee machine that followed him around and then looked down at the engineers in his living room that had come for another meal.

There weren’t a lot of tables and chairs in his house, so they let the older engineers take the chairs while the others sat on the floor or stood on the side with their digitals pens while surrounding that crashed digital butler of this house.

“Hey,” Lu Bixing knocked on the metal handle of the staircase. The chatter downstairs quieted down as everyone turned up to look at him. “Say, if I remember correctly, I requested for a long vacation, not changing the engineering department’s workstation to my house, right? We’re low in supplies here, even the top engineer’s house doesn’t have enough food. My six-months’ worth of coffee is all gone thanks to you all, maybe it’s time to end the party.”

“Don’t worry Professor Lu, we got the Prime Minister’s permission to bring a few extra bags of coffee for you.” An old engineer stood up and responded, “The Prime Minister said that if we can’t recover Zhanlu’s database, we’ll be playing centuries worth of catch-up in technology here, you can’t just leave us out like this.”

Lu Bixing scratched his head speechlessly; this was only an excuse he had given the Prime Minister to approve of his vacation. Most of the records on Zhanlu’s database were on technologies from the Union; Lu Bixing had taken a look at it before--even though it was top-end data, a lot of what was recorded was more for show than having any practical value. Besides, could the Eighth Galaxy compare to the production of the Union before the war? What the Union could accomplish wasn’t equivalent to what the Eighth Galaxy could accomplish. If they couldn’t bring these technologies to reality, everything was just talk and theories. In terms of practical value, perhaps even Hope’s farm model was more useful than Zhanlu’s data—otherwise, Lin Jingheng would’ve already shared the information with them.

Lu Bixing kindly responded: “No matter how high-end a technology is, it will have to depend on whether we have the production ability to actually make it work. The Eighth Galaxy’s main goal right now is to rebuild our production lines and social order; the Prime Minister may have confused things. Zhanlu…Zhanlu should be considered a long-term project. You all should go back and do whatever you need to do, don’t follow me and waste your time here…”

“Professor Lu,” another young engineer interrupted him and skipped the small talk, “you don’t need to explain. We all know that was just an excuse for you to ask for a vacation because you think Zhanlu’s database is your personal issue, and you’re unwilling to let other people worry about your own problems. But no matter what other people say, I came out of rural Alpenglow and grew from an artificial ecosystem repairman to an engineer in the Engineering Department because I followed you on my own will; you have also chosen me.”

“We don’t have time during work hours, we can come after work.”

“Professor Lu, you’re the one that told us that the entire department is a team.”

“Professor Lu, isn’t our department’s motto ‘always challenge the seemingly impossible’?”

“The seemingly impossible is right here, that’s why we came.”

Lu Bixing was still holding the empty coffee bag. He opened his mouth and then closed it again as he looked at the people before him; he felt words stick in his throat and couldn’t even make a sound.

“We’re all here.”

The Eighth Galaxy might have been a rural land, but even a place like this could raise up unconventional engineers and scientists like Lu Bixing. They were all buried under the sand over the years on these deserted planets, until they were suddenly dug up by someone and forcefully dragged into this world of unrest without warning.

Finally, these people were starting to shine the way they were meant to be.

People you never forgot would never leave you behind.

“The Home of Commander Lin and Engineer 001” wasn’t particularly large, the modest design was built to the size for around three to four residents. Occasional dinners with a few friends weren’t an issue, but inviting the whole Engineering Department over made the place a bit more cramped than usual.

The basement of the house had been taken over by these people; these unconventional Eighth Galaxy engineers took over the training room like a bunch of wild monkeys everyday as they worked. Three people shared a treadmill, and the zero-gravity simulator room was turned into a mini meeting room where four to five people argued over their studies inside like a bunch of uncultured hooligans. Unique Eighth Galaxy slang and curses filled the room as one poor engineer was forced out of the meeting room. The angered engineer turned on the zero-gravity system as revenge as he watched his vulgar colleagues inside get thrown around like in an ancient washing machine until they all got knocked out and were shoved inside a medical capsule.

Lu Bixing, who rushed over after hearing this incident, didn’t know what to say and could only put up a “house rules” by the front door. The first line was a large, bolded text that said “no physical contact” while the owner of the house quickly moved all the training equipment temporarily to the attic.

The attic was a room lit by natural sunlight. In order to protect specialty equipment, Lu Bixing covered up the glass roof and window while the small robots finished their jobs, then went back into their standby position by the wall.

Lu Bixing now turned towards the dimly lit attic and took a good look at the room. Everything in here belonged to Lin and stood quietly under the shade as if that person was staring at him kindly and patiently from the side.

Lu Bixing’s heart thumped at the moment the locked doors of those forbidden memories quietly opened up a little. Suddenly, he couldn’t control the urge to think about Lin Jingheng, to think about those people he hadn’t seen, those people he’d purposely turned away from. Regardless how much he rationally told himself that he shouldn’t think, shouldn’t reminisce about them because he still had so much work to do, even though the entire engineering team was still waiting for him downstairs, and he couldn’t afford to lose control…he still gave in to his desires.

Like a drug addict that entered an episode, he walked around the attic a few times anxiously as he tried to close the door inside his heart. He even pulled out a cigarette subconsciously and breathed in a large cloud of smoke, only to cough it all out with no signs of calming down. He then put out the fire of the cigarette on his own arm until the pain and smell of burnt flesh pulled his senses back.

He was like a man drowning as he gasped for air in a desperate attempt to regain control of himself through self-inflicted pain.

When he finally felt his heart rate return to normal, he ran out of the attic and locked it up as if he were running for his life. He slid inside a small room, quickly patching up his wound and pulling down his sleeve as if nothing happened, then threw himself back into the sea of data processing.

The core of the Eighth Galaxy’s research technology and department was established under these turbulent conditions.

In a blink of an eye, the most eventful and climatic Woltorian year had passed. From the Prime Minister down to the residents, everyone cut down their needs to survive. Over a dozen armed conflicts sparked within the galaxy during these times. The Prime Minister silently approved of Lu Bixing’s policy to reenact the death penalty during the young man’s time as the temporary Minister, then publicly executed the group of smugglers involved in the production of fake nutrient syringes.

The old Prime Minister’s attitude drastically changed as he embraced a more iron-fist rule of the galaxy. He pushed for the amendment of the constitution and even forcefully introduced a set of new government policies as if he was racing with time to pave the way for the future.

Qiming had completed its orbit around the Eight Galaxy’s sun as the planet once again returned to the same place fourteen months ago when the explosions of the transfer portal happened. Prime Minister Edward officially announced this day to be the Day of Independence of the Eighth Galaxy; from then on, the Eighth Galaxy abolished the NSC system and established a new calendar system based on the orbit of Qiming. Starting the year off with the Day of Independence, a full year was now 424 days in the new calendar

Meanwhile, Lu Bixing and his unconventional team of engineers finally made significant progress on their project.

424 days later, the backup system of Zhanlu inside Lu Bixing’s house finally rebooted successfully.

That familiar voice once again rang up inside the house from the living room down to the basement: “Hello, I am Artificial Intelligence Zhanlu. My apologies, but due to system malfunction, I am unable to provide service right now. I will now enter self-repair mode, which will take approximately 800 hours to complete. Please be patient and secure sufficient energy sources—"

The crowd of engineers in the basement cheered. Some people whistled a song, others laughed as they hit the wall; some people hadn’t slept for three days and decided to take a nap on the spot. Lu Bixing clenched his chest—inside the little pocket on his dress shirt near his heart, he could almost feel that tiny resin ball burn up in fire as the heat pierced through his skin, boiling his blood as it pumped through his frozen heart.

Where was Lin right now?

Did he leave any messages for him before all the portals in the Eighth Galaxy perished…even if it was just a pointless reminder?

Lu Bixing felt his soul leave his body as he thought about the possibilities, the desire to drop down to the core of the planet grew strong as he finally grasped onto a ray of hope.

While the rebooted Zhanlu quietly ran through its self-repairing process, Lu Bixing placed an 800-hour countdown by his front door for the engineers to be able to see everyday before they went to work.

The young man slept for three days straight until he felt his entire body numbed by sleep. He got up and cleaned the stubble growing back out, cut his hair that had once again grown out past his shoulders with his home robot, changed to some clean clothes and a jacket, then made his way to the command post to find the Prime Minister and Turan to report his progress.

Right before he left, he called out Turan: “General Turan, where’s my father at?”

Turan looked into his eyes to see how over 400 days of seclusion had slowly but surely cleared out the nightmarish mist of despair and bloodthirst from the young man’s eyes, showing hints of the light that had once filled those pupils. It was as if he’d returned to who he was in the past, but also become a completely different person. She personally led Lu Bixing to a public cemetery near the military base and said: “We found the remnants of his mech.”

Lu Bixing’s gaze fell as he looked at the sculpture on the tombstone, only to see the line carved on the side: *“Don’t worry, kid, I picked you up from the garbage anyway.”*

Turan left like a gust of wind; whether he wanted to cry to stay strong, she didn’t want to look.

It was as if he finally woke up from a long and tormenting nightmare…

As if.

The burden on the Prime Minister’s shoulders lightened significantly when Lu Bixing returned to the command post. Zhanlu’s repair process was going smoothly, it was like everything was moving towards the right direction.

After 867 hours, a little longer than expected, Zhanlu finally completed his self-repair.

The entire Engineering Department, Turan, even the Prime Minister who barely got out of the medical capsule, came to “the Home of Commander Lin and Engineer 001” as they waited patiently for a miracle.

“Hello, Headmaster Lu,” Zhanlu’s voice rang out inside the crowded house. “Even though I have no physical body, I am very happy to see you again. It seems you have grown a bit paler and thinner than before.”

Lu Bixing’s eyes reddened as he listened speechlessly to that familiar voice.

Turan asked the question everyone wanted to know: “Zhanlu, what happened to Commander Lin? Is your main body with him?”

Zhanlu fell silent for three seconds: “Captain, we ran into a pirate ambush during our retreat back to the terminal. They exploded the transfer portal and the entire Seventh and Eighth Galaxy fleets were annihilated. Commander’s commanding ship blew up…”

Turan fell to the ground.

“My main body perished in the explosion.”

They climbed through mountains, walked through hell, slowly but surely crawled out of the abyss as they looked towards the other side of the mountain, the end of the road…

Only to find that nothing was left in the end.

Hope had once said: “Mankind was born from faith.”

Lu Bixing had followed him up on a whim at the time: “Mankind will also die from faith.”

It was a prophecy by word.

## Ch 122 - Hail the Pledge of Freedom

A starship sailed to the border between the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy.

Many years ago, it was a lively place filled with smugglers stopping by the small space stations and trading their goods. Sometimes the Seventh Galaxy would send out their law enforcement and chase the smugglers away, turning the terminal into a hub of chaos. Unable to pass through safely, many merchants that passed through the terminal were forced to hire illegal armed fleets to escort them between the borders.

Of course, this was no longer necessary anymore.

The transfer portals connecting the two galaxies were gone and the Eighth Galaxy completely vanished from sight. For the next coming years, no mechs or starships would be able to pass through between the two galaxies.

The starry skies of the Seventh Galaxy were completely silent, aside from remnants of space waste left uncleaned that could be seen on both sides of the terminal. Even the space stations floating beside the terminals were empty with no traces of other mechs or starships sailing by.

Within a little less than two years, Hope--Harris, had grown more white hair that ironically made him appear saintlier than before.

He was looking through the galactic telescope at this dead zone in space.

“Some said that the Seventh Galaxy lost 60% of its population during that battle; a portion of them died, and another portion fled to the Eighth Galaxy. Now, only some people live on a few dwarf planets on the edge of the galaxy. The spineless Seventh Galaxy government couldn’t handle the unrest after Ankur’s death, and now the Seventh Galaxy is deserted like the foreign lands outside of the Union.” A young man in a long robe poured a cup of hot tea for Hope. “Head Prophet, we should prepare to sail back, there’s no point in sailing forward. The Eighth Galaxy cleaned up all the transfer portals already, there’s nothing aside from space waste left. Besides, that space waste is also a safety hazard.”

Harris turned his head without a word. He was wearing a long robe of unique fabric that looked almost like water shining like a line of broken diamonds under the light. Yet the man under this fancy robe carried a cold and exhausted expression--he was a completely different person than the ‘Hope’ who had once built a farm with a group of inexperienced engineers and chatted endlessly with Lu Bixing about life.

Yet the coldness in his eyes didn’t bother his subordinates; the young man that delivered the hot tea didn’t dare to meet his gaze with the Prophet and turned his head down. His feeling of inferiority was so great the young man could almost kneel on the floor and pray to the Prophet.

When Harris left the Eighth Galaxy with his group of followers, the regret that lingered in his heart was the bottles of home-made wine that he’d promised his young friend. Despite having some reservations, he’d still decided to trust Woolf when he left the galaxy because he felt as if he were a man carrying nothing aside from faith. Nobody could possibly take advantage of him because he was a poor man with nothing to give.

However, he was wrong. He should’ve also made Woolf have some reservations as well.

When the light of the AUS vanished from the White Tower, when they lost everything and were struggling to survive outside of the Union, it was Woolf that offered a helping hand like a savior. Woolf bowed down to the Union and turned his back to the Union, yet no matter what he did over the years, he had never chased after fame or riches and never fell into the hands of greed. He was a rare single man in the Union without even an offspring.

Harris had always thought that if anyone could understand the pains of the White Tower, it would be Chief Commander Woolf.

But now he knew. Anyone without desires may not always be a saint; sometimes they were simply mad.

The battle 400 days ago shook the entire Union. The Eighth Galaxy became isolated, and the Seventh Galaxy was almost annihilated as a result. The story of the two galaxies fighting alongside each other against the pirate fleet until the end was like a tale of tragic heroes that struck a chord with the other galaxies. With the First Galaxy as the lead, the protesting movements within the civilians grew more heated as time passed. The phase of despair brought about by the war was long gone, and the people that survived finally realized that they still had a life to live as they gradually learned to step out of the cradle and embrace the pains of reality.

The sophisticated population of the First Galaxy had their own unique ways of protesting; rather than resorting immediately to violence, they started off with peaceful demonstrations on the streets and kindly asked the ‘illegal’ Glory Troops to leave the galaxy. Rumor had it that the largest demonstration was a street filled with protestors who stood quietly and orderly for over twelve hours, and by the time the pirate police forces arrived to disperse the demonstration, the streets were left clean without a single trace of litter.

They collectively dragged the Glory Troops that took over Wolto like massive burnable trash.

The pirates finally couldn’t withstand these demonstrations. One day, when the President yelled in anger under stress, his subordinates misunderstood his order and opened fire on the peaceful demonstrators that night.

A clean street showered by fresh blood exposed the true nature of the Glory Troops overnight, nobody bought into their delusional “Glory Empire” propaganda anymore.

The sounds of rebellion grew louder as the Union held up their justice, summoned the Central Militia throughout the galaxies to “fight alongside our people against our common enemies.”

The battle in the Seventh Galaxy didn’t simply destroy two whole galaxies; due to Lin Jingheng’s infamous tenacity on the battlefield, the AUS still suffered a great loss despite having Woolf controlling the game from afar. The internal conflict in the organization magnified as the important figures of the mania faction were assassinated, which then created a clear-cut break between the two factions. Harris, who had been working his way back up the organization, was naturally pushed onto the stage by Woolf.

Harris was a strong advocate of the anti-war agenda and would never resort to violence if conditions permitted. Once the AUS got back onto its feet, the anti-war faction single-handedly threw down the trigger-happy side of the organization and retreated all its troops from the Union.

The reunited Union and Central Militia centralized their power to push out the remaining Glory Troops and Freedom Corps pirates.

Everything was moving towards the right direction as the beacon of peace could be seen from afar; the Union was ready to arise from the ashes.

The AUS was under the hands of Woolf, the Freedom Corps selling opium were forced out of the market to take shelter for the meantime, the laughable Glory Empire was digressing and slowly backing down from their throne. Pushed to the edge, the Glory Troops held the entire First Galaxy hostage as they faced the Union in a grand stalemate.

But Harris knew that this stalemate wouldn’t last long. The President had no more tricks up his sleeves and could never win against Woolf.

Who could possibly win against the old Chief Commander?

Nobody knew that the tragic and heroic battle that turned the entire tide of the war had been a meticulously planned assassination plot against Lin Jingheng.

The AUS feared him because the Silver Ten was their nightmare. They were sacrificial lambs that gave their heads to Lin Jingheng, and even though Woolf never made it clear, the old Chief had been reluctant to mess with the young commander in the beginning.

Until the forbidden fruit was revealed by accident and Lin Jingheng became the necessary sacrifice.

All the pirates in the AUS thought Woolf was joking; how could invading the Seventh Galaxy trap Lin Jingheng? It almost sounded like a tale of fantasy. Lin Jingheng’s hostility towards Ankur was more than obvious and he would never step foot in the Seventh Galaxy. If the AUS attacked Ankur, perhaps this young commander would simply watch from the sidelines with popcorn in hand.

But the AUS were the losers by Lin Jingheng’s hands; they couldn’t even touch the young commander with their resources, so they could only listen to Woolf in despair to uproot this nightmare of theirs.

They didn’t expect that plan would work out.

Harris also only found out after the fact that the Silver Ten couldn’t make it to the Eighth Galaxy because they were stopped by the crossfire within the Union.

Woolf had watched Lin Jingheng since he was born, as he grew up, and even personally helped him up the ladder to become the top commander of the Silver Fortress. He watched the young man for nearly 50 years, saw through every inch of his soul to the point where he knew Lin Jingheng better than the young man knew himself.

What did it all mean in the end?

The starship turned around slowly as Harris took a sip of the hot tea. The hot water burnt his tongue, but his heart remained cold.

Lin Jingheng had to die because he still remembered who he was. Ever since he decided to mingle in the war instead of pulling his bargaining chips back and allowed the Silver Ten to prioritize helping the citizens of the Union, he had already decided his own fate.

Harris’ fate was already determined as well. He had to continue being Woolf’s puppet because the White Tower’s ceaseless eyes watched these troubled times; no matter where mankind was heading toward, he couldn’t watch the New Sidereal Era end in bloodshed...even if he knew Woolf’s true colors and understood that peace would be built on crimes and lies.

Harris had some people place a few self-brewed wine bottles inside a small ecopod and pushed it out toward the direction of the Eighth Galaxy; he watched the pod float in the emptiness of space. He gave one last look in the direction of the Eighth Galaxy, unsure how Lu Bixing was doing right now.

*Perhaps not well*, he thought. *It was the destined path for those people who believed in something and wanted to do something for the world.*

And when they finally entered the forest of darkness, they would realize that everything they had looked up to and treasured were all shackles and ropes. If they couldn’t let go of those restraints in time, regardless if they were a powerful giant or a wise scholar, they would be strapped to their foolish ideals against all odds.

Lu Bixing’s joke was right, mankind would indeed die from faith.

Though weren’t all rules, morals, and sense of justice in human society a product of mankind’s imagination?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Then faith was the same; it came from the void of nothingness that would eventually pass through time and space until it burned into ashes.

In a galaxy far away, Lu Bixing held the Prime Minister’s physical health report in his hands.

Through the small glass window on the medical capsule, he looked at the sleeping Prime Minister. The old man lost more weight and grew much weaker than before; he was slowly being killed by his own body.

Lu Bixing asked: “How long does he have left?”

The doctor responded: “From my experience, he has between three to five months. However, because of how painful the process is towards the end, most people won’t wait until the last moment of their natural death and choose to be put down.”

Lu Bixing asked again: “What about resting?”

The doctor shook his head as he gave a difficult smile: “You should know that this condition doesn’t have much to do with lifestyle.”

The doctor saw the young temporary Prime Minister fall into a daze for a moment before he turned and nodded towards the doctor, then walked away after keeping the report in his personal device.

Aside from the check-up report, the Prime Minister also handed him an official letter of appointment.

The old Prime Minister officially announced his resignation and passed this isolated galaxy over to the young man’s hands.

Lu Bixing walked down the pedestrian road by himself down towards the central plaza.

Many people in Milky Way City knew him; Lu Bixing had always been sociable and friendly, so many people turned and greeted him on the road. Several cars even stopped by to ask if he needed a ride, only to be turned down politely as the young man walked into the central plaza.

The dusk skies fell quietly as the last of the people left the plaza for the day, leaving only a small robot selling iced tea running around aimlessly while its boss fell asleep to the side. There used to be two different clocks in the plaza, one in Woltorian time and the other in standard Qiming time; due to the time differences caused by differing planetary orbit and rotations, a day on Qiming did not equate to a day on Wolto. People living on natural planets were often used to living with two different time systems, but thankfully they no longer needed to as the Woltorian clock got taken down. The people on this planet no longer needed to keep up with the schedule of the Union’s standard time.

Lu Bixing stopped and looked at the large stone statue of Lu Xin. The people here loved him and had done their best to recreate the details of their beloved hero -- even the details on the hair were carefully sculpted. A small balloon caught onto a piece of hair on the statue at this time and made the scene seem a bit comical.

The child that had lost his balloon stared at the statue with a pout on his face, tears welling in his eyes. As the hero and spiritual idol of the Eighth Galaxy, there were always guards protecting the statue in the plaza. Nobody dared to touch this holy relic so the adult beside the child had no choice but to drag the child away, and the child finally cried out loud.

“Hey, wait, don’t cry.” Lu Bixing gave a nice tap on the guard's shoulders, and to the surprise of everyone around, he rolled up his sleeves to climb up the statue. The young man glanced at the statue for a short moment as he pulled the balloon off and handed it back to the child.

The guard was in complete shock: “Lu…. Lu…”

Lu Bixing held his hand out and said: “Do you think Commander Lu Xin would mind?”

The guard couldn’t respond. Prime Minister Edward had already announced his retirement and handed the letter of appointment publicly, so starting tomorrow, Lu Bixing would be the new Prime Minister. Since the new Prime Minister said he didn’t mind...well, perhaps nobody would mind.

Lu Bixing walked down the stone stairs from the statue and found a place to sit down near the last step. He lit up a cigarette in the night breeze; the shop owner that was sleeping earlier finally woke up and looked at him in surprise, then gave the young man a courteous bow. Lu Bixing nodded his head in response with an airy look on his face, looking out with a difficult to read expression.

Lu Bixing wasn’t someone who hid his emotions in the past. He felt that everyone had emotions and feelings and that it wasn’t shameful to express them, but almost overnight, a wall built up around his heart, quietly locking away all his emotions.

Nobody knew that when he received the Prime Minister’s sudden appointment, he had just finished decoding the protection of the forbidden fruit system inside Zhanlu. Of course, the system had stopped running long ago and was left with only some data. Lu Bixing checked the names of all the higher-ups in the Union on the list of the forbidden fruit and felt that he would also revolt if he were the director of the White Tower.

The earliest list was composed of almost the entire Eden Committee staff and the politicians in the parliament who were clearly sided with the Committee. Even the people that were making the laws themselves wanted to escape the surveillance of the system.

The second half of the list was more complex. Starting with the first director of the White Tower, Doctor Hardin, the list began to include the opposing sides of the political stage--with Chief Commander Woolf’s name being the highlight of them all. From the list, it wasn’t hard to deduce who was behind the pirate forces.

Yet no matter how much he searched, from top to bottom until the very last name on the list--Lin Jingheng, he couldn’t find Lu Xin anywhere. The name of the man who had secretly kept the forbidden fruit was nowhere to be found on this list.

The forbidden fruit ran on Zhanlu, and even Lin Jingheng himself didn’t realize the true functions of this system. Therefore, it must be Lu Xin himself that wrote the protection code; there was no way he never saw this list.

Lu Bixin turned his head towards Lu Xin’s statue. The statue and the man with nothing left exchanged their gazes across time; the Pledge of Freedom carved under the statue suddenly became a little too difficult to look at.

*Did you still believe in this stuff when you left?* Lu Bixing thought, knowing that the statue had no thoughts and couldn’t answer. The young man continued to impose his ideals onto the silent statue: *I don’t believe it anymore. Someday in the future I’ll personally crush it down. This isn’t anything personal, please don’t take it as disrespect, Commander Lu.*

Now was not the time. He still needed this garbage to maintain order in society; the fragile and weak Eighth Galaxy still needed this spiritual drug to keep going.

Lu Bixing extinguished the cigarette and tossed it into the trash, then turned and smiled at the guard: “Thank you.”

The guard saluted him and responded: “All hail the Pledge of Freedom.”

Lu Bixing got onto an armed mobile through a platform in Milky Way City and went back home. He’d remodeled his home a little under Zhanlu’s butler permissions and cleaned up the entire house from top to bottom. Even the flower garden outside in the yard was reorganized to better taste. The basement was fully transformed into a laboratory as well, but Lu Bixin had never again stepped foot into the locked attic since that time.

“Good evening, Headmaster Lu.” The house said, “I saw the medical report on your personal device, what awful news. I hope your mood is alright.”

Aside from Zhanlu, perhaps nobody else would ever call him “Headmaster Lu” anymore, and nobody would remember that naive dream called the Starry Sea Academy.

“Hm, I’m okay.” Lu Bixing answered carelessly, “Illness and death are natural parts of human life.”

Zhanlu said: “I have organized your work files already; do you wish to look over them?”

“I’ll deal with it tomorrow.” Lu Bixing already changed into his slippers as he walked down to the basement. “Is the result of the experiment from yesterday ready to view?”

Zhanlu: “The analysis report is complete, however, please excuse my bluntness; Headmaster Lu, a proper scientist should control his dangerous curiosity.”

Lu Bixing laughed in response and walked into the lab without a word.

Zhanlu continued: “If it affects the health and life of my master, I will…”

“Reject the orders of your master?” Lu Bixing questioned in a gentle voice, “Have you tried it before?”

Zhanlu fell silent for a while: “I am unable to defy your orders. You have turned off my automated protection function during my self-repairing process, but I strongly encourage you to turn it back on.”

“Thanks, but no,” Lu Bixing said, “I need some quiet time to read the analysis report right now.”

Zhanlu recognized it as an order and fell silent.

Lu Bixing put on his headphones and cancelled out all noise from his surroundings as he opened the analysis report--beside him, a biochip rested inside a small specimen medium.

Aside from the list of names, there was a portion of a biochip research analysis within the database of the forbidden fruit. While it was incomplete, to Lu Bixing who had Zhanlu on hand, it was more than enough.

It was a biochip they’d once obtained from the hands of the Freedom Corps; after taking it apart and readjusting it several times, Lu Bixing concluded that the chip was essentially safe for clinical experiment.

Lu Bixing made a little mark on the analysis report, placed the biochip inside a syringe and injected it into his arm.

At the same time, on a hidden dwarf planet two galaxies away, a pod that had been silent for almost two years finally gave a small reaction.

## Ch 123 - Maintain the Status Quo

The total land mass on the dwarf planet was probably nowhere near the size of an average space station and looked almost deserted, aside from a tall research building amidst the smaller buildings. Its appearance was quite bland, almost like a private observatory of an old astronomer-though it was fully equipped with a lab, private residence, furnishings, and other necessities.

The researchers on shift that night were planning on catching up on sleep during their shift, until one of the researchers woke himself up by hitting his head on the table. He rubbed his half-asleep eyes as he turned his head toward the screen in front of the ecopod, freezing up for a few seconds before forcefully opening up his eyelids to stare at the screen. He then yelped from his seat and ran outside in shock: “Oh my god...doctor, doctor!”

Within moments, the entire lab was awake. All researchers that had been fast asleep earlier shot up like they had just downed a bottle of energy drink as another group of people ran into the lab. Some took over the equipment around the lab and frantically made notes, while the other group of doctors were having a heated discussion on the side as chatter filled the whole room.

The security guards by the door were woken up by the commotion and quickly made their way towards the lab. A doctor inside the lab saw the guards and called out: “Unrelated persons stay out, especially all the ‘generation two’ folks and above. You guys don’t have a signal blocker, you’ll disrupt the mental network of the ecopod!”

The lead security guard nodded in understanding, then gestured for the team of guards to split into two teams to guard the entrance of the lab.

The uniforms on these men were quite similar to the Union soldiers but were instead in a strange sky-blue color that made them look less like a proper military uniform. Even the emblem on their shoulders was the “Sword of Freedom” from the Union troops, except upon closer look they were flipped from the original image, sending some eerie vibes…

This was the most feared and mad armed forces of the eight galaxies: the Freedom Corps.

The leader of this team of the Freedom Corps guard watched the researchers and doctors work inside the lab through the glass window. At that moment, a wheelchair slowly rolled over from the other side of the hallway; the old man who sat on the wheelchair was the first director of the White Tower, Doctor Hardin.

The guard leader quickly walked up to hold his wheelchair and greeted the old man respectfully: “Doctor.”

This strange old man who returned from the dead had aged even more since two years ago. The wrinkles on his face were like deep cuts from time as he reached his head out towards the lab like an old turtle peeking out of its shell. Doctor Hardin ordered the automated wheelchair up, placed his hand on the intercom on the wall and asked: “There’s suddenly a reaction, what’s going on?”

“We were quite unfortunate this time, Doctor. We ran into a gust of stellar wind as the planet reached its closest point to the star and faced a large natural signal disruption. Because the alarm malfunctioned at the time and the equipment was doing self-repair, the shield activated 0.01 seconds later than normal. I’m guessing that it was this that activated the automated protection function of the ecopod and triggered a reaction from the mental network. We can’t determine whether this was a voluntary reaction from the patient, or a reaction caused by the disruption on the mental network; it’s also hard to say whether this is good news, please remain calm.”

A soldier from the guarding team let out a small sigh: “He’s really still alive? That’s impossible. That’s...too powerful.”

When the ecopod was retrieved, the person inside was literally on their last breath. Their rib cage was shattered, spine damaged, and internal organs severely injured. However, luckily the injuries were all physical and could be cured with modern medical technology.

The most fatal damage was the brain.

In the beginning, both the medical capsule and human doctor in charge gave the same diagnosis--due to the backlash of the mental network, the person inside the ecopod was already braindead.

Soon after, this same doctor and medical capsule that spoke the truth were ‘destroyed’ by the cold-hearted leader of the Freedom Corps. Since then, nobody dared to speak the truth and could only pretend to do regular checkups around the ‘corpse’ day and night to check for signs of life with the lingering fear of death over their heads.

To their surprise, this thorough checkup did allow them to discover a strange phenomenon.

This was something nobody in the research team had ever seen before--there were traces of broken mental network pieces left on the broken ecopod. Even if the network was completely destroyed, the human-mech port was still connected.

A dead man or someone who had lost consciousness could not possibly be connected to the mental network. If the human-mech port was connected, that meant this person was still alive; and perhaps, still maintained consciousness.

However, that mental network was completely dead and showed no signs of a living person, so nobody could determine whether the person truly was dead or alive.

The team fixed the person’s body, maintained the health and function of this body through external means; if everything went smoothly, they could maintain this ‘sleeping beauty’ status until centuries later when the inevitable breakdown of the DNA happened.

But how would they wake this dead brain?

The top doctors and researchers came up with a treatment plan after a long discussion; they determined that they could stimulate the connected mental network in an attempt to get a brainwave reaction. Of course, the risks to this treatment plan were significantly greater as there were no precedents. The person inside the pod was like Schrodinger’s cat stuck between life and death; nobody could say whether this small stimulus meant to disrupt the current balance could wake the brain or cut off the connection with the mental network.

Yet to everyone’s surprise, their master Lin Jingshu who had a history of doing medical experiments on humans without hesitation rejected this treatment plan. She only asked them to maintain the function of the physical body so that she could come visit every once in a while, as she stayed in the lab by herself for five minutes, cutting off the rest of the world.

She left a team of the most elite medical researchers for him but left the team doing all the basic jobs of babysitting and cleaning the pod as if she didn’t want him to wake up. It was as if she only needed to see and pretend that he was still alive in her heart.

“It’s like when King Arthur pulled the sword, it must be fate.” Hardin let out a deep sigh as he sank back in his wheelchair. He looked up at the leader of the security guards and asked, “And you are…”

“Nice to meet you, Doctor. I’m a ‘generation four’ who used to be in charge of marketing the biochip in the Seventh Galaxy. Back then--before that great battle broke out in the Seventh Galaxy, I received an urgent command to head towards the Eighth Galaxy to deliver a batch of military supplies to Commander Lin. After I completed my delivery, I received another order from our master to put a pause on my old marketing work to go undercover between the Seventh and Eighth galaxies. I was told to be on standby and report Commander Lin’s actions to our master in real-time.”

The old Doctor gave a small “oh” of understanding--after two years of expansion, the Freedom Corps developed a clear hierarchy within the organization. Everyone’s social status and identity were determined by the level of the biochip on their napes. Starting from the lower tier called “generation one”, the highest-ranking chips today were currently “generation five”. The higher tier biochips could order lower-tier chip holders at will, and the lower-tier chips could not disobey any orders from their higher-ups. The system was so powerful that sometimes a higher-tier chip could make a lower-tier commit suicide with a single order, forcing everyone to remain loyal to their superiors and climb up the social ladder.

A “generation four” was a very unique level that was clearly more important to this soldier than his name or job title.

Generation fours in the Freedom Corps were generally people who had presence and a say in the organization and not a simple security guard on a small planet. Therefore, he must have done a great deed in order to be able to climb up to this position.

Doctor Hardin nodded: “You were the one that saved him.”

“Uh….no, Doctor,” the soldier was a bit hesitant but still said the truth under the influence of the biochip. He lowered his head and said, “it was indeed because of him that I have been able to move up to a generation four these last two years, but I can’t say that I was the one that saved him.”

“I patrolled around the battlefield to keep an eye on Commander Lin as I was ordered to, but the frontlines were too out of control and dangerous so we couldn’t even go near it. I thought they were going to retreat to the Eighth Galaxy that was about to close off permanently while I hesitated to follow up, and that was when everything turned around...I was scared to death because I thought I didn’t complete the mission. If anything were to happen to Commander Lin under my eyes, I’d be executed once I return...so after the AUS fleet retreated, I finally sailed over and followed the energy waves to search for him…”

Doctor Hardin responded: “I’ve heard that the AUS blew up the combined fleets along with the portal the moment they passed through.”

“Yes, and according to our findings after, Commander Lin’s commanding ship was leading the fleet at the time; in other words, he had already passed through the portal the moment the explosion occurred. Compared to the others that perished inside the portal, his habit of leading the way ironically gave him a chance of survival. His mech was also equipped with a super-core ‘Zhanlu’, which had a transformable base that allowed it to turn into an emergency ecopod at the last minute, saving Commander Lin from blowing up into ashes.”

Doctor Hardin said: “But no matter how powerful a mech core is, they are still man-made products that can’t possibly withstand the energy level caused by a transfer portal explosion.”

“Right, so when this powerful mech core got destroyed, the person inside would be completely exposed under deadly cosmic rays and die.” The soldier said, “But can you imagine? He was still conscious under these conditions and didn’t wait for his inevitable death. I’ve explained earlier that he was closest to the AUS fleet during the explosion, and in the instant right before the powerful mech core disappeared, he extended the mental network of the super-mech core to its extreme and hacked into a small mech of the frontline AUS fleet.”

Doctor Hardin’s eyes looked past the glass window at the ecopod and mumbled: “......that’s impossible.”

There wasn’t a proper mech dock on a heavy mech like military bases on land, so mid-sized and small mechs could only park onto it like an aircraft carrier. In certain times, a single heavy mech could even form its own small fleet of mechs.

However, in consideration for practicality and safety, heavy mechs were designed to overtake the mental networks of the mechs parked on its body. In other words, unless someone hacked into the mental network of the heavy mech and released the small mech, these unmanned mechs would not have been able to move and risk being hacked into.

In addition, there was usually at least one back-up pilot inside a heavy mech. Even if Lin Jingheng had a fully functioning Zhanlu that could wipe out an entire fleet of mechs, the most he could do would perhaps be to destabilize the human-mech port on the heavy mech for a short while. It would be almost impossible for him to hack into a heavy mech for a long period of time all by himself.

It was a miracle for him to even connect to the mental network of the mech core at that state.

“Even if his survival instincts are insanely high, how could the AUS not notice that their heavy mech’s mental network was hacked?” Doctor Hardin asked, “The ecopod is very small, compared to a large mech that still wouldn’t be easily noticed in a space full of floating space waste, but wouldn’t he expose his location by hacking into the enemy’s network? You don’t need a missile to blow up a broken ecopod; a gust of wind from the engine would be enough to take his life.”

“We later repaired the recording system inside the pod,” the soldier explained, “we found out that he didn’t choose a target at random. When the portal exploded and the whole fleet was caught in the fire, countless armories blew up at the same time and caused an extremely high level of energy disruption. The AUS had top-notch technology that could detect energy waves, but it was still not powerful enough to accurately detect the sources of the particle emission in this situation. So when their side wing was caught in the explosion, the heavy mechs around the area were damaged to varying degrees; the heavy mech that was hacked happened to remove the launching dock on its body. He almost instantly hacked into a small mech parked on the removed body and remotely controlled the mech to open up a shield near his ecopod. However, the AUS quickly took notice of the removed part and fired a missile at it, otherwise he would’ve almost taken control of the mech completely. Soon after, Zhanlu’s mental network broke down and once again forcefully cut off the network connection. You should know that being forcefully cut off from the mental network in this state would mean a high risk of dying from brain damage, and he had to go through this twice.”

The soldier let out a sigh: “By the time we found him, the temporary shield was virtually broken from the particle waves. This man is way too scary; if the AUS was late by even a few seconds or if his mech core had lasted a few seconds longer, he might’ve successfully saved himself. It was a shame…”

It was a shame that luck wasn’t on his side.

As long as he existed in this world, whether he was actually alive or not, Lin Jingshu would order this elite medical team to carefully preserve his body. They carefully repaired the ecopod and even rebuilt an external mental network to patch up the broken network that remained, making it seem as if the man inside was only asleep and could be woken up at any time.

But everyone knew that there was no way the man inside could still be alive.

“Doctor, this was a reaction caused by the solar storm, right?” the soldier asked.

The old doctor didn’t answer. At the same time, the ground shook--perhaps a mech had just landed on this planet.

Soon after, Lin Jingshu waved off her guarding team and ran towards the lab in high heels. She hadn’t had time to put on any makeup and looked a little more disheveled than usual, her lips reddened as she rushed down the hallway.

Everyone around the lab held in their breaths, even the generation four soldier earlier stood still as if he didn’t exist.

A few strands of hair glued onto Lin Jingshu’s chin like seaweed. Her heavy breathing from her run could still be heard as she stared at the old doctor expressionlessly for a moment without a word. For a second, Doctor Hardin saw a little girl in her eyes; a young girl not even over the age of ten who chased desperately after her sibling being taken away. She was a little girl that would still trip and cry from pain.

Yet that short moment was broken up when the sound of footsteps followed; those garbage security guards finally caught up.

Lin Jingshu’s gaze calmed down while she slowly fixed her long hair and tucked it behind her ears. She adjusted her heels and walked over to the lab, nodded at the generation four soldier and asked the doctor on the wheelchair: “Why are you here as well?”

The old doctor responded: “You two are both Laura’s children, so you’re both the same in my eyes. I just wanted to see him.”

“Thank you,” Lin Jingshu smiled lightly at him and then lifted her head back up. “How come I heard that this was caused by a malfunction in the alarm system?”

The generation four soldier quickly responded: “Yes, my lady, the alarm malfunctioned, and we coincidentally ran into a solar storm…”

“Coincidentally.” Lin Jingshu interrupted, “It can’t possibly be. I don’t believe in coincidence in this world.”

Chills ran down the guard’s spine as he stood in silence.

Lin Jingshu: “Investigate thoroughly, or else…”

A doctor walked out from the lab before she could finish; Lin Jingshu’s eyes widened slightly as she noticed the excited expression on his face.

“My lady, we have reasonable suspicion that this wasn’t an abnormal energy wave on the mental network caused by the solar storm and was actually a reaction from the patient after stimulus.”

Lin Jingshu’s eyebrows jumped a little.

“In other words, the chances of the patient waking up has greatly increased. Regarding the next steps in the treatment plan, we wish to consult you for advice.”

Lin Jingshu answered without hesitation: “No, I need you all to maintain the status quo.”

Doctor Hardin looked up in shock: “Jingshu!”

Lin Jingshu’s lips curled downwards slightly as she pressed on Doctor Hardin’s shoulder and explained reasonably: “Doctor, there’s a risk to everything. I only have one brother; there’s no way I can expose him to this kind of risk. What’s wrong with staying inside the pod like this? He has people taking care of him, and we can even take turns visiting him in our free time.”

“You only have one brother, so you don’t want to expose him to these risks…” Doctor Hardin said in a low tone, “Jingshu, who was the one that indirectly exposed the truth that the forbidden fruit was in Lin Jingheng’s hands? Who was the one that blocked the Silver Ten on the way out of the Union? Who…”

“Doctor,” Lin Jingshu interrupted him coldly, “I gave him mechs and arms. I mixed up the hot pot of the war for him so he could go anywhere within the eight galaxies. He was the one that went mad and voluntarily locked himself up in the Eighth Galaxy!”

## Ch 124 - The Prisoner in the Cage

Whether it was the researchers in the medical team or the guards waiting outside, nobody dared to speak up when Lin Jingshu was present.

Doctor Hardin looked at her strangely: “Jingshu, do you know what you’re saying?”

The red in her bloodshot eyes quickly faded away as her voice softened: “It’s nothing, Grandpa Hardin. Sorry, those are just irrational complaints. A breathing corpse is still better than a cold corpse, right? We don’t know…”

“No, you know,” the doctor’s tone stiffened up for once as he pulled his back up from the chair and said hoarsely, “you know, because you’re smart like Laura. How could you not know the difference between the dead and the living? Aside from the fact that a breathing corpse is prettier than bones, what’s the difference between being stuck inside an ecopod and being buried in a grave? You’re scared; you’re scared of him waking up, scared of facing him, scared of facing yourself. You only want to…”

A clicking sound rang from the wheelchair. Lin Jingshu turned on the wheel brakes and locked the old doctor on the spot.

The wheelchair trembled slightly as the old doctor rushed to maintain his balance.

“My words are the rules here, doctor.” Lin Jingshu lifted her lips up slightly into a sharp angle. She then stood upright and looked deeply into the lab through the glass window and carefully repeated her words: “I said to maintain the status quo--okay, let me know immediately when his condition is more stable. Doctor Hardin is getting old, send him back to rest up soon, don’t let him sit here the whole night.”

“Jingshu, that’s your selfish desires.” It seemed as if Doctor Hardin was determined to not let her go today. “What about him? What if he refuses to maintain the status quo, what will you do? Kill him with your own hands?”

Lin Jingshu’s footsteps stopped.

Doctor Hardin continued: “This world can’t revolve around the will of one person, nobody can be god and control everything. Jingshu, do you still not understand at this point?”

Lin Jingshu didn’t respond and walked away as the sound of her heels clicking on the ground drifted further away.

She had arrogantly thought that Lin Jingheng was stuck in the Eighth Galaxy because of limited resources, that he was being targeted by the lowlifes in the galaxy due to his fame. She thought that if she could turn the war into a bigger mess across the galaxies, he would be able to take the chance to leave that place.

She thought that she had picked the right time to crush the weak bond between the Union and the Central Militias and shatter the Union at its core. She thought that the helpless citizens who gradually grew to accept the fact that Eden would never be fixed would embrace the gift of opium.

Yet nothing went according to plan.

A Top Commander of the Union like Lin Jingheng had the power of the Silver Ten in his hands; if he wished, there was nothing in the universe that he couldn’t conquer, no enemies he couldn’t kill. Lin Jingshu couldn’t imagine what kind of curse fell upon him to make him give up such a powerful weapon and fall into this state.

Two years ago when the Freedom Corps had the opportunity to exponentially expand their influence without fear, her biggest enemy wasn’t the Union and Central Militia, nor was it another pirate organization, but the Silver Ten themselves.

The Silver Ten that had regrouped and resummoned through her own base.

Why?

Did Lin Jingheng figure out that she was the one behind the Freedom Corps? Lin Jingshu didn’t even want to think deeper about this question...

If he didn’t figure it out and this was all an unfortunate natural course of events, wouldn’t that mean fate was fighting against her? The shadows of fate had been shackling her for over 50 years and forced her to walk down all the wrong paths in life. If she couldn’t even break out of this curse with her own hands, what was the point of her living in this damned world?

If Lin Jingheng had figured it out…

Lin Jingshu’s footsteps grew faster as if she was running away from a monster that only appeared in nightmares, opening its mouth, ready to swallow her up.

Many things were like an uneven balancing scale that always leaned towards the direction nobody wanted it to go toward. Murphy’s Law wasn’t exclusive to those weak souls in life who tried to cheat their way out of the limits of fate, it also applied to the powerful figures that smugly thought they could manipulate the world.

Like how the medical team couldn’t immediately ‘revive’ Lin Jingheng into full health in the beginning, they couldn’t maintain the status quo right now.

That accidental signal disruption woke the mental network like a sudden unstoppable shower of rain that revived the dried plants in a drought.

Lin Jingheng’s body hadn’t woken up, but the brainwave activity was growing more active by the day.

It started off as small reactions once every month, then grew to a reaction once every few days. A while after, his brainwave activity flooded the monitor like an open river into a continuous stream.

“Doctor, look,” a doctor from the medical team said to Doctor Hardin, “his brainwave activity was exceptionally active this morning. We scanned his brain and mental network to find out that there were weak signs of human-mech activity on the mental network--it’s almost as if he was ‘looking’ outside the pod through the mental network.”

Doctor Hardin lowered his voice: “His consciousness is recovering.”

“It has already recovered.” The medical team doctor said, “We’ve already successfully communicated with him once today; we already connected a simple typewriter onto the external mental network we built outside.”

Doctor Hardin looked up in surprise.

“It’s only very simple phrases or words, he can’t handle long sentences at this rate yet. We asked how he felt and if there were any discomfort in his body, and after about 40 minutes he responded ‘no’.”

“No? No discomfort?”

“That’s not the case. With his current conditions, it should mean that he can’t feel his body right now.” The medical doctor suddenly lowered his voice, “Doctor, trust me, if we don’t have an order from our master, we wouldn’t dare to give him extra stimulus. We can’t even use extra medication or biochips, everything from the position down to the status of the ecopod has been the same since we found him.”

Doctor Hardin: “Hm...what about it?”

“I don’t want to say this,” the medical doctor said, “but if our master insists on ‘maintaining the status quo’, in my perspective I can only use inhibitory drugs to keep his neurological activity down to a minimum.”

As the first director of the White Tower and a specialist in human-machine interaction with the Eden system, Doctor Hardin knew immediately that this ‘inhibitory drug’ wasn’t any normal hypnotic drug.

If Lin Jingheng’s situation before was still considered in between life and death, then any extra medication and drugs introduced now would potentially destroy his soul.

“Doctor, what should we do?”

Doctor Hardin fell silent: “...Go ask Lin Jingshu. Ask her if she wants to turn her own brother into a human display.”

Lin Jingshu was a busy woman. With the AUS’s ambush and newly patched up relationship between the Union and Central Militias, the Freedom Corps were forced to move underground to avoid getting caught in the crossfire and wait for the next opportunity to slice through the Union. This wasn’t hard; Lin Jingshu believed that the unity and sense of justice that held the Union together was built on lies. The Union had already used the same lie for over three centuries, so this was simply the last straw that needed to be uprooted. In addition, statistics proved that opium users were still increasing at a steady pace even as the Freedom Corps turned to the underground market.

But no matter how busy she got, she still insisted on visiting the dwarf planet once every three days.

The medical doctor gave her a very roundabout explanation on Lin Jingheng’s current status and Doctor Hardin’s question. Lin Jingshu remained silent for a long time after the explanation.

The doctor said: “If you decide to use inhibitory drugs, we have the medication plan and drug already prepared. They’re inside the medical capsule beside the ecopod, we can start anytime.”

Lin Jingshu walked toward the door of the lab and interrupted him: “All of you, leave. Don’t bother me.”

The doctor closed his mouth and ordered the rest of the team out of the lab as he notified the guards outside to clear out the area of people as well.

The ecopod was like a whole world of its own, closing itself off from the outside as it carefully protected the person inside. Through the glass cover, one could even clearly look at his calm expression as if the man inside was only taking a nap. *He’s a bit different than before*, Lin Jingshu thought. Her impression of her brother had always been that he was always quite cold, his brows naturally angled over a sharp gaze in his eyes.

Was this face also capable of showing a soft expression like this?

“They told me that you’re attempting to use the mental network they connected for you. Can you hear me talk right now?”

The man inside the ecopod didn’t react, neither did the medical equipment nor the small screen connected to the mental network. Lin Jingshu studied him for a bit and concluded that she probably came in during his resting time.

She sat down slowly beside the ecopod as her fingers glossed over a button on the medical capsule beside it--with one press of a button, the medical capsule would shoot out a syringe into the ecopod and return the man inside back into deep slumber.

“It’s tiring to stay alive, don’t you think?” Lin Jingshu rested her elbow on her knee as she held up her face. She spoke gently, but of course Lin Jingheng couldn’t respond; she tilted her head slightly as she looked down towards the man in the pod. “They said that you entered the Black Orchid Academy when you were 14, and you were already decided as the honorary graduate of your class the moment you walked onto the campus. They said you’d be the eye of the storm for the Union when you graduate; you must’ve had a tough life during those years, right?”

“I’m sure you’ve never read novels, but I read a lot. They didn’t like for me to work too hard, so I could only appease them by drowning myself in boring pastime activities. Did you know that horror stories are actually very similar to adventure stories? Both protagonists would run into terrifying antagonists and those antagonists would come up with millions of ways to kill the protagonist, but do you know what the difference between the two are?”

Lin Jingshu paused a little and pretended to wait for a reply, then continued her own ramblings: “For example, there’s someone who has friends and family, a job, a good life, and many dreams and aspirations in their hearts...then one day after coming home from work, they realize the door to their house is open and there is a murderer waiting inside the house to snap their neck. When you get here, you’ll be drawn in by the story with fear and curiosity as to what will happen next. Is the protagonist’s family all dead? How will they escape, and even if they do manage to escape, will they be chased down? What will happen to their job? Will their life from now on be changed forever? This is a horror story. But what will happen when you take the same scene and same murderer but flip the protagonist into a murderer’s role? You wouldn’t be scared at that point and will instead be excited to see how the protagonist will kill the other killer in their house; that’s an adventure story. Jingheng, what kind do you prefer?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t give a response.

Lin Jingshu smiled at him and said: “Do you know what conclusion I drew from these two stories? The more you care about the world around you, the easier it is for others to threaten you and push you to the edge. When people get slowly pushed to the edge, they will break down, go mad, and even scare themselves to death--unless you become one of those people threatening others and give up the burden called ‘desires’. When you do that, you will have no fear.”

“Do you know why the Committee chose me back then?”

“Because the day Laura Gordon left, she snuck into the breeding center and pulled both of us out over ten days early. So perhaps there wasn’t any real reason for you to be called my older brother, you just happened to be heavier and look bigger than me when we were born...the Committee was notified of her escape and forced our father to chase her down with force. She split both of us up between herself and her comrade; her comprade that carried you was caught in secret and taken into her husband’s hands while I was brought up to her mech... until she placed me inside an ecopod and pushed me out before she self-destructed. And because of that strange mental power, the Committee had always suspected there was something in me.”

“In the beginning, they used the excuse of doing health checkups for premature births to take me away, only to find that my mental strength range was seven times higher than average children of my age. Would you believe that I’m a genius? What a coincidence, the Committee also didn’t believe that. So when our father Lin Wei died, they were desperate to take me away by all means possible. But guess what? This ‘genius’ child was actually an artificial product created by Laura using a semi-permanent relaxant. It wasn’t until I reached adulthood when the effects slowly faded and the Committee realized they’d been fooled for all these years, that she had already given the forbidden fruit to Lu Xin. In order to lure the Committee away, she didn’t even hesitate to use her own child as bait. If Lu Xin didn’t jump out to try and fight for the young girl after Lin Wei’s death, perhaps the Committee would also never have found out that the forbidden fruit was in his hands.”

“Semi-permanent relaxants have been banned since before the Union was founded due to their high potential of causing irreversible damage to the human nervous system. I haven’t felt anything yet, but perhaps it’s because I haven’t reached that age, maybe I’ll get dementia when I grow old? That would be interesting.”

“For decades, people monitored me day and night. They were insistent on training me to be an obedient dog. I’ve probably taken more illegal drugs and medications than all the pirates you’ve ever beaten up in your life.”

“And those old directors of the White Tower with their boundless reach...Doctor Hardin, a saint who escaped the surveillance of Eden, who was backstabbed by his own men, who ran and hid for many years to the point where he couldn’t even believe in his most precious student and friend. Perhaps only a little girl who also had nothing left could make him open up his heart, right?” Lin Jingshu looked towards the security camera inside the lab and lifted her red lips up slightly into a faint smile. “He feared that this little girl would be brainwashed into a foolish puppet under the Committee and tried to save her by keeping her ‘free spirit’.”

“The free spirit--how lavish and unreachable. The little girl didn’t even dare to think about it, she thought a cheap ‘freedom’ of the body was enough already, but why did she not acquire what she yearned for, my dear Doctor Hardin? That’s because you wanted a venomous snake that could bite into the root of the Committee, right? Then don’t complain. Isn’t it normal for the breeder of the venomous snake to taste the bite of the snake they raised?”

Perhaps it was her imagination, but she felt as if the camera in the corner turned slightly away from her like it couldn’t look her in the eye.

“This was a fate we were both supposed to share, but you ran away in the middle of it. Sometimes when I remember this, I feel envious and hate you; we’re both the same, why should you have it better than me? But sometimes I’m also relieved because you’re like another me...however, Jingheng, are you...still another me?”

At that moment, the small screen on the ecopod displayed a small reaction; the man inside the pod gave a small brainwave reaction.

Lin Jingshu lifted her head up and stared at the curve on the brainwave detector for a short while. Her hand glossed over Lin Jingheng’s face through the glass cover of the pod as she said with a cold smile on her face: “Stay here with me, I only have you left.”

She turned to the medical capsule onto the side: “Activate automated injection for the inhibitory drug.”

The medical capsule’s robotic voice responded with an alert: “The selected inhibitory drug will cause unknown damage to the patient’s nervous system, please confirm injection.”

Lin Jingshu: “......”

The medical capsule’s voice once again rang inside the empty lab: “Please confirm injection.”

Lin Jingshu took a deep breath, the word “yes” was already at the tip of her tongue as a single word suddenly appeared on the text monitor connected to the mental network: “...Wh?”

The person controlling the mental network seemed to be struggling to formulate words and made a small typo on a simple word.

Lin Jingshu trembled in shock.

The monitor indicated that the patient was attempting to expand the mental network to ‘look out’ through the network. The monitor showed that the invisible network was slowly expanding and passed through the place she was standing at. Lin Jingshu trembled even more as the urge to run filled her mind.

The text monitor dimmed down for a few moments as another line of text appeared: “Who are you?”

This time, he fixed his own typo. However, Lin Jingshu didn’t notice because her vision blurred with no sign of clearing up: “You don’t know who I am anymore?”

The medical capsule asked again: “Please confirm injection.”

The small monitor connecting to the mental network carefully displayed another word: “......You?”

Lin Jingshu suddenly grabbed onto the robotic hand reaching up from the medical capsule behind her: “Do you still remember who you are?”

“......No.”

The ‘no’ disappeared abruptly as another line with a typo appeared: “Don cry.”

This line crushed her. Lin Jingshu suddenly turned around and ran out the lab as if she couldn’t handle staying on this dwarf planet any longer, then left the planet on her mech. Three hours later, she ordered the destruction of all the mech docks and galactic vehicles on the small dwarf planet. She then activated a special type of signal blocker used for galactic prisons to cut off all connections from the outside and turned this planet into an isolated cage in the midst of space.

There was only one prisoner in this cage, with a planet full of prison guards also locked inside.

One hundred days later, the prisoner successfully disconnected from the mental network on his own and opened his own eyes.

He had been sleeping for too long and wasn’t used to his own body, only able to move his eyes. Those grey eyes were clear and vibrant, but soulless as if they were the eyes of a dead man.

Doctor Hardin, who was also left inside the prison, rolled his wheelchair into the lab. He waved everyone else out the lab and blocked off all the surveillance.

Lin Jingheng looked at him blankly as if he didn’t recognize this infamous traitor of the Union, even studying the old man curiously.

The old doctor sat in his wheelchair and stared at the man inside the pod in silence for a long while.

“When the brain is damaged, it can’t completely control the mental network. It’s difficult to even maintain a normal rate of conscious activity --’s when people are the most honest,” Doctor Hardin said.

Lin Jingheng blinked.

“So when the person insists on lying, it would cause some uncontrollable technical mistakes; for example, typos,” the doctor said.

The clear and innocent grey eyes grew cold.

## Ch 125 - Our School Motto

Lin Jingheng connected to the ecopod’s mental network silently. The ecopod shook in response, and coincidentally sent out a vibration strong enough to break a glass tube in the corner of the lab. The liquid inside the tube flowed all the way down to the foot of the old doctor.

The old doctor didn’t move and only gave the man inside the pod a mournful look.

The corners of his eyes and mouth naturally drooped downward due to his old age, making him look more heartbroken. The wrinkles on his face looked as if they were carved on to immortalize the sorrows of old age.

“Whether it’s the war or Jingshu, I am guilty for what happened to the Union today. I’m the first director of the White Tower,” Doctor Hardin said lightly, “I’ve taught many brilliant students including your mother.”

“The initial goal of Eden was for the benefit of mankind; if it can function properly, we’d be infinitely closer to the eternal happiness the ancients sought after. But the researchers were too optimistic...when a man-made product becomes too powerful to the point where even the average man can’t successfully put a stop to it, no matter how good the intentions were in the beginning, it is doomed to end in one of two ways the more it is developed. Either mankind becomes the slave of machine civilization, or a small portion of man controls the lives of many through the hands of this powerful tool and turns the majority into their slaves.”

“By the time I realized Eden had gone off the rails, I initially thought about finding a way out for the Union. I believe you should agree with me on this.”

Lin Jingheng could only move his eyes--his expression remained the same regardless if he agreed or not.

“I wanted the White Tower, which was the core of the Eden system, to play the role of the shepherd that controlled the system and worked night and day to realize this goal. But I forgot that people have their own status and ideas; that’s why someone among my students exposed me to the Committee.”

This wasn’t hard to understand. People that lived in the bottom of society often dreamed to fight for justice and looked at the people above them with biased lenses. The middle class wanted to step on the people below them and label them as losers or procrastinators that didn’t work hard to prove their own worth. At the same time, they stood on top of the lower class in hopes to use them as a pedestal to move up the social ladder. As for the people on top, they viewed everyone below them as violent and ungrateful barbarians that could never be satisfied with their current status.

The White Tower was the core of the Eden system and had a close relationship with the Committee. Whether it was the valuable researchers or politicians that were backed up by the Committee, they were all the bright future of the Union. The young and rash Doctor Hardin stole a piece of cake from his higher-ups and paid with the price of a death sentence.

“Due to my irresponsible actions in the past, two things came to be. The first was the powerful backlash from the Committee; their greed grew uncontrollable as they began using Eden for their personal gains more and more. The second...was that it caused all my loyal students to lose hope in the Union and to look outside the boundaries for help, connecting with the madmen of the AUS and raising a monster in foreign land. I didn’t know who to trust especially after the same tragedy that happened to me happened to Laura once again. Out of regret, I left Jingshu with the Committee...I also didn’t have the power to expose myself and take that child away, turning both of us into the next targets of the Committee.”

Doctor Hardin lowered his head as he spoke and looked at the liquid on the floor. The spilt liquid reached a corner of the ecopod, which was near the power socket.

“RT7 solutions have electrical conductivity,” the old doctor mumbled. “My life has been full of indecisiveness which resulted in my making a lot of mistakes. It’s normal that you want to kill me.”

Lin Jingheng’s eyes moved slightly as he looked at the old man judgingly through the glass cover.

Doctor Hardin said in exhaustion: “My specialty is brain neurology and human-mech interaction. It took you only two months to go from the first time you showed a conscious reaction to being able to control the network and interact with the outside world. But it took you a hundred days to be able to ‘wake up’ since learning how to control the mental network; this isn’t a normal pattern. I’m guessing you’ve been using the time to collect information on the outside, right? I can believe that you still have plenty of ways to kill me even if you can’t move right now.”

It was hard to tell Lin Jingheng’s reaction after being exposed; his eyes were still calm as if he had no intention of hiding. Hardin suddenly felt like he could understand why so many people wanted his life. This man was truly someone that could turn the world upside down even with a single breath left.

“I’ll keep the secret for you,” Doctor Hardin said, “Jingshu closed up this planet and we’re all trapped here. Everyone’s on the same boat right now; can we live in peace for a while?”

Lin Jingheng’s eyes curled up in what looked like a sneer; the doctor wasn’t sure if that was a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to his question.

“I’m already old, I’m not scared of death. I’m scared that she will go down the path of no return.” Doctor Hardin moved his wheelchair away from that highly conductive liquid. This time, Lin Jingheng didn’t show any signs of threat as he watched the old doctor slowly roll out of the lab.

“......Even though it’s already too late.”

Lin Jingheng’s consciousness finally began to fade away after he confirmed the old doctor had left. He struggled to disconnect from the mental network and found himself dozing off very quickly after.

The passage of time inside the ecopod gave him anxiety, but he didn’t dare to think too much about it. To be able to reach this point and reopen his eyes was like a miracle to him. He felt as if he traveled thousands of miles while that thin silk strand of luck held him up on the cliff of life and death, swinging him around wildly. It forced him to hold his breath and concentrate every time he was awake, in fear that the silk strand would snap at any moment.

The Eighth Galaxy had Turan guarding them. The Captain of the Ninth Squadron would never hesitate at any given moment, perhaps she had already cleaned up all the portals around the galaxy. But him...what about Lu Bixing?

It was barely past dawn on Qiming after rain. The sky was clear with a hint of sunlight glowing from the horizon.

Lu Bixing stood beside a small statue next to the entrance of the hospital as he listened to a doctor talk beside him: “...can no longer eat on his own, but thankfully we still have nutrient syringes. I noticed the record on the capsule from yesterday didn’t look very well; he only slept lightly for less than twenty minutes. This is possibly insomnia caused by pain, but we can’t increase the dosage of painkillers for him anymore.”

Lu Bixing asked: “He refused to sign?”

The doctor shook his head and Lu Bixing fell silent.

According to law, unless the patient had completely lost consciousness and had stated clearly while in a conscious state that they wish to be put to sleep, only a blood-related family member could sign the paperwork for the patient. The old Prime Minister was still conscious and had no other family, so he still had the right to choose his own path.

A robot rolling out a wheelchair during the conversation got the wheelchair stuck somehow, and a few doctors ran up to help. Due to the condition of the old Prime Minister, his wheelchair was no longer simply a tool for mobility and had the function of an ecopod. It was over a meter long with a very strong shell, almost like a small car.

“Careful, don’t injure him.”

“It still won’t work, everyone leave, call a robot out to help out.”

Lu Bixing let out a sigh, took his jacket off to place on the statue and said: “Let me do it, push it to the side for me.”

He grabbed both sides of the wheelchair and pulled the stuck wheels out of the ground with his bare hands.

“I... goodness, Prime Minister Lu, you’ve been working out lately.”

Lu Bixing responded wordlessly with a smile and carefully pulled the wheelchair out of the place it was stuck in.

The sleepy old Prime Minister felt something, opened his eyes and looked at the young man.

“Alright.” Lu Bixing took the wheelchair from the robot’s arms. “You all can go back now, don’t worry, I’ll have someone escort him back later.”

After Lu Bixing was officially appointed as the Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy, the old Minister Edward began spending more time in the hospital. Of course, despite his condition worsening every day, the old Prime Minister’s heart still carried the Eighth Galaxy. He would still go around the executive building and military command post every morning as people walked into work.

Lu Bixing was still worried about him and could only escort him every day from the hospital and take the old man around the two places before the nurses escorted the old man back to the hospital.

The old Prime Minister was still weak as he laid on the wheelchair half-awake. Lu Bixing didn’t bother him and walked alongside the automated wheelchair with a hand resting on the handle as they made their way towards the Qiming military base. Lu Bixing’s ankle boots trudged through the wet grounds, his expression calm and peaceful with the current Eighth Galaxy, giving off a sense of dependency.

The soldiers in the base saluted them as they walked by. Not too far away, a group of newly enlisted soldiers were doing ground training with training mechs. The old Prime Minister tapped on Lu Bixing’s hand to stop for a bit as he squinted his eyes toward the lively training grounds filled with virtual cannons and fire. If this was a real battlefield, the amount of fire would be enough to wipe out the entire Galaxy within the short time he watched.

The four students that just finished their morning run with Turan ran into them and quickly ran up to give the old Prime Minister a blanket.

The old Prime Minister suddenly spoke up: “How realistic is the data used on the training grounds?”

Lu Bixing answered quietly: “All data and records are being 100% reenacted in simulation. A training mech can cut down over half of the normal training time for new soldiers.”

“I saw the new ten-year development plan you recently signed,” Prime Minister Edward paused for a moment. “Bixing…”

“Hm?”

“Military supplies, production, and large-scale industries are getting too much funding and planning. What do you plan on turning the Eighth Galaxy into...a super fortress where all citizens are soldiers?”

Lu Bixing carefully avoided the sensitive topic in front of his students and said: “In a newly settled society under machine civilization, large-scale and military industries are the most optimal choices for building the foundation of the economy. They can accommodate large amounts of uneducated people; besides, education during this time often focuses on the hard sciences until we enter a more stable and wealthier phase of development. This is the law of history, what’s wrong with it? Besides, we can’t possibly be stuck inside the Eighth Galaxy forever, we’ll have to rebuild the transfer portals leading outside eventually. I’m already replanning the maps. If you don’t go out voluntarily, the enemies will knock on your door; we need a lot of resources, a powerful fleet to protect our safety. We can’t protect our future if we can’t protect ourselves.”

The old Prime Minister followed up with another question: “What kind of future?”

“A peaceful and wonderful future, of course.” Lu Bixing’s gaze scanned across the young men and women beside him as he gave a model explanation. “The Universe expands every second, there’s an even bigger world and more exciting new discoveries beyond the Union. Society had grown too comfortable with the luxuries in front of them ever since the great age of exploration -- we’ve already forgotten the curiosity that once belonged to mankind. I want us to escape a fake utopian world and reopen a new age of exploration--this was also the reason why I wanted to open up the Starry Sea Academy many years ago.”

White’s eyes lit up and interrupted from the side: “Boss, you’ve already built so many military schools and mech design schools on multiple satellites, when will you rebuild the Starry Sea Academy? I can study there for another century.”

Mint kicked him for talking too much.

Lu Bixing rolled his eyes at him and lowered his eyebrows: “You think I can just build my Starry Sea Academy whenever? It needs that six-million star dome, where’s the money? You say it so easily, why don’t you try and raise the money so you can be my sponsor?”

White stuck out his tongue.

“We’ll think about this later.” Lu Bixing smiled. “We still have a million things to do right now, and nobody has enough arms and heads to deal with it. We don’t have the tools and place to study quietly right now, so for now we’ll have to pour our limited resources into basic education, we’ll eventually have the Starry Sea Academy…”

White cheered and gave Rickhead on the side a high-five: “We want that six million dome with our school’s motto carved on it.”

“Alright you all can leave now, go do whatever you all need to do.” Lu Bixing waved them off. “You kids are too loud, the old Prime Minister is tired, don’t bother him.”

The students all ran off at the gesture. Every one of them now had their own schedule of work to do; some were interning in the engineering department, others were working as frontline mechanics for Turan, and White was already starting his work with mech design in the factories. Even though the students had grown used to hanging out with others and would still gather up during their free time to share their latest work progress and new ideas.

Their shared experiences in the past had created a strong bond between the students as they grew to be like family.

Lu Bixing and the old Prime Minister could still hear Rickhead’s loud voice from afar: “What school motto!?”

“We have one, dumbass!” Huang Jingshu responded, “‘Remember that from now on, knowledge is more valuable than money, boundless curiosity is more precious than knowledge, and what’s more valuable than curiosity is the starry sky above our heads.’”

Lu Bixing’s mind went blank for a moment.

*Whether you’ve found a way or you’re lost, everything depends on where the tides of history take you. In your long life, perhaps you’ll go through countless failures and times of complete solitude…*

*Please remember to not get ahead of yourselves when you stand in the eye of the storm. Think about the boundless sea of learning in the academy when you sink deep into the dark waters; don’t bury yourself in mud and sand and remember the foundation the academy built for your young soul.*

How foolishly shameless.

How far away it all felt.

Lu Bixing pulled himself back to reality and collected his expression once more as he lifted the blanket up for the old Prime Minister: “Let’s go, you should go back to the hospital after we make a round in the executive office.”

Prime Minister Edward grabbed onto the young man’s wrist. That hand didn’t seem abnormal; it was an average size for a grown man, not particularly thin or thick. The young man’s fingers were long and warm to the touch; the old Prime Minister said quietly: “My wheelchair weighs almost a whole ton, yet you can still lift it up with your bare hands. I’ve also heard that you even sleep for less than three hours a day, but you don’t look a bit tired at all.”

Lu Bixing gave a thoughtless excuse: “I’m still young……”

Prime Minister Edward interrupted: “What did you do to yourself?”

Lu Bixing closed his mouth. Perhaps it was because the old Prime Minister was the only living elder with some authority and was already too sick to stop him, Lu Bixing didn’t hide and continued: “Just a small experiment. There’s still a lot of unknown factors, I can’t exactly share the details right now. But if it succeeds, I can potentially build a super fleet of extremely high mental-strength soldiers.”

The old Prime Minister asked sharply: “Like those half-human, half-monster fleets of the Freedom Corps?”

“Of course not,” Lu Bixing answered truthfully, “if AIs could completely replace humans, modern warfare would’ve already been a war of robots by now. The AI fleet of the Silver Fortress wouldn’t fall so easily either, we have a failed example before us already.”

“You know that I’m not asking you what type of soldiers are better.” The old Prime Minister put on a stern attitude. “Do you know the dangers of this time? If…”

“If I die, then my job ends here.” Lu Bixing answered calmly, “But for as long as I’m alive, I will no longer return back to the state where others can take advantage of me.”

*I will personally rip up the path leading out of this isolated land; I’ll crush the peace they built on lies and make them all pay for their crimes.*

The old Prime Minister said: “Listen to what you’re saying, isn’t this contradicting what you said before? You really plan on opening a new Era with this mentality? A whole new era of exploration?”

“It’s not contradicting.” Lu Bixing’s gaze lowered. “What new era? Those are just pretty words to spoon-feed the children.”

The old Prime Minister fell silent. A sudden gust of wind blew over and threw the old man into a violent coughing fit that sounded as if he would cough out his own lungs.

Lu Bixing let out a sigh and turned the wheelchair to block the wind.

The old Prime Minister finally let out a breath of air and said: “Bixing, there will be nobody who can pull you back from the wrong path when I leave one day.”

Lu Bixing’s grip tightened as the handle of the wheelchair cracked in opposition.

“Prime Minister,” he asked softly, “why don’t you sign the papers to be put to sleep? Is it because you’re worried about me?”

“Being put to sleep can end pain and give the patient honor and peace in the final moment of their life.” The old Prime Minister’s voice was like a broken record, “I voluntarily give up my honor and peace until the very last second, so that I can struggle and fight with this galaxy until the last moment. I…”

His voice cracked as his body trembled. Lu Bixing asked: “I’ll give you a shot of anesthetics, can I send you back so you can get some sleep?”

The old Prime Minister’s fingers clutched harshly onto the young man: “I...I... resigned seven times...in the Eighth Galaxy’s government...and came back an eighth time....so that I could take the position of Prime Minister...during the toughest times…”

“Okay, okay, I know, Edward…”

“I...I couldn’t do anything on my own...until...until I met you guys...I finally saw a bit of hope...Bixing, can you also give yourself a chance to stand up again...after perishing into ashes seven times? The words you’ve spoon-fed the kids...are...are…”

45 days later, the old Prime Minister finally perished into ashes for the eighth time and walked to his end.

For Lu Bixing, a decade-long grind of anguish and hardships inevitably began.

Author’s note: Regarding the time: the Eighth Galaxy will be using the Eighth Galaxy time, with a year being over 400 days. Everywhere else will be using Woltorian time.

## Ch 126 - The Eleventh Rainy Season on Qiming

This was the eleventh rainy season on Qiming since the first year of the new calendar.

The Eighth Galaxy would perhaps never spend the time to control the weather like Wolto would, avoiding getting wet mud on their shoes like the plague. They didn’t have the budget, nor did they care to live a lifestyle like the Woltorians. Aside from the farmland bases that sometimes had specific climate requirements, most planets in the galaxy lived with the natural climates of the planet; and like the ancients, sometimes they would forget to check the weather and run in the pouring rain with no umbrella.

Houses were built with a special type of material that could control the humidity inside the building into a more acceptable temperature. However, the coldness from the gloomy clouds and rain outside the window was still almost therapeutic to watch.

Lu Bixing was in his study with a desk filled with messy files and windows he’d opened up from his personal device, covering the black walnut wood color of the desktop.

His gaze never left his files as he reached his arm over and slid his mug aside. A robot arm reached out from the corner of the table and poured a freshly brewed cup of milk tea for him.

“Headmaster Lu, you’ve been sitting for over three hours already,” Zhanlu’s voice came out of the robot arm, “you should get up and exercise for a bit for the sake of your health.”

This robotic arm was visibly smaller than the original arm with very limited transformation functions that couldn’t turn into a human form.

In theory, they had the ability to rebuild Zhanlu’s original mech core with the data they’d retrieved from the AI’s database but had not touched it due to budget concerns. The estimated budget the Engineering Department gave was too high; rebuilding a single Zhanlu mech would be enough to give Turan a fully equipped superdimensional galactic fleet.

Besides, an unrivaled weapon of the era was as useless as a kitchen knife without an equally powerful wielder, so the project to restore the mech core was postponed indefinitely.

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” Lu Bixing answered without looking up at the AI, “It’s...say, can you take this little guy off my foot first?”

There was a meter-long albino python under his desk that was scrunched up by his leg lovingly as its scaly head rested on his knee. The python dozed off carelessly as it stuck out its tongue, completely unaware that it was being asked to move.

“Oh, there it is.” The robot arm quickly crawled under the desk and grabbed onto the body of the python. The arm picked up the snake and placed it back in its tank. “Maybe it’s time to give Popcorn a bigger home.”

Lu Bixing’s expression grew visibly more awkward at the name ‘Popcorn’.

Aside from the snake, there was also a chameleon resting at the corner of his desk attempting to change into the color of the table. Its face stared off dumbly thinking it was still living in ancient Earth.

There was also a giant tank on the first floor of the living room that was almost three meters tall filled with a whole family of sea creatures like a mini aquarium. The tank was carefully decorated and upgraded periodically as the fishes swam happily inside as the ripples in the tank reflected the puddles of rainwater outside.

“Please, Zhanlu, if you were a real person you’d definitely win an award for being the galaxy’s strangest roommate. Why can’t we have a pet that isn’t covered with scales?” Lu Bixing moved his leg that had fallen asleep when the snake rested on him and looked around, feeling like he was surrounded by unintelligent vertebrates that reeked of cold air from every inch of their bodies.

Zhanlu answered: “Owning pets is good for the physical and mental health of the body, I encourage you to raise a pet of your liking.”

*In other words--I’ll raise what I like, you raise what you like, but you have to be responsible for your own pet.*

“I swear I’ll have to reset you one of these days.” Lu Bixing took his mug and waved it in front of the chameleon. “You’re on my coaster, please move aside, my friend.”

The ancient living fossil tilted its head at him as if he couldn’t understand Lu Bixing’s words.

Lu Bixing realized he failed at communicating with the animal and finally picked up the four-legged friend with a finger in slight reluctance. He placed the chameleon onto the ground and saved his ceramic coaster at the corner of his desk.

Seven uneven cuts on the wooden desk stood out beside the coaster with varying levels of deepness. Some were so deep it seemed as if the person wanted to break the table while others were made up of various small cuts like a small tree branch. This combination of deep and shallow cuts on the desk almost seemed like a strange piece of art with no real meaning.

Lu Bixing’s gaze scanned passed those markings and stopped slightly for a second look--

*It’s already been ten years, huh*, he thought.

It was also a rainy season ten years ago during the funeral of the old Prime Minister.

Lu Bixing hosted the entire funeral and returned alone back to “The Home of Commander Lin and Engineer 001.” He felt as if he was walking on clouds the whole time; his footsteps were light and almost surreal while his mind was in a daze as if he was about to fall from the planet into the dark void of the universe.

He wanted to drink his feelings away but couldn’t at the time because all supplies in the galaxy were rationed. Even the newly appointed Prime Minister didn’t have non-essential items like alcohol in his own home, making his short but poor life on the Old Fart’s space station seem even more like a fever dream. Lu Bixing searched high and low inside his house only to find an old bottle of beer. He had a delusion the moment he saw that unopened beer bottle: he saw that night many years ago when Lin Jingheng opened up the fridge in his pajamas and pulled out the beer bottle inside. The commander looked at it in distaste for a short moment before throwing it back inside the fridge, then went and took a sip of the tea he had brewed in his cup that had gone cold in frustration.

Lu Bixing had reached his arm out to hold onto that delusion, only to see that man vanish at the tip of his fingers. This became the last straw that broke him down like a meteor shower falling into the atmosphere.

He screamed in despair for the medical capsule at home to give him hallucinogens, illegal drugs...anything that could knock him down into a never-ending fever dream. Zhanlu warned him three times until Lu Bixing threw a one-sided fit at the AI. After the third warning, Zhanlu couldn’t defy his orders; even if his master wanted to commit suicide on the spot, the AI could only hand him a gun without question.

Yet right before this powerful AI was forced into complying with its master’s orders, it made another conscious decision on its own--

He pulled up an old footage from his database and projected it onto the white wall.

A 14-year-old Lin Jingheng was attending the opening ceremony of the Black Orchid Academy. The ceremonial hall was decorated with heroic histories of the Union since its founding, motivational and inspiring. The young boy sat in the corner with his attention being pulled away occasionally. But even then, he still wanted to act cool, and pretended to look around in boredom whenever he remembered he was still in the middle of a ceremony. He then accidentally noticed the small camera beside him that was recording his every move; his face reddened in embarrassment and anger as he slapped his hand down and turned off the recording.

Lu Bixing stared at that young face dumbly as he forgot about the hallucinogens he was screaming about earlier, forgot where he was at, and forgot the dark days ahead of him.

That night, he rewatched this short clip of less than five minutes hundreds of times by himself. The next morning, he carved down the first marking on his desk and turned on Zhanlu’s automated function he had blocked off since the AI’s repair---

Prime Minister Edward once said that when he was gone, nobody would be able to give Lu Bixing a tug of warning; the young man actually took this message to heart.

At dawn of that sleepless night, he suddenly thought about why someone as arrogant, aloof, and bossy as Lin Jingheng would let Zhanlu bother him for so many years. Why didn’t he think about turning off the AI’s self-protection function? Zhanlu had even worked behind the back of his master with someone else to stop him from doing certain things.

He finally understood at that moment. For someone who walked down the streets in the night alone with a sharp sword, he needed a chain to tie him down, even if it was just a small chain tied to his pinky finger. It would be enough to give him a gentle tug when he stepped onto the path of no return and remind him of who he was.

Lu Bixing promised Prime Minister Edward that he would perish into ashes seven times and revive seven times from his own ashes.

Since then, every time Lu Bixing faced a situation he could no longer handle, he would make a mark on the corner of his desk. It was like a contract with the deceased and a countdown for himself.

Perhaps that ‘countdown’ aspect gave him a sense that there would be an end to all of this. Every time he left a mark at the corner of his desk, his soul would be eased from pain.

...Of course, giving Zhanlu too much autonomy had its downside as well--like this house filled with strange aesthetics and cold-blooded animals.

At the end of year 3 of the Independent Era, the long depression of the Eighth Galaxy caused the underground culture of the galaxy to resurge. The heads of those black merchants and illegal forces were all people that had some authority back in the old Independent Navy. In the beginning, due to the ties they had with the navy and their feat in uniting the Eighth Galaxy, Lu Bixing turned a blind eye on them out of courtesy. But very soon after, the expanding black market began to pose a significant threat to the proper economy as hostility between the two grew. The internal struggles among the black merchants also began to heat up; eventually the same people that praised and sang under Lu Xin’s statue triggered an internal warfare within the galaxy.

The war lasted for three whole years. During this time, Lu Bixing dug up all data related to Lin Jingheng from Zhanlu’s database as if he relived those teenage years with the young commander in the recordings. The carvings on the desk also increased to five.

The five markings on the desk were like scapegoats; those hands that held the knife never razed the Pledge of Freedom under Lu Xin’s statue in the end.

Then, in the middle of the 7th year of the Independent Era--

When Mint reached adulthood, she took the spirit of the Starry Sea Academy and decided to give the rest of her life to the vast and unknown world outside the galaxy. She voluntarily joined the Galactic Expedition Team and followed a group of crazy young people to explore the world outside of the galaxy without any transfer portals. Mint grew up and finally understood the teachings of her elders; Lu Bixing didn’t agree to sign the Galactic Expedition Project back then because his heart hardened and cooled down into missiles and mechs. It wasn’t until Mint secretly sent him a copy of the opening ceremony speech from the Starry Sea Academy he gave under the dome that this niche project finally got approval.

The results of the Expedition Team were a few unknown dwarf planets with plenty of natural resources, an accidental new galactic terminal...and the discovery of a natural wormhole area in an unknown territory.

Active wormholes appeared and disappeared like whirlpools inside this area. The trailblazers of the Expedition Team wrote their wills with a fearless heart and went inside the wormhole. They disappeared for ten months, and when everyone thought they once again sacrificed their lives to curiosity, the beat-up team of Expeditioners finally returned miraculously with a new whirlpool. With their return, they also brought back groundbreaking news--the natural wormholes overlapped spacetime and passing through would lead them into another galaxy. The area was much more dangerous than the Wasteland of Death in the Eighth Galaxy; it would be tough to even make it out alive. However, they discovered remnants of mechs in that new area, which proved that there were human activities near the place!

Lu Bixing ignored the stern rejection of his entire cabinet and insisted on entering that dangerous wormhole area on his own. He left the Eighth Galaxy, followed the trail marks left by the expedition team and discovered that this was the no-man’s land of the First Galaxy--the Heart of the Rose. This was the first time Lu Bixing left the Eighth Galaxy in his life; he didn’t expect it to be in this form and searched around the Heart of the Rose like a madman for months. He even dreamed of passing through the area and sailing into the First Galaxy in hopes of finding even a trace of that person.

His efforts were not in vain, and even though he didn’t manage to find a terminal within the Heart of the Rose, he managed to capture the remnants of a Union mech. After recovering the data of the mech, they discovered that this was a mech that floated over after a heated battle between the Union and the Glory Troops. The data contained all the major events within the last few years with enough information for the Eighth Galaxy to make an educated guess on the current status of the war outside.

Of course, the data also included the start of everything--the annihilation of the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy fleet.

Lu Bixing finally witnessed with his own eyes the recording of what happened that year.

When he returned to the Eighth Galaxy with a broken soul, the first thing he did was order Turan to station patrols around that natural wormhole area as he locked himself up inside the lab in his home. He pulled out the single strand of hair inside that resin ball like a maniac and extracted the DNA out of that strand of hair--*he’s gone*, he thought, *maybe even a copy of that man will be enough to console this broken soul*.

Zhanlu’s countless warnings had no effect, so the AI activated its self-protection function and blew up the breeding tank without hesitation. Lu Bixing locked himself up inside that dark lab for three days and finally carved down the sixth mark on his desk, then destroyed the DNA file with his own hands.

Then, the beginning of year 9 of the Independent Era.

Lu Bixing used himself as the lab rat and continuously injected, took out, amended, and once again injected that biochip into his body. He gave up the interaction function between the chip and cut off its disruption effect towards digital products. At the same time, he confirmed the safety of the chip and made sure no external forces could control it. After nine years of self-research, the stability and safety of the chip seemed to reach a satisfying level and had positive reactions in animal experiments. The mice injected with the chips showed a clear increase in bodily function with no signs of concerning side-effects.

Just as he thought he succeeded and was ready to let Zhanlu send out an experiment report to the little circle of engineering friends, the lab mice suddenly died of DNA breakdown in batches as if that chip sucked out the life inside the mice.

Only one group of mice from the controlled group lived a month longer than the others--this controlled group was filled with mice that had been infected with the mutated Rainbow Virus that Lu Bixing had secretly raised from the original virus sample.

It took Lu Bixing nine years to prove that the AUS wasn’t just a group of madmen obsessed with human experiments. This ‘superhuman’ creation needed to go through the Rainbow Virus.

In order to break the shackles of human evolution, they needed to destroy the foundation of natural evolution at its core.

As a unique exception, Lu Bixing could still merge in with society as an ‘oddball’; but what if ‘exceptions’ like him got mass-produced? Would they create a completely new species? What was the future of these man-made species? Would they become like vampires from ancient myths, born out of human origins and then turn against their ancestors? Perhaps thousands of years into the future, one side would annihilate the other; but would that mean mankind had evolved or would humans be extinct?

One side was the success of the research he sought for nine years; the other side was a tempting Pandora’s Box.

This time, Prime Minister Lu didn’t scare his own cabinet or the Engineering Department, nor did he ask Turan to personally break into his house. He went into work normally during the day and returned home at night without letting anyone know that he was standing at the intersection of fate while holding the hand of the devil beside him.

One month later, the soundless storm in his heart became the seventh mark on his desk. The replicated Rainbow Virus and nine years’ worth of research perished in flames.

The seven marks on his desk shaped the respected and powerful Prime Minister Lu today.

Lu Bixing took his mug and got up from this desk after three hours of work and walked around his study as he listened to Zhanlu report his work schedule: “The Financial Department sent in their latest fiscal year report; the debts have been reducing at a steady speak, I personally think this the economy is looking quite optimistic.”

Lu Bixing nodded: “Hm, that is good news.”

“The Engineering Department is requesting more funds; the new anti-missile development lab on Beijing-β made some significant progress.”

Lu Bixing let out a sigh: “I thought we could finally have a bit more money on hand, and now they want more money…”

Zhanlu: “Miss Mint sent a message. They are preparing to apply for the Expedition Team’s second exploration plan, they have already completed all necessary preparations aside from the paperwork.”

Lu Bixing lifted his head.

## Ch 127 - Who Deleted It?

The night sky was clear.

There wasn’t a large gravitational field around the dwarf planet, and because it was located in a deserted place with no other celestial bodies around, it was impossible to see large stars in the sky with the naked eye. When the artificial energy tower, carrying the small sunlight for the planet, turned to the other side of the orbit, the sky would look as if it was filled with diamond dust. On clear days, the glitter in the sky would look almost within reach.

The temperature on the planet was always a comfortable 24 degrees Celsius, the night breeze always gentle. Words from the outside could never be received on the planet as it remained in eternal silence.

This was a galactic prison.

Ancients built their most dangerous prisons on isolated islands surrounded by the ocean to prevent jailbreaks. In the galactic era, people built their prisons inside the furthest planets and space stations from any terminals, blocking off all signals with their heavy protection.

To escape a prison on an island, a prisoner simply needed a strong body and luck. If the prisoner could jump into the ocean, they might have a small chance of making a successful escape; but how would people escape the shackles of gravity and fly into space from a galactic prison?

Lin Jingheng thought this was an easy problem and simply needed to beat up the ‘prison guards.’

Beating people up had been his job for decades; since the day he could finally pull his body out of the ecopod and walk by holding himself up on the railings, he had been planning his escape. The opium biochip was powerful enough to let people significantly increase their physical strength, control digital products, and even create hallucinations for other people. The latter two were technological issues that Doctor Hardin could solve--as for physical strength, it wasn’t particularly a problem for Lin Jingheng. His plan was to kill the guards and make his escape, not win in an arm-wrestling tournament.

But very soon after, he realized his plan wouldn’t work out because Lin Jingshu would never leave any loopholes in her plans.

The small planet was completely self-sufficient with a very complete artificial ecosystem that could last thousands of years. The entire planet used low-efficiency energy, so even if the almighty Commander Lin could build an entire mech with his brainwaves, there was no way a mech could fly out of the atmosphere from this planet.

In addition, these ‘prison guards’ also had no way to connect to the outside world; in certain ways these guards might even have it worse than the prisoner since they still had to work everyday and maintain the prison.

Lin Jingheng didn’t believe it at first because this scenario was illogical and immoral. It would be impossible to throw a group of people into an enclosed space and expect them to live in peace and harmony like ants. They would be like ancient toxic creatures stuck inside a pot, doing anything they could to achieve their goals, including harming one another. There were at least ten months or more for Lin Jingheng to rehabilitate after waking up from his ecopod and struggle to return to his top physical condition, why wouldn’t any of these prison guards take advantage of him during this time and take his life?

The strange reality was that these guards were truly like obedient ants that worked day and night at their jobs. Even the medical team that was assigned to him took great care of the patient--much greater care than that broken hospital in the Eighth Galaxy that would kick their patients out of their medical capsules.

It wasn’t until then that Lin Jingheng realized how truly terrifying this galactic prison was.

Aside from himself and Doctor Hardin, everyone else on the planet was injected with biochips. The chips seemed to have made invasive changes to the brains of these people like a virus rewriting programs on a computer: they all looked like normal people with different personalities in the day, they communicated, had varying levels of intelligence and even unique senses of humor...but the concept of ‘leaving this place’ seemed to have been completely erased from their minds.

Every time this topic was brought up, the conversation would turn into a one-sided lecture as if these people with biochips couldn’t understand this concept of leaving.

When Lin Jingshu left, she not only destroyed all physical means and equipment to leave the planet, she also completely brainwashed the residents on it.

The only two people left on this planet that still stargazed were Doctor Hardin and Lin Jingheng himself.

Lin Jingheng walked up to the rooftop; the night breeze blew out the corner of his shirt.

It had been fourteen Woltorian years since he’d woken up. This was his 2001st failed attempt at breaking through the layers of the blockage as his signal sank into the depths of the void.

However, he remained relatively calm at the result--anyone that had experienced over 2000 consecutive failures would have numbed their senses. Lin Jingheng narrowed his eyes as he lit himself a cigarette and drowned himself in clouds of white smoke. The tobacco used was home-grown on this planet, hand-picked by the security guards, and rolled into paper after drying. It wasn’t anything fancy and was a little too strong for his taste, but still did its job. Lin Jingheng stared at the rough edges of the roll paper and felt as he was digressing into ancient earthlings.

“Can’t imagine that, right?” Someone behind him spoke up suddenly, “Our Earthly ancestors lived on a planet not much bigger than the one we’re on right now, stuck on that planet for generations due to the force of gravity. Countless people would look up every night and watch the galaxy above their heads, but like the biochip-humans on here, nobody thought Earth itself was a prison. They would create stories and tell fortune with the stars, but never once would they think of escaping the atmosphere.”

Lin Jingheng turned his head slightly to see Doctor Hardin roll his wheelchair over. The old man had aged even more, the wrinkles on him jumbled up into indistinguishable flesh that made him look as if he could be on his last breath at any given moment.

“So, what really is freedom?” the old doctor continued, “if you raise a small bug inside a house a few square meters large, its life will end before it could even make a round inside the house. Its short life was spent on the road; would you say it was free? What about you? You have a whole planet to yourself; you can order the people below you to grow tobacco and they would clear out the wheat field for you. Even then you still feel that you’re trapped; who is more tragic, you or the bug?”

Lin Jingheng fell silent for a few moments before he answered gently: “Had I not seen the Sun, I could have borne the shade.”

“But Light a newer Wilderness, My Wilderness has made[[2]](#footnote-2)...I took one Draught of Life, I’ll tell you what I paid, precisely one existence, the market price, they said.” Doctor Hardin finished the last lines in a low tone. “It’s an ancient poem your grandfather loved.”

Lin Jingheng let out a soundless sigh as he thought: *Well shit, here we go again*.

Doctor Hardin was too old. Even though his brain was still functional most of the time, he still had his moments where he would bring up stories from the past. On top of rambling on and on, he would always somehow relate Lin Jingheng’s grandfather into the story; after listening to the same story hundreds of times, Lin Jingheng grew tired of even pretending to listen.

He sat on the ground and flung the ashes of his cigarette down against the roof. As he continued studying how to break through the signal blockade, Doctor Hardin’s ramblings turned into background music for his work.

“In the last era, the eight galaxies were like an endless warring era. Some people took over a planet and claimed the surrounding planets under their rule as they fought day and night in a chaotic and harsh war. The civilians were like us, trapped on land for their entire lives with no way to obtain freedom. We huddled up on a small space station in the beginning...which became the City of Angels later. Big Bro Lin was one of the core members of the group, Woolf and I were the younger ones that followed him like little lackeys.”

“I remember our big bro said that he wanted everyone in the world to be born with honor, to be able to search for their limits, and live their lives to the fullest extent. He wanted everyone to live the way they want, to be able to express themselves freely, and travel throughout the universe without restraints.”

The founders of the Pledge of Freedom wanted to break the cages surrounding them and realize the dream of universal human rights and freedom. However, this dream was too fleeting and unrealistic that the Eden Committee’s actions seemed more practical in comparison. They brainwashed everyone into little bugs inside a house, feeding people the lies of human rights and freedom as everyone lived foolishly in peace.

Lin Jingheng wasn’t someone easily moved and didn’t give much reaction after hearing the core ideology of the Pledge of Freedom. He thought, *normally, there are only two or three ways to set up signal blockages on galactic prisons. We’ve already attempted all possible methods of breaking the network with no luck, and we were running out of ideas...was it possible that the blockage system upgraded while he was stuck in the Eighth Galaxy?*

Even having a single supercomputer to analyze data would help, but they were living the lives of the ancients here. Everything they did was like tossing a ball blindly into the void, hoping luck would be on their side with every attempt. Perhaps they were infinitely close to breaking through over the last decade, but because they had no way to check their work, nobody could tell how close any of their attempts were. Maybe they were a hair strand away from solving the puzzle, but ignorance blinded them and even led them astray.

Lin Jingheng grew restless at this thought, concerned that he might have dug his own grave unknowingly.

*Did that mean he was going to have to wait for an accidental visitor to find this small planet?*

Doctor Hardin’s ramblings didn’t stop: “...Lin Ge’er was like our elder brother, he took care of many orphans from the war including Woolf and myself. Did you know? There were rumors in the past that Woolf’s attachment to him was too strong that it exceeded normal friendship.”

Lin Jingheng was putting out the cigarette on the ground with a frown when he heard this and lost his train of thought: “....”

*What the fuck?*

“I’ve heard that Woolf got drunk once and continuously called our big brother’s name.” A slight, mischievous smile lifted on Doctor Hardin’s face. “But it was all rumors, nobody has proof. Woolf was a mature young man who knew his boundaries. The Lin couple had a very good relationship, and ever since that rumor came out, Woolf and our big brother have been consciously avoiding each other. The Lin couple never lived to see the founding of the Union, and your father was born years later through a breeding tank with the couple’s DNA. Woolf received the legal guardian rights the moment your father was born and raised the boy like his own son. He remained single for his whole life, mentored Lu Xin and raised Lin Wei. When Lu Xin retrieved the Eighth Galaxy and was promoted to top Commander, Woolf was barely 200 years old and was already planning to retire his position in favor of the future generation. I met him once at the time and told him that he was too optimistic; the Union was already derailing from its initial path and the Military Council will eventually become a caged tiger. I told him he would regret it, but he didn’t believe me...until the lies of Eden were exposed and the Union broke down in chaos. The two people whom he once hoped would carry the future of the Union died and the poison of Eden had already seeped inside the bones of the eight galaxies, so he needed foreign power to break the status quo.”

Lin Jingheng: “Is that the reason why he worked with pirates and let them into the Union to massacre the people?”

“You cannot have new hope until you completely destroy the old structure. We’ve already walked into a dead end; we must wipe everything out and redo everything.” Doctor Hardin said, “Woolf didn’t have much time left to grind through political battles and push for reform, so he could only make a huge gamble all at once. Jingheng, I’m only telling you this because I want to ask you: what would you do when you find out that the world outside has completely changed after you escape? Will you break through everything for revenge?”

Lin Jingheng automatically filtered out everything he didn’t want to hear and picked up the keywords: “What do you mean? Do you have new ideas on how to break the blockade?”

“Fourteen years ago, this planet orbited near the brightest star in the area. The energy waves from the solar storm woke you from your sleep in the mental network.” Doctor Hardin said, “This means that the blockade and signal interception on this planet is not strong enough to block out solar storms. If I’m calculating correctly, we have one month until the planet rotates back to the same area as fourteen years ago; that’s the time when the blockage is the most unstable; perhaps we’ll have a chance then.”

Milky Way City Military Base Command Post, planet Qiming. Turan was surprised to receive a message from Lu Bixing.

Lu Bixing rarely contacted her directly; normally he would send out documents for official business or call up a meeting when there was something he needed to discuss.

The Eighth Galaxy had settled the internal warfare over the last few years and began investing in military resources as the galaxy prepared to mobilize all its citizens. The military and government worked seamlessly as a single body, but Turan and Lu Bixing’s private relationship grew more distant as time went by. The anesthetics incident in the elevator also damaged their friendship over the years; nothing could return to how it was before. When they two saw each other occasionally, they would only greet each other with “Prime Minister” and “General Turan” courteously as they walked past each other without a second word.

Turan immediately connected to his personal device: “What happened, Prime Minister?”

“Mint and her team started a specialized research study on the wormhole area; the Expedition Team is preparing for another trip to test their research results. I need you to send an armed patrol team for them.” Lu Bixing said, “We don’t know the situation outside, and weonly managed to bring back a broken mech last time. If they end up sailing a bit further off this time, they might run into other armed fleets, so we need to ensure their safety.”

Turan accepted the request without hesitation but had some questions in her mind--Lu Bixing could’ve just signed an order and sent it to the command post, he didn’t need to speak to her directly about it: “Sure, Prime Minister. Do you have any other orders?”

Lu Bixing hesitated for a moment: “There’s one more thing I want to ask you. From the time Lin got ‘assassinated’ in the Heart of the Rose back then to the time the war broke out, was he still in contact with you guys? Was coming to the Eighth Galaxy part of his original plan?”

“Uh...to be fair, we weren’t always in contact. We were still in the Silver Fortress at the time, so any signals we sent out would be intercepted. We needed to escape from the Silver Fortress, meet up at the designated location, and reestablish the long-distance connection there. It was indeed part of the plan for him to go to the Eighth Galaxy because it wasn’t under the control of Eden.” Turan suddenly remembered something and added, “But he acted much sooner than I expected, that sure is Zhanlu for you...what’s up?”

Lu Bixing lifted his eyebrows slightly--when he’d fished up Lin Jingheng, Zhanlu’s energy had already been depleted and was in standby mode. It was unclear how long Lin Jingheng’s ecopod had floated outside Beijing-β, and thanks to Lu Bixing’s butterfingers the man had stayed an extra three months inside the pod...and that’s still considered ‘acting fast’?

Lu Bixing suspected that Lin Jingheng hadn’t floated over his original route and had instead passed through the wormhole area in the Heart of the Rose.

Turan said: “The details of the plan should be recorded on Zhanlu’s database; I’ve been on standby the whole time with the Ninth Squadron so he should know more than me.”

Lu Bixing nodded at her absentmindedly and cut off the connection. Zhanlu didn’t have any records of this particular event in his database; nothing about Lin Jingheng’s ecopod was recorded on him. Zhanlu’s own explanation was that he had been on standby mode due to lack of batteries.

But...was the standby mode really that effective?

It felt like this silly AI had gotten its files deleted by someone.

Lu Bixing first realized this problem when he was concerned if anyone else knew about the wormhole area in the Heart of the Rose, possibly posing a security threat to the Eighth Galaxy. That was why he searched Zhanlu’s database for records of the past only to see that there were traces of records in Zhanlu that had been purposely deleted.

The traces of deleted files were scattered throughout the database, a few of them seeming to have something to do with Monoeyed Hawk as well.

Lu Bixing recalled that the most obvious trace of data removal was the time Lin Jingheng had been fished back up after the commander single-handedly overthrew Primeal Alien’s entire pirate fleet. Lin Jingheng seemed to have gotten into a quarrel with Monoeyed Hawk very soon after he returned to the space station--Lu Bixing had been watching through the security camera at the time and even purposely turned the camera to grab the two men’s attention.

But there were no records.

Who had deleted it? Why?

Lin Jingheng and Monoeyed Hawk were always bickering openly with each other over the most trivial matters -- what did they have to hide?

Lu Bixing strolled over to the cemetery and stood before Monoeyed Hawk’s grave: “Are you two keeping a secret from me?”

Monoeyed Hawk remained silent.

By the end of August, NSC 290, year 12 of the Eighth Galaxy Independent Era, the Galactic Expedition Team passed through the wormhole area for the second time and re-entered the no man’s land Heart of the Rose.

A small planet at the edge of the Sixth Galaxy once again rotated to its nearest position to its brightest star.

That same year, the President of the Glory Troops that had been fighting against the Union for over a decade was assassinated by his subordinate. The pirate organization finally surrendered to the Union.

Countless strings of history finally intersected at a single point--

## Ch 128 - The Heartbeat Behind

“The natural wormhole area isn’t like an artificial transfer portal and is extremely unstable, and we don’t have enough research on it yet. I’ve looked over your reports -- there are no issues with the theoretical framework and logic behind the hypothesis but remember that theory doesn’t always equate to the result of your experiments. Even the tiniest variable in these mathematical formulas can cost a life in practice.”

“According to the hypothesis provided here, you all can either stabilize this area or cause it to go even more haywire and create the breakdown of spacetime. Perhaps some of you will lose your lives here or enter an unknown state of life; are you all prepared?”

Lu Bixing’s warnings were taken to heart by the entire expedition team right before they entered the wormhole area.

This grand parade of the expedition team and their escort ships was like a group of unarmed bugs inside this unknown territory of space. They were like an army of ants using a small leaf as a boat to embark on a dangerous adventure into the vast sea.

“Equipment energy level is on the higher side--”

“Got it,” Mint responded, “activate the pre-cooling system.”

“Cooling pipe preparation...6%....45%...99%.... pre-cooling completed.”

“My friends, I can tell that this is much different from the first time.” The captain of the Expedition Team spoke into the internal channel, “We had no preparation last time when we jumped into the wormhole without thinking too much about the consequences. This time, even after knowing that we arrived more prepared than last time, did years of research, and upgraded our equipment, I can still feel the anxiety in my heart.”

Another team member responded: “That’s normal, the ignorant are fearless.”

“Start the 120 second countdown before entering the wormhole area.” The captain paused slightly before asking, “Did everyone prepare their wills?”

“Just a simple goodbye; it’s not like I have any assets left, why do I need a will? To get creative?”

“My family only has one mouth to feed, that’s me. I even saved time on the farewell.”

Mint was a quiet girl and didn’t join in the conversation as she checked her terminal equipment one last time. Her will was left inside the research lab of the Expedition Team; if anything were to happen to her, the letter would be automatically sent to the personal devices of Lu Bixing and her other three classmates ten months from today. They were the only family she had left.

Her will was only one line: I can’t go back anymore, sorry.

This “sorry” was a word that she kept in her heart for many years; it was a phrase that followed her day and night from adolescence to adulthood.

The four students had gone through a lot over the last years. Huang Jingshu threw herself into the seemingly endless research of planetary anti-missile systems, the young Rickhead joined the military, and White worked his way into the Engineering Department. Only Mint chose the niche and dangerous field of Galactic Expedition. She wanted to walk out further, explore the depths of the universe, and hope the boundless night sky could wash away her mortal struggles.

That day, Saturday had contacted the Engineering Department before it all happened. For years, Mint had thought if only she had been more patient with him, paid a little more attention to him, perhaps she would’ve noticed something was wrong.

Perhaps...if that person hadn’t been Saturday, she might’ve actually asked what was wrong. But as a young girl with a responsible guardian that she could hide behind, she was more inclined to give the young man with a romantic interest in her a dirty look. She liked to give him attitude and liked to shoo him off.

If she was a little more mature and stopped bringing personal feelings into work, would she have been able to stop everything by noticing something was wrong and warned Saturday before it all happened?

Before the Expedition Team left, Lu Bixing even called her to the side to tell her that she could still back out of the team if she wanted to. She hesitated but didn’t respond, so Lu Bixing only went over a few more safety instructions with her before she left.

Nobody had ever scolded her for the past, but she had not been able to let go of her guilty conscience for many years.

Her colleague gasped loudly beside her. Mint collected her thoughts and looked up to see the space around them began to warp, almost as if they were passing through a giant freeform magnifying glass. Very soon after, the world felt as if it was being forced into slow motion. The lights on the mech signifying strong energy waves flashed but no sound came out; the network connections were all cut off, and even the gravity system malfunctioned as Mint noticed she was floating inside the mech. The safety belt connected to the walls of the mech kept her from flying out; Mint’s eyes widened as she heard the slowed heartbeat in her chest--

When they’d entered the wormhole last time, due to the lack of preparation everyone knocked out the moment they went in and woke up to find themselves sailing towards the corpse of a mech. Thankfully, they were all wearing protective space suits that saved them from the deadly cosmic rays and air pressure inside the mechs.

This time was much better, at least Mint was still conscious during the passing.

She couldn’t feel her body and felt like the mech was also breaking apart. She looked up to see an ecopod quickly fly by her towards the opposite direction. Mint’s gaze followed it as she subconsciously noted down the ID number on the pod.

The next instant, the space around her expanded infinitely until it all gathered into a small point as if a blackhole had sucked up the world. Mint’s eyes looked past the point into a distance, only to see the world beyond the blackhole filled with countless convex mirrors that flashed familiar scenes before her eyes--the explosion of Beijing-β, the scary base the Freedom Corps hid in near the Eighth Galaxy...and herself in the past.

The young girl in the mirror glanced out to herself a decade into the future before her gaze left the young explorer on the ship. She turned her head back towards the communication screen and said something towards Saturday.

“Stop him!” Mint screamed at the young girl inside the mirror, “tell him General Turan is going to blow up the portals immediately so don’t touch anything and don’t pick up any communication request. Tell him he’ll regret it! Tell him he’ll kill many people if he does!”

Yet the unstable flow of timespace inside the wormhole couldn’t truly affect causality; she could see herself in the past through the warped time, but even if timespace intersected in the wormhole, the world wouldn’t allow her to change the past.

“Don’t hang up! Please!”

The point of interception in spacetime finally left her as that ‘convex mirror’ disappeared into the void.

That was the harsh reality. While time and space could warp, human life was still a one-way street.

Nothing could change the past.

A large thump and bright light exploded out of the mech; Mint’s feet landed on the ground inside the mech as the safety belt pulled her back to her position.

Mint stood dumbfounded as she realized they’d made it through the wormhole alive. Yet her vision was blurry; tears had filled her face before she even realized what happened.

She wasn’t the only one that was crying, everyone that remained conscious during the passage were all staring blankly off into the distance.

Mint thought for a split second that everyone lived with pain and burdens, and they would all cry their hearts out upon the crossroad of spacetime. They carried the curiosity of mankind, walked down a passionate path carrying the spirit of exploration from their ancestors, and shone in optimism; but at the end of the day, they were all still human.

They were still inside an active wormhole area and had no time to spare for reminiscing. The disconnected channel was still filled with noise for a while until the captain’s hoarse voice frantically did a roll call only to notice that the size of his team had shrunk significantly through his mental network.

“What happened?” Mint took off her suit’s helmet and wiped her face, “Why are we the only ones left?”

“Timespace warped,” her colleague answered, “they must’ve come out a different exit but it shouldn’t be too far...can we fix the communication channel? Is there a way to try and contact them?”

“Funny joke, there’s no transfer portals here so we can’t set up any long-distance connection…beep...the signal’s been unstable…”

“Captain,” Mint said, “the wormhole tunnel we passed through earlier didn’t disappear immediately, and the energy level around the area is still stable...does that mean we succeeded? Should we try sending out a signal back to Qiming’s base?”

The captain didn’t have time to respond.

“Wait, wait! My mech seems to be sending off an alert,” a pilot inside a mech next to the captain interrupted the chatter inside the channel, “check it out, what’s that?”

The Expedition Team sailed out carefully and discovered a remnant of a large starship surrounded by countless pieces of small mechs around the starship like a giant stellar graveyard.

Mint swiftly pulled up the military camera and locked the lenses onto the remnants in order to collect data. A few seconds later, a large photo popped up on-screen and zoomed in clearly enough for a line on the starship to be seen: “Starship...Jing...yuan…?”

The Command Post on Qiming was also filled with anxiety as they lost contact with the Expedition Team for a whole week. Then, they finally received a broken signal message from the team that they could barely make out. Different voices spoke at different times while a whole section of the message couldn’t even be decoded.

The Engineering Department exploded into a mess.

“Let Zhanlu handle this.” Lu Bixing received the news in the middle of the night and quickly made his way over. He scanned the screen filled with garbled text and said, “It seems like multiple messages were jumbled up together, maybe from the warped spacetime in the wormhole. It could also be possible that the Expedition Team was split up after they passed through the wormhole.”

“Received.” Zhanlu’s robotic hand controlled a whole room of supercomputers in an instant and quickly delivered a result. “According to the decoding pattern of the message, there seems to be three different messages being jumbled up together. The content is very similar, all of them have reported that they safely passed through the wormhole but were separated from their teammates. There seems to be a little bit more extra information in the third message, which is currently being decoded right now, please wait…”

Lu Bixing’s eyes widened.

The unstable signal sent out a loud siren after it disconnected. Zhanlu fell silent for a few seconds before saying, “Decoding completed--Miss Mint reported that they discovered the remnants of Starship Jingyuan near the place they landed.”

Starship Jingyuan was the ship that Lin Jingheng took that year when he ran into space pirates in the Heart of the Rose, while on his way back from the Silver Fortress to Wolto.

And even if an unarmed starship was forced to detour into the no-man’s land, it would never have sailed deep into that territory.

Zhanlu’s calm voice rang inside the command post: “If we can rule out the possibility of unknown gravitational forces affecting their landing, this could possibly mean that Miss Mint and her team are very close to the First Galaxy.”

In the Sixth Galaxy, the galactic prison was slowly closing in on their destination. The artificial energy tower orbiting the small planet had entered a temporary sleep mode.

“You know that we’re not the only ones paying attention to the orbit; Jingshu is looking too, right?” Doctor Hardin asked.

Lin Jingheng held the blueprint of the galactic prison in his hand as he made marks on it and answered without even batting a lash: “I’d be more concerned if she didn’t come.”

Lin Jingshu had not dared to walk close to him within the last fourteen years. On one hand, perhaps she didn’t know how to face him; on the other, she was fearful of him. Lin Jingheng was someone who could survive a transfer portal explosion; it was impossible to say what he would do next. If there was a chance that he ‘regained his memories’ and used that as a crutch to stand back on his feet, he could climb his way out of the well. Therefore, the person who imprisoned him had to completely isolate him and not give him any chances.

“If she doesn’t come, who am I going to send my signal to? Pray that it gets randomly sent to a kind person’s personal device and ask them to call the cops for me?” Lin Jingheng sneered, “I don’t have much luck to speak of.”

Doctor Hardin swallowed his words.

Lin Jingheng closed up the blueprint and placed it back inside his personal device: “As long as your time-stopper program works.”

The core ecosystem of the galactic prison was located in a mountain range 500 kilometers away from the main laboratory, which was being maintained by mechanics once every ten days. The mechanics would go to and from the mountain ranges via a special train system in order to perform the periodic maintenance.

One end of the train tracks stopped near a platform not too far from the main lab. The door leading to the tracks opened slightly as Lin Jingheng took a peek through the small opening, holding the signal blocker in his hands. The signal blocker was a product of Doctor Hardin’s five years of research that was disguised as a necklace on him--of course, with questionable aesthetics. Despite its look, the signal blocker was powerful enough to intercept opium biochip signals for five whole seconds within a twenty-meter radius. With the advancement of opium technology, human senses grew exponentially stronger than before; a third-generation chip could even allow a person to feel infrared rays with their own bodies, so Lin Jingheng needed something that could block himself from the sight of these people. Five seconds was more than enough for him to do his job.

The surveillance went completely blind temporarily as Lin Jingheng snuck out from behind the door, cranked open the backdoor of the train and rolled inside. A group of mechanics walked onto the train the moment he got on and chatted amongst themselves like normal people. They walked past the restrooms near the back of the train as they made their way to the front.

At that moment, one of the mechanics from the group waved at their colleagues and walked back toward the restroom.

Lin Jingheng held his breath behind the restroom door as he watched the five second countdown on his personal device end, watched the signal blockade turn ineffective--

The mechanic heard a heartbeat that didn’t belong the moment they opened up the door and stood shocked for a second. The mechanic looked around in confusion until they finally realized the sound of those heartbeats was coming from behind them.

Before the mechanic could turn their head, a cold object pressed against the back of their neck. The instinct to cry out was forcefully stopped as they realized no sound came out of their mouth; their body fell out of their control as a special type of radiation passed through their skin and suppressed the chip inside. The biochip reacted to the radiation and intercepted the mechanic’s brain waves until the mechanic fell unconscious like a skinless frog, their limbs still twitching as Lin Jingheng dragged them to a corner.

Lin Jingheng pulled out a laser gun from his waist, pressed it against the mechanic’s nape and made three consecutive shots that were carefully calculated to avoid damaging the chip inside. The flesh on the mechanic’s neck, strengthened by the chip, burned, and melted under the laser while Lin Jingheng pulled out a nanoknife from the dead mechanic’s body and stabbed right into the corpse’s neck where the chip was injected. A square burn appeared on the remaining visible skin on the corpse as a chip covered in flesh and blood fell to the ground. At that moment, the flesh of the corpse deflated like a balloon as Lin Jingheng tossed it into the restroom next door.

He scanned the biochip with his personal device--a second generation chip; this person might be the leader of this group of mechanics.

Lin Jingheng turned his head slightly to look at the corpse he had tossed onto the side, placed the biochip inside a special sterilizing container, and quickly pulled the clothes off the corpse to put on himself. The mechanic conveniently had a hat on that could cover his face when it was pressed down.

After cleaning up the biochip, Lin Jingheng placed the chip inside a syringe filled with a special type of liquid that surrounded the chip like a gel cover. He shook the syringe in his hand around for a bit before he injected it into his body the next second without hesitation.

“The opium biochip is highly addictive, especially for people who have a high human-mech sync rate. Unless you’re a vaccuocerebral, don’t ever try it.” Doctor Hardin had once warned him, “If you run into an emergency, here’s a gel stopper for you--remember, this is still an experimental item even if it can temporarily intercept the effects of the biochip on your physical body. This will essentially turn you temporarily into a vaccuocerebral, but I suspect that you will be able to metabolize the stopper gel within 90 minutes, so you must take the chip out before that happens.”

It would take approximately 40 minutes to reach their destination; there was more than enough time.

Lin Jingheng turned to lock the door to the restroom with the corpse, then walked back into the car of the train and sat down in a corner with his hat covering his face.

Even with the gel stopper, he could still feel the uncontrollable power growing inside of him. His senses grew much sharper as the sounds of people’s heartbeats around him turned into background noise. For a split second, Lin Jingheng even had the delusion of feeling like a terminally ill patient suddenly cured of all diseases the minute the chip was injected into his body.

Another mechanic carefully walked towards him; Lin Jingheng heard the footsteps coming near him and thought: “Scram!”

Due to the suppression of a second-generation biochip, the mechanic left him along before they could speak and walked away quietly, creating an invisible fortress around Lin Jingheng.

Lin Jingheng opened his palm and gently clenched his fist, only to see that his personal device indicated that this power of this grip had already reached over 400 kilograms.

An unknown source of power and control was like an addictive drug that was supposed to fascinate anyone; yet perhaps the stopper’s effects were still active, as Lin Jingheng only felt anxiety and unease in his heart.

He remembered the two times Lu Bixing injected the chip into himself...*was this how he felt back then?*

The chip that Lu Bixing injected into himself had been destroyed, but after the multiple attempts of the Freedom Corps sailing into the Eighth Galaxy, they also brought in new biochips. He couldn’t remember if all of the chips had been cleaned up.

Lin Jingheng clenched his fist harder and thought, *Hope that old Persian Cat still knows how to deal with that child.*

The mechanics who came in to do the periodic maintenance were the lowest class on the planet and were mostly first-generation opium users. Lin Jingheng snuck in without much problem and quickly found the core ecosystem of the planet--the artificial control of the climate, temperature, and gravity.

Lin Jingheng placed a few small black packages near the central operating system of the artificial gravity controller, then glanced at his personal device to see that the small planet was moving closer to the sun. His mouth lifted up as the solar storm warning appeared and left the area quietly.

Half an hour later, the solar storm on the dwarf planet reached its peak as the signal blockade on the planet was intercepted. At the same time, a series of explosions from the central ecosystem of the planet stunned the world; the artificial gravity suddenly malfunctioned as the gravitational force on land decreased to one-tenth of its regular force. Everyone on land was suddenly stepping on air as their bodies floated off the ground; in addition to the loss of gravity, the artificial atmosphere was also on the brink of breakdown under this low-gravitational situation.

The ecosystem on the planet broke down immediately as sirens rang across the planet, sending out a desperate call for help that passed through the damaged signal blocker out to the universe.

The special kind of SOS signal sent out by a planetary or station ecosystem would be captured by the nearest galaxy, which would prompt the government or a related organization to send out people to inspect the planet or station.

At the same time, sixteen sailing days away, a mech that had been patrolling the planet for the last decade also received the same SOS signal.

“Contact our master immediately, planet Treasure Chest’s ecosystem has severely malfunctioned, the artificial atmosphere is at risk of breaking down--”

## Ch 129 - Resummon the Silver Ten

Doctor Hardin was shoved inside an ecopod while everyone else grabbed the nearest spacesuit to put on. After the artificial gravity got destroyed, the atmosphere also began to disappear as the deadly change in air pressure and lack of oxygen began to sweep the planet. Of course, there wouldn’t be enough spacesuits for everyone inside this isolated galactic prison, so a portion of people were doomed to die.

Spacesuits and ecopods were reserved for the highest-ranking chip carriers; the only fourth generation and the handful of third generations took the ecopods inside the lab. Ecopods were designed to let people survive for years in space and block off a certain level of stellar storm effects and mech attacks, making them the ideal method of escape. In contrast, a spacesuit could provide up to 48 hours of protection and would almost be highly dependent on luck to survive if they could wait for rescue to arrive.

As for the first-generation chip carriers, a portion were sent off to search for the missing hostage Lin Jingheng while the others were sent to make emergency repairs for the already doomed ecosystem. If someone among them could accomplish their task and prove themselves ‘useful,’ they may be granted a chance to survive if there were extra spacesuits left after all the second-generation carriers got their suits.

Fear consumed the minds of the first generation as they frantically ran to carry out their orders under these difficult conditions. They cried in despair as their limbs swam through the air but even the most basic survival instinct couldn’t disobey the biochip’s absolute hierarchical system. No matter how much they feared or how much they hated their higher-ups, their bodies were forced to carry out the orders given to them.

Doctor Hardin laid inside the ecopod and heard the signal interception caused by the stellar storm from outside, causing the voices of the people to be cut off by the disturbance.

“We still haven’t found anything...Commander Lin…. buzz...the surveillance couldn’t…”

The ecopod’s alarm went off: “Alert, the environment outside is facing a dramatic change, air pressure continuously dropping--”

“Check the last camera that caught him…. buzz….it’ll be too late if we can’t find him!”

Doctor Hardin took in a breath of the precious oxygen inside the pod and closed his eyes.

Perhaps Lin Jingheng was a man born with a sword in his heart that had been polished by the harsh world for many years. He always flashed the side of the sharpened blade against the world based on habit, therefore he never felt pain from the injuries caused by the harsh world. Instead, he used these wounds and scars to further polish his blade and created a unique cycle that consumed his life.

Every grind of the blade sharpened it even more.

It would be a devastating tragedy if that blade was to break one day.

Suddenly, the ground shook violently while the communication signals inside the ecopod completely cut off. Immediately after, a strange noise came out of the speakers as a mysterious channel without a passcode engulfed the land.

Sixteen sailing days away, a mech that had been watching the galactic prison was reporting the situation to Lin Jingshu. They didn’t have time to wait for backup and warped near the dwarf planet as the mech passed through the dispersing atmosphere. This time, the sounds from the channel were much clearer: “Director of the security team, please confirm the safety of the target and prepare to board the rescue mech!”

“Reporting in, Doctor Hardin has entered the ecopod but we’ve lost track of Commander Lin!”

The mech pilot’s cold voice rang out from the channel: “The air pressure is already at its limit, if we cannot ensure the safety of Commander Lin, I’m afraid we cannot carry on the rescue mission.”

“Reporting in, first generation chip carriers are dying--”

The first generations that were exposed to the dangerous environment while working to carry out their orders no longer had the energy to cry. Some people could barely muster enough energy to take another step and fell onto the ground, then floated into the air after a few seconds of twitching until their bodies stopped moving.

Along with the dispersing of the artificial atmosphere, the lights indicating the first-generation chip carriers also dimmed down one by one as they died in despair. Who knew if they regretted letting their greed for power get the best of them in these times of crisis when their lungs blew up, when they accepted and voluntarily put on the shackles of the Freedom Corps on themselves.

The same things that once protected people would turn around one day and rip out the necks of those people they once guarded.

Someone inside the rescue mech said: “Send Doctor Hardin over to me, I’ll report to our master immediately.”

Two men who seemed like medics dressed in spacesuits barged in and placed the doctor’s ecopod on a temporary railing pointed towards the mech. One of the men knocked on the cover kindly and reassured the old doctor: “Don’t worry Doctor, we’ll take care of you.”

Very quickly after, Doctor Hardin felt his ecopod move slightly as it slid out on the railings, its speed accelerating as it got further away from the backdoor of the lab. Two medics held onto both sides of the ecopod as they escorted him through the automatically built tracks that led towards the capturing net of the mech.

The person on the mech asked frantically: “Doctor Hardin, where did Commander Lin go?”

The doctor really didn’t know. Everyone outside was in complete chaos, he couldn’t even guess where the Commander would go at a time like this.

He’d spent fourteen years but still couldn’t manage to gain Lin Jingheng’s trust and even suspected that the concept of ‘trust’ never even had a chance to grow and nurture inside this man. Lin Jingheng had always been cooperative on the surface when they planned their escape. Yet even if the commander had been kind and even caring to the old doctor, he never once asked the doctor for anything nor revealed any extra information on his plans to escape.

Doctor Hardin: “I…”

At this moment, an armed mech fleet suddenly sailed near the dwarf planet. Then, a message signal connected onto the planet through the flow of the particles in the storm as the voice inside the channel spoke out in a professional manner: “We’re the Patrol Team of the Sixth Galaxy; we’ve received an emergency signal earlier from this planet, did the artificial ecosystem send out an SOS alert? We’ve discovered that this dwarf planet had not been officially registered with the Sixth Galaxy government, please have the people on this planet show their resident IDs for the Sixth Galaxy so that we…”

Oh no--the rescue team from the Freedom Corps held in their breaths.

They couldn’t intercept the signal due to the solar storm and had hoped it would be lost in space, only to find out that someone actually caught the signal and came over. If Lin Jingshu were to find out that the location of this secret galactic prison was exposed, they would all be offering their heads to her!

Lin Jingshu had assigned two important orders to the man inside the mech: First, the patrol must always ensure the safety of Lin Jingheng. Second, the patrol must make sure Lin Jingheng shall never get in touch with the outside world.

If the two orders ever conflicted, the patrol must place the second order as priority--

In other words, even if Lin Jingheng were to die on the planet, nobody shall know.

The rescue mech of the Freedom Corps detected a small flashing dot on its communication channel--it was their backup.

The rescuer inside the mech bit his lips and fired a missile at the Sixth Galaxy patrol fleet that was sailing over. The leading mech of the patrol team didn’t expect to be attacked and ran head-on to the missile as the mech fell onto the dwarf planet like a comet. The remaining atmosphere sparked fire against the mech body as it dropped onto the ground right in the middle of the train tracks leading to the core ecosystem.

The train that barely parked safely at the platform was unmanned and fell off the tracks.

“This planet is a pirate base!”

“Call for backup from the Sixth Galaxy Military bases!”

“High-energy alert, a pirate fleet is closing in…”

A single missile fired through the atmosphere of the planet right into the patrol team. The patrol team didn’t back down and fired back as they contacted the military bases near the border of the Sixth Galaxy.

The two forces that were summoned by the SOS signal of the dwarf planet were now fully engaged in combat.

Doctor Hardin’s ecopod shook violently for a second as the pod crashed into the capture net of the rescue mech. At this point, the rescue mech couldn’t afford to wait for everyone else on the ground and dragged the ecopod back inside as it sailed up the atmosphere to join the battle.

The capture net also pulled the two medics escorting the pod along with them, almost knocking the medics into the line of fire as the net was reeled in. They were like little bugs trudging through a wildfire in the forest, hiding behind leaves and stones in a desperate attempt to survive.

A large sound outside shook the ecopod; the Doctor inside skipped a heartbeat and felt as if the pod had been shattered into pieces. The shock from outside knocked the old doctor out temporarily and made him think he was going to die.

The next moment, the cover of the pod opened and Doctor Hardin’s eyes opened. He discovered he had already boarded the mech safely and noticed the tail of the pod had been blown away. The nutrient solution inside was leaking out of the pod, but thankfully he was saved before any fatal damage could be dealt.

The two medics that were dragged into the mess were also on the mech; one of them had been hurled into a corner, unconscious, while the other who had opened up the cover of the pod was already covered in blood--the broken pieces of the ecopod pierced through his spacesuit into his lower abdomen.

Doctor Hardin was shocked: “You…”

The medic covered in blood gestured for the doctor to remain calm; a strange feeling surged inside the doctor as he attempted to look through the oxygen mask to see the face of the person behind it.

The door on the side of the mech opened as a pirate from the Freedom Corps came in to check if the rescued men were still alive. A row of medical capsules followed behind them and pulled Doctor Hardin out of the ecopod; the capsules turned to the blood-covered medic only to be interrupted by a bright light the next moment.

Everyone was blinded temporarily by the light as someone yelled: “We’ve been hit by a missile!”

“Run!”

“Wait, the mech didn’t send out an alert….”

The blinding white light quickly disappeared as the pirates who had almost lost their vision crawled up from the ground and opened their eyes. They looked around dumbly until they realized after a whole minute that the bloodied ‘medic’ from earlier had disappeared from sight.

The pirate who had been standing closest to the medic earlier was the first to realize something as he looked down at his wrist and screamed--the entire hand that carried his personal device had been cut off from the wrist and had disappeared along with the medic.

Doctor Hardin’s eyes widened in disbelief.

The mysterious ‘medic’--Lin Jingheng, quickly decoded the personal device on that bloodied hand with a small decoding device between his fingers. He used that unfortunate pirate’s identity to hack directly into the core of the mech’s control system without issues, then ran directly into a pirate guard on the mech.

The guard stared in shock at the blood on him and ran up to Lin Jingheng: “Wait, you...hey!”

The bloodied medic fell upon the guard before the guard could finish; the guard quickly caught his colleague and heard the bloodied man mumble something into his ears.

“What’s that?” The guard turned his head and leaned in closer to hear the words. The next instant, a cold object stuck to the back of the guard’s neck as a special signal interceptor shot through his skin. The guard didn’t even have time to respond before he fell onto the ground, twitching in pain.

Lin Jingheng dragged the man to the side and repeated his offense of stealing clothing from the unconscious as he quickly removed the bloodied spacesuit. Cold sweat rolled from his fringe and down the bridge of his nose while he carefully put on the guard’s clothes; the clear pain and smell of blood served to pump his adrenaline.

He was like a beast stuck inside a lightless cage; when he finally managed to break the metal bars, he would run out even if it meant he would be crushed along the way.

Lin Jingheng ripped up a piece of cloth and pressed it onto his wound without looking, covering it up with the jacket and lowering the hat on his head. He temporarily hid the smell of blood on himself as he once again turned on the signal blocker on his neck.

He had five seconds to block off the sense of chip carriers.

Inside the main control room, the pilots and back-up pilots of the mech all had their attentions locked on the battle with the Sixth Galaxy patrol fleet ahead of them.

*Five--*

Lin Jingheng walked effortlessly in between them and quickly made his way into the main control room, even sparing time to nod at a pirate passing by.

*Four--*

He scanned the surroundings; for the first time in fourteen years, he felt the intimidating power of a mech’s mental network.

*Three--*

Lin Jingheng made his way towards the human-mech port of the mental network, lowered his voice, and said to a pirate that looked at him in confusion: “It’s an emergency.”

*Two--*

“Wha……” The person looked like a back-up pirate and grabbed onto Lin Jingheng’s arm.

*One--*

Lin Jingheng sneered lightly and shot out a small coin-like object from his fingers; it was the secret weapon Doctor Hardin gave him: a biochip signal blocker.

*Zero.*

The heavy smell of blood engulfed the entire central control room of the mech as everyone turned to the source of the smell. The signal blocker and mental network of the mech created a unique reaction: all pilots and back-up pilots of the mech were stunned for an instant, which allowed Lin Jingheng to force himself into the human-mech port of the mech’s mental network.

These mech pilots stunned by the blocker would never have imagined that a super-soldier like them who had been injected with biochips would have their mech’s mental network stolen within an instant. They didn’t even have time to react when they were all knocked unconscious.

Lin Jingheng turned off the artificial gravity system inside the mech and accelerated the speed of the mech. Other than himself, he tossed all the unsuspecting pirates inside the mech out of the room. Soon after, he utilized the signal blocker inside the mech and amplified the disruption waves to the maximum, causing all chip carriers inside the mech to twitch in pain.

Doctor Hardin watched as these pirates crawled on the ground to run outside, leaving the old man on his own inside this mech. The pirates ran out of the door and were immediately locked out of the room. Almost immediately after, Lin Jingheng’s voice broadcasted inside the mech: “Hello Doctor, if you’re not injured, please rest inside an ecopod or medical capsule; we’re preparing to make an emergency warp.”

Doctor Hardin asked frantically: “Jingheng, how did you get in here? Did you inject…”

A medical capsule rolled out before he could finish and shoved the old man inside.

This mech suddenly blocked off all communication from its ‘comrades’ during the battle in the air and snuck out of the battlefield in silence. Before anyone noticed, the mech activated its emergency warp and escaped without any trouble as the Sixth Galaxy patrols and Freedom Corps fleet were still busy exchanging fire.

It took a while before the mech finally settled after passing through a number of transfer portals. Doctor Hardin pushed open the cover of the medical capsule and noticed the door outside that was locked earlier had opened back up. He rolled the medical capsule inside in a frenzy to see a room full of corpses--all the pirates on the mech were locked up in enclosed spaces and had suffered through a festival of poisonous gas.

Lin Jingheng leaned on a tall chair with his shirt unbuttoned while a medical capsule created a small, sterilized area on his lower abdomen, treating his gory wound with care.

Lin Jingheng wiped off the cold sweat on his forehead with a hand and gave a victorious smile at Doctor Hardin: “Long live freedom, Doctor.”

The doctor was speechless.

Lin Jingshu’s plan proved to be right; this man could completely destroy the galactic prison with the smallest opportunity.

“Do you think the Silver Ten still remembers the passcode I used sixteen years ago to contact them?” Lin Jingheng asked as he flipped through the database on the mech, “Hm... looks like they’ve been having fun fighting off the Freedom Corps over the last few years. Thanks to these pirates I can deduce the general coordinates of the fleet.”

Doctor Hardin: “You want to…”

“Resummon the Silver Ten.”

Lin Jingheng sent out the long-distance signal. Within an instant, a voice that could stun the whole world passed through the transfer portals within the universe. The signal expanded into every corner of the existing galaxies with one simple order--go to the Heart of the Rose in the First Galaxy.

“Do you think they’ll be scared?”

Doctor Hardin looked at him as his lips trembled: “You...the stopper gel’s effect only lasts 90 minutes…”

Lin Jingheng lifted an eyebrow: “Hm? The chip? Don’t worry. Yous should have the ability to upgrade the chips, right Doctor? Upgrade my chip to the highest level; I bet it’ll be useful if I ever want to beat up Freedom Corps pirates in the future.”

Doctor Hardin’s expression turned grave immediately. He wasn’t disabled, only too old to walk on his own so he had been using wheelchairs to move around. At this moment, he managed to struggle out of the medical capsule on whis own and said: “Lin Jingheng! Do you know what the biochip is? How could you…”

Lin Jingheng lifted his head and cut him off: “Doctor, you’re the one that hasn’t been telling the truth.”

Doctor Hardin stared at him blankly.

## Ch 130 - The Passcode

“I found a recorded message by accident that Laura sent to the AUS right before she died.” Lin Jingheng turned the mech on autopilot--the Freedom Corps mech was equipped with a well-rounded navigation system that allowed pirates to find the best hiding spots within the depths of the universe. “She said that your criminal charge back then was ‘anti-humanity, allying with foreign pirates, and human experiments.’ Because of you, registration to Eden became obligatory and therefore eradicated the concept of ‘missing persons’ from human society. Doctor, are you going to tell me that all of these charges have been fabricated by the Eden Committee?”

Doctor Hardin’s expression stiffened when he heard the phrase ‘recorded message.’

“You told me that your students were the ones that joined the crazies in the AUS and that you had nothing to do with them but that wasn’t what I heard.” Lin Jingheng continued, “There was another secret file inside the AUS headquarters that recorded a portion of the organization’s funding sources; Doctor Hardin, I’ve seen your name on that file. You surely can’t say that this was a conspiracy against you between the Committee and the AUS, right?”

Doctor Hardin answered hoarsely: “You’ve already retrieved the data from the AUS, that’s why...you’ve known that I was keeping things from you since the moment you opened your eyes on that small planet.”

Lin Jingheng gave him another sneer; the blood stain remained at the corner of his eyes.

For fourteen years, this man had not leaked even the slightest hint that he already knew the doctor was hiding something. He simply acted cautiously around everyone and developed a cooperative relationship with Doctor Hardin while remaining a difficult person to get along with most of the time. Yet despite his shithead personality, sometimes he would display vague hints of kindness that made it seem as if the harsh reality was slowly chipping away at his hard shell as the two non-chip carriers lived interdependently.

Once again, that was all a facade.

The doctor had a sudden realization; when Lin Jingshu locked up the galactic prison and fled from the dwarf planet, he remembered visiting Lin Jingheng inside the ecopod who at that time had barely woken up. Lin Jingheng had a change of attitude from a single line by the doctor and immediately blew up a bottle of liquid with high conductivity...looking back now, perhaps that was also an act he put on.

The man purposely painted himself as the dangerous prisoner of the planet and shaved away the suspicion inside the old doctor’s heart.

Now, they were the only two living beings inside the mech. Lin Jingheng controlled the mental network and was finally in a position of power, so he lowered his gaze and faced Doctor Hardin without any reserve: “Right--so, Doctor, perhaps you can tell me now. Why did you choose not to contact the AUS after you ‘died’ and instead went off to start your own campfire?”

Doctor Hardin answered lightly: “What will you do if my answer doesn’t satisfy you?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry, Doctor,” Lin Jingheng spoke in the old Woltorian tone that they both hadn’t used in years and answered nonchalantly, “after living through the hands of the AUS and Freedom Corps, I’m sure you’re an extremely valuable asset who already has the core technology of the opium biochip in his hands. Almost too valuable, so even I have to keep you safe ‘with care’.”

“Commander Lin.” Doctor Hardin let out a long sigh. He felt that even as a top researcher from the White Tower, he was no longer in a position to call him ‘Jingheng’; he had grown used to standing on top with the elites, always thinking he was the smart one among a sea of foolish people. He always felt that he was the overseer of the game while everyone else was pawns and players...yet he forgot that these ‘players’ on the board were all people who had once stood in the eye of the storm on Wolto’s political stage. This was the same for Lin Jingheng and Woolf--even Lu Xin wasn’t as foolish as he’d imagined, but the late commander had taken too much under his wing and couldn’t manage to protect everything he fought for.

“Let the medical capsule take out the biochip for you first,” Doctor Hardin shrunk back into an old and tired ball as he spoke calmly, “the opium biochip is very dangerous. It will cause irreversible damage to your biological buildup up to a certain extent; do you really want to become a crazy addict of that chip?”

Lin Jingheng rested his head upon one arm and looked at him unfazed: “I thought the initial biochip you researched wasn’t an addictive drug, but a tool leading to ‘human evolution’.”

Doctor Hardin was shocked: “How did you know?”

“I’ve spent quite some time in the Eighth Galaxy before and learned about the history of the Nuwa Project, even came in close contact with the mutated Rainbow Virus. I’ve also had a reliable researcher with me,” Lin Jingheng said. “What, am I wrong?”

Doctor Hardin closed his mouth.

“I’ve heard that the Rainbow Virus can regress cells back into stem cells and trigger DNA evolution, so if there are ways to utilize this particular characteristic of the virus it’s possible to rebuild the human body into a base for artificial ‘evolution’. With the support of the biochip, humanity will become a species of infinite potential for evolution,” Lin Jingheng waved off the robot arms on the medical capsule after they finished sewing up his wound. He refused the sticky anti-scarring gel from the capsule and buttoned up his shirt while he spoke in a somewhat playful tone, “The Nuwa Project in the Eighth Galaxy had successfully created a birdman, I’ve seen him before. You can’t tell me that as the first director of the White Tower, you were less skilled than those self-taught scientists in the Eighth Galaxy, right?”

Doctor Hardin answered dryly: “That was...that was only a theory we came up with. It’s impossible for the Rainbow Virus to fully manipulate the human body. We’ve never successfully raised the ideal base body for evolution, and the biochip was…”

“A foundational theory.” Lin Jingheng interrupted him as his venmous gaze rested on the doctor’s throat. “That can’t be right, Doctor, you’re too humble. If it was only a foundational theory, why did you hide for so many years?”

A chilling sense of fear crawled up Doctor Hardin’s back; those slightly cold but occasionally spirited grey eyes of Lin Jingheng that he had grown used to seeing for over a decade were suddenly darker than a black hole. The doctor saw through those eyes and realized that this man also wanted the core research of the Nuwa Project.

Neither of the twins were characters that deserved to be looked down upon. Though compared to Lin Jingshu’s mad terrorism, the former Union Commander Lin Jingheng’s schemes were much more fearsome.

“Doctor, you’ll be very safe in my hands. None of your secrets will be exposed and I can provide you with all the necessary tools Jingshu gave you for your research. I even know a whole group of vaccuocerebrals that would be more than happy to become your test subjects.” Lin Jingheng lowered his voice gently and spoke into the doctor’s ears, “You also have me; my mental strength is constantly stable at the human limit. For almost a whole century, nobody in the Union could compete against me in this department. I can even help you examine the limits of mankind--aren’t we supposed to be constantly striving for more power?”

Doctor Hardin had a sudden change of expression: “What are you talking about? Are you being controlled by the opium chip!?”

Lin Jingheng looked at him calmly.

“I won’t give the core research of the Nuwa Project to anyone! Whether it’s the AUS, Lin Jingshu, or you! You can kill me right now if you want!”

Lin Jingheng pressed on the doctor’s shoulder with a faint smile on his face: “Shh--chill out, Doctor. Neither of us are scared of death, I know.”

Doctor Hardin was pressed into the medical capsule by the young commander. Even if the old doctor had the greatest mind in the world, he didn’t have a body fit enough to fight back. His whole life had been an endless game of escaping from trap after trap.

“When I left the White Tower, I destroyed all my research materials and cut off connection with the AUS... that was because I discovered that they tried to use me to monopolize the technology behind the Nuwa Project. They wanted to determine who could evolve into a superhuman and who would make up the class below that would serve the superhumans. That was when I understood why evolution must be a natural process: artificial evolution would only create great calamities in human society, so I refused to work with the AUS...and let myself take the blame for everything. In the end, I couldn’t even determine who betrayed me. Was it the loyal followers of the Eden Committee or my students that allied themselves with the AUS? I really don’t know! I had nowhere to entrust Jingshu to and could only let her stay with the Committee because I believed that they were at least better than the pirates!”

His voice grew more agitated and desperate as he spoke, almost as if he were questioning his past self across a quagmire of guilt: “But how did she turn out like this? How did we manage to trudge down this path? Why did we end up like this?”

His old friend Woolf was the pillar of the Union. The doctor had always been concerned that his friend was too loyal to the Union and would end up becoming a pawn of the Eden Committee; that was why he added Woolf’s name onto the forbidden fruit back then, only to realize now that he had unknowingly planted the seed of tribulation for this world.

Lin Jingshu had forced him to watch her twisted ‘experiments’ on the opium in order to probe the old doctor’s knowledge and threaten him, forcing him to watch her slowly build up her crazed underground kingdom.

In the pit of despair, Doctor Hardin met the legendary Commander Lin who almost gave his life away for the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy. He thought that Lin Jingheng would be different from others, only realizing that everything had been another elaborate lie.

The truth was that everyone in the world was the same in pursuing their own desires for power and authority.

“Tell me, what should I do? Is this the punishment I received for touching the forbidden area of Eden? Was I supposed to be a fool that worked for the Committee, properly managed Eden, and lived in the fever dream of Wolto? You…”

Doctor Hardin suddenly stopped as his eyes widened. He saw Lin Jingheng take out a bloodied piece of biochip from his pocket and tossed it onto a small tray beside him.

“You...already…”

“Get some rest, I’m sure you’re tired.” Lin Jingheng retracted the cold and avaracious expression on his face as he finally let go of the old doctor. He gave the medical capsule a simple order as the capsule shot a small bit of sedative into the doctor’s veins.

Doctor Hardin stared dumbly at him: “You…”

He vaguely saw a bit of pity on Lin Jingheng’s face before his eyelids grew heavy from the sedative, dragging him into deep slumber.

After the doctor finally fell asleep, Lin Jingheng pulled up the record of the doctor’s blood pressure, heart rate, and hormone levels from earlier and sent it to the supercomputer on the mech. He studied the truthfulness of every word the old doctor said as he tossed the biochip into the trash.

Doctor Hardin passed his initial test--Lin Jingheng summoned a robot as he rolled the capsule back into the medical chamber and cleaned up all the corpses left on the mech. He then pulled out some hidden wine left on the mech; he did need to bring Doctor Hardin back to the Eighth Galaxy because Lu Bixing’s Rainbow Virus-built body had always been a worry of his. He needed to make sure Monoeyed Hawk and his half-assed lackeys hadn’t left any aftereffects on this child's body.

The mech sailed quietly along the stars as Lin Jingheng was finally given a short moment of rest from gunfire and the battle of wits. The longing thoughts that he’d suppressed in his heart grew like weeds in a field, ready to pierce through his chest.

He’d promised that person that he would return, no matter how long it would take.

He’d lost contact with the Eighth Galaxy for over a decade after the ambush of the combined fleets. Turan had given that person a dose of anesthetics under his silent approval…

What would Lu Bixing think when he woke up?

Would the young man think his commander was dead?

Would the young man hate him?

Would the young man...forget about him?

Lin Jingheng’s heart ached slightly at the last thought while the bitter taste of alcohol rolled down his throat. The burning sensation of the wine in his stomach pulled his mind back to reality, making him feel slightly light-headed-- perhaps due to the blood loss from his injury.

Lin Jingheng forced himself to focus when the first response to his long-distance message arrived: “Who are you!?”

The commander packed up all his overflowing and unchecked emotions back into his heart and locked it up, returning to his immovable demeanor as a commander. He placed the empty wine glass on the rack and responded: “Who do you think I am, fool?”

On the other side of the channel, Thomas Young, who was secretly chasing after a fleet of Freedom Corps pirates felt his eyes watering as he yelled into his own team’s channel: “Fool! I can’t believe he called me a fool again! Am I really that stupid? He hasn’t contacted us in sixteen years, we didn’t even know if he was dead or alive--he could’ve at least left a message for us! I almost fucking disbanded our squadron! What kind of shitty boss and commander is he!?”

The Third Squadron’s communication channel was completely silent as everyone listened to their captain rant.

Poisson let out a sigh.

Thomas hollered back at his boss with a hoarse voice: “Silver Third Squadron received! Heading over to the Heart of the Rose immediately and will be on standby!”

“Silver First Squadron received.”

“Silver Tenth Squadron is on our way to the Heart of the Rose.”

“Silver Sixth Squadron is fully assembled; we are on standby at your order. It has been twenty years, Commander.”

“Silver Fourth Squadron’s casualty rate was extremely high; the entire Squadron is now left with only three people and two mechs. We haven’t given up our fight in sixteen years; it’s a pleasure to hear your voice again, my commander.”

August 15th, NSC 290.

The Glory Troops that had taken over Wolto for over fifteen years finally fell to their knees and broke down from the inside out under the pressure of the combined Union and Central Militia forces. The President was still stubbornly living his fever dream of a great empire and refused to surrender until he was assassinated by his own subordinate in his backyard.

Two days later, the Glory Troops announced their surrender and that they would retreat all forces from the First Galaxy without any underlying conditions. They also promised to hand the crystal ball of the Union, Wolto, back to the Union.

The City of Angels celebrated in tears of joy when the news came in. People pinned the Azure Sea to their chests and hugged one another. From NSC 275 to 290, they had been kicked out of Eden, their hometown, and lived in fear day and night. They didn’t dare to look up at the night sky or reminisce about the beautiful horizon on Wolto until now when they could finally see a ray of hope.

September 1st, thousands of superdimensional heavy mechs landed on Wolto and held a grand celebration of the pirate’s surrender as the Union once again reclaimed the planet. On the same day while the world’s attention was on the capitol planet, the Freedom Corps suddenly charged in during this time of weakened First Galaxy defense and took over planet Serbia, holding the entire planet hostage.

A dark mist once again clouded the ray of hope before the celebration ended, foretelling that this crisis of human history was nowhere near the end.

At the edge of the First Galaxy, the Union and Freedom Corps troops gathered up silently in a stalemate that lasted days.

Planet Serbia lacked natural resources and wasn’t an ideal location for living. Once every six years, the planet would orbit near the forbidden land of the Heart of the Rose. Even though the Union called it a danger zone, the real forbidden area wasn’t deep inside the Heart of the Rose and was actually the edge of the territory that was still under human control. Therefore, many tourists would visit the planet during this time to get a close look at the rumored forbidden zone of the First Galaxy. Serbia became a popular tourist location with very few permanent residents, with tourists making up most of the population on the planet. Most of the planet’s resources were outsourced from other planets, so the pirates skipped the method of a massacre and instead ‘accidentally’ blew up a supply of nutrient syringes. Without proper communication with the rest of the galaxy, the planet quickly ran into the problem of a food and water shortage.

The pirates didn’t block off the signals of their hostages and let these desperate people send out cries for help.

The morning of September 10th, the Parliament of Wolto was filled with people seated in silence like the normal state of the government prior to the war.

This was day ten of the planetary kidnapping incident on Serbia.

On closer inspection, the Parliament was still visibly different from how it was before the war. Before the war, the center seats of the Parliament were reserved for the Eden Committee; every politician from their respective galaxies had their own section in the Parliament around the Committee. The flashy politicians took over the most important seats while the Military Council were placed in the outermost corner of the hall like a bunch of outliers.

Now, the entire hall was filled with intimidating people in different military outfits.

Old Chief Commander Woolf arrived late to the meeting.

“Chief,” an old general broke the silence, “the people of the First Galaxy are gathering up to call for more action. We can’t simply continue the stalemate and give verbal condemnations; you must give us a plan of action to deal with this situation.”

The current First Commander of the First Galaxy added on: “Serbia will soon leave the danger zone in the Heart of the Rose, I’m afraid the pirates may make a move when that happens.”

The door to the Parliament opened as he finished. Secretary Wang Ailun walked in and said: “They’re already on the move.”

He moved his wrist as he spoke and sent news footage from his personal device onto the main screen inside the hall: “The pirates just announced that they will be holding a public poll on the hostage planet for the next week.”

“Pirates are organizing public polls? What a joke! What can they even vote on?”

The answer was displayed on the footage before Wang Ailun answered--Did the old Chief Commander Woolf commit a crime against humanity?

Chattering flooded the Parliament as everyone turned their gaze to Woolf standing on the chairman’s seat.

Woolf gave a small gesture to calm everyone down.

“You vote or you die, that’s their threat.” Wang Ailun said in a stern voice, “We already know the result of the poll; this isn’t just a personal offense to the old Chief, it’s a mockery to the Union’s foundational democratic spirit. We must take immediate action by force. In ten days from now, Serbia will leave the danger zone inside the Heart of the Rose; according to strategist analysis, the pirates will fully take control of the planet by then so we must reclaim the planet before that happens. The enemy didn’t block out communication signals in order to openly put pressure on and threaten the Union, so the stationed troops on the planet have been contacting us in code. I’ve heard that some citizens have attempted to break out by sailing further into the Heart of the Rose and some have even successfully escaped the planet. This proves that even the pirates have their reserves toward the Heart of the Rose and don’t dare to sail deep into the area; therefore, I suggest we detour around the Heart of the Rose and ambush the pirates from the back.”

“The disruption and noise have disappeared; we’ve confirmed the coordinates of our missing teammates as well. Our guards are making their way over right now, we estimate that we should be able to meet up within half an hour.” Mint lifted her head. “We’ve also detected energy reactions from transfer portals, requesting to relocate our signal--have we sailed out of the depths of the Heart of the Rose yet?”

Their connection with the far-away Eighth Galaxy was still unstable, it took at least ten tries to successfully send out the message. Thankfully due to the nature of this expedition, the entire Engineering Department was very patient about the inconsistencies.

“Received communication request--”

“Is it our escorts?” Mint mumbled to herself, “I thought I sent our coordinates to them already...wait, Captain, this seems like…”

Before she could finish, the rest of the team also noticed that an unexpected small starship was sailing towards them--unexpected because the starship was virtually destroyed and was barely functioning. Perhaps it was due to luck or a very skilled technician on board, but the starship’s main body was still untouched like a giant messenger bottle floating in the sea. It flew towards the Expedition Team with a broken engine as if it was ready to blow up the next second.

“People from the other galaxies?” The captain seemed a bit excited. This discovery meant that they had once again entered a zone of human activity after a decade. “Accept their request and greet these people.”

Mint picked up the request and was immediately greeted by countless voices from the other side. The voices ranged from old to young; a few children’s screams pierced through the channel, shocking Mint for a split second, unused to this sudden noise: “What’s going on?”

A weak but calm man’s voice passed through the countless cries in the background and explained clearly: “Hello, unknown fleet. We’re from the corner planet Serbia of the First Galaxy; everyone on this starship are unarmed civilians that include six elderlies over the age of 250 and four children. We don’t have any weapons and our starship’s engine has completely broken down. We were pulled in by the gravitational forces in the Heart of the Rose. Our friends, regardless of which forces you belong to, are you able to give us a helping hand, out of humanity? I’ll repeat, we do not carry any arms…”

Eighth Galaxy, Planet Qiming, the Milky Way City Military Base Command Post.

“Prime Minister, we’ve just received a report from the wormhole area that the Expedition Team ran into a fleet of refugees from planet Serbia of the First Galaxy.”

Lu Bixing lifted his head: “What happened, I thought the Glory Troops were quite courteous to the people of the First Galaxy?”

“Apparently the pirate organization Glory Troops have surrendered. The First Galaxy had already been out of war for a while, so the pirates will officially drop their arms and leave the First Galaxy within sixteen hours and turn in their letter of surrender to the Union.”

Lu Bixing’s expression remained flat as he commented: “So it’s peaceful now? That’s pretty good. We barely found our way out and the Union dropped their guns; what kind of luck is this?”

“I’m afraid that isn’t the case,” Zhanlu said, “according to the information we received from Miss Mint and her team, an unidentified pirate fleet invaded planet Serbia and took the entire planet hostage. They are currently streaming their act live throughout the universe.”

“How lively,” Lu Bixing said. “Do they not have any navies stationed around, why did a whole planet fall so easily into enemy hands?”

Another unstable message was sent back to the Eighth Galaxy from the escort of the Expedition Team.

“Prime Minister, the panicked citizens are starting to flee into the Heart of the Rose, the escort team is awaiting your order…”

“Stay on standby, don’t mind unarmed starships.” Lu Bixing said, “The pirates and the Union can fight however they want, but I’d rather they don’t go near the Heart of the Rose or we’d have to welcome them.”

“Understood,” Zhanlu responded kindly, “let General Turan increase the troops…”

Turan barged into the command post before he could finish.

Her whole body trembled while she breathed heavily in rhythm with the vibration.

Zhanlu: “General Turan, I’ve detected that your heart rate…”

“Pas-passcode!” Turan interrupted him frantically as she ran towards Lu Bixing’s desk and placed her hands on it. “The escort I sent to the Heart of the Rose detected from the transfer portals nearby…”

Lu Bixing pushed a cup of water towards her and spoke kindly: “Slow down a bit, what passcode?”

“C-communication passcode. Eleven...no, sixteen years ago…” Turan couldn’t even properly distinguish between the two calendars under her overflowing emotions. She even forgot her own position and grabbed the Prime Minister’s collar as she said, “Commander…”

## Ch 131 - Long Time No See

It was like Turan had damaged the language construction part of her brain on the door when she walked in; nobody in the command post understood what she was crying about and watched her grab onto the Prime Minister’s collar. The mechanics of the Engineering Department thought these two were about to finally go at it after over a decade of cold war and collectively took three steps back, ready to call in security to break up a potential fight.

But Lu Bixing understood.

To some people, the wounds that turned into scars over time would grow to become the untouchable reverse scale of their lives. Even a single word, letter, or a hint of it would be able to inflict pain upon that wound. Lu Bixing’s eyes widened slightly as his chin stiffened up visibly for a split second.

Lu Bixing quickly grabbed onto Turan’s wrist and pulled her disrespectful paws off as he asked nonchalantly: “You’re saying that the Expedition Team detected the Silver Ten’s communication passcode signal near the Heart of the Rose?”

Turan opened her mouth to speak when Lu Bixing held up a hand and interrupted her again.

He pressed his own personal device and pulled up a galactic terminal map of the First Galaxy, covering the room from the ceiling down to the floor.

Lu Bixing stood up and strolled casually towards the projection: “With our limited knowledge right now, we should form a reasonable hypothesis for the situation. The Central Militias have all stepped away from the Union while the Glory Troops and AUS pirates formed their own governing bodies within their organizations. The war has multiple fronts, but now it seems like there’s a turn of events on the playing field. It’s likely that the Union has once again gathered up the Central Militias under their wing; on the other hand, the AUS has been under the radar this whole time. Let’s just assume that the AUS is preparing for a counterattack and the Glory Troops are preparing to surrender.”

“The latter has been holding the First Galaxy hostage for over a decade. The First Galaxy is the epitome of modern civilization, so they can’t possibly be firing rounds of missiles like they did here in the Eighth Galaxy. This means that it’s likely that the pirates and Union have been involved in a long-time power struggle for many years and are finally reaching a resolution. But that’s when someone else joined in at the last minute and turned the tables again--judging from the method this third party is using against the Union, it’s highly possible that this third party is the old Freedom Corps pirates from the past. General Turan said that we’ve detected the passcode signal of the Silver Ten near the Heart of the Rose, so we can assume that perhaps the surviving Silver Ten fleets are chasing down the pirates near the area. If that’s the case, it would seem as if we were lucky enough to make it to a grand gathering of all the largest armed forces outside of the Eighth Galaxy.”

Turan couldn’t help but add in: “No, Prime Minister; the communication method used among the Silver Ten is different from the passcode used to summon the fleet, the order given to us from the higher-ups uses a completely different code system, this is the ru…”

“In the history of the Union, the Silver Ten had almost always been in a contract relationship with the Union and didn’t take orders from the Military Council. I’ve heard that in times like these when the top commanding position is vacant, you all have your own system of handling the situation. I’m surprised that the summoning order still uses the old coding system, it’s quite an impressive preservation of tradition; though I would have to say it’s quite unsafe.” Lu Bixing looked directly into Turan’s eyes. “Is there anything else you’d like to add, General Turan?”

Turan stared into his eyes and suddenly felt all words escape her. Under that intimidating stare, nobody aside from a fearless AI like Zhanlu would dare mention the possibility that perhaps Lin Jingheng was still alive.

Lu Bixing picked up the thermos on his desk and took a sip of the coffee he brewed this morning. The coffee was still warm as small wisps of steam floated from the cup, covering all the emotions in his eyes as he continued calmly: “Apparently, when areas of human activity expand in space, it’s very likely that large predatory animals and extraterrestrial life forms around the area face the risk of extinction. In contrast, smaller animals and life forms are more likely to merge into human society...whether it was the ‘empire’ or the ‘religion,’ no wonder why both of the largest pirate organizations were the ones that fell first. It’s now these drug dealers living underground who became the biggest threat to the Union; we were quite lucky to close off the Eighth Galaxy back then. Zhanlu, pull up some people from the Engineering, Intelligence, and Wartime Planning Departments immediately, I need an analyst team ready.”

“Understood.”

“How much energy disruption can the wormhole stabilizer used by the Expedition Team withstand? What’s the statistical difference between using the stabilizer and not using the stabilizer? Give me an estimation as soon as possible.”

“Prime Minister, the data analysis is currently in progress.”

“Zhanlu, pull up all old research the Union had on natural wormhole areas, we’ll need to devise a full strategy against them.”

“Okay, Headmaster Lu.”

“Also…”

Turan let out a breath of air as she stood slightly dumbfounded, then watched Lu Bixing order around this group of people to get to work. She suddenly discovered the biggest difference between Lu Bixing and the late Prime Minister Edward.

The old Prime Minister had always looked up to the Union whether it was in respect or hatred; he had always believed the Eighth Galaxy was a part of the Union and recognized the Union as the legitimate governing authority. Even though he endorsed the concept of ‘independence’ during a time of crisis, he never would have imagined himself to stand against the Interstellar Union as a rival force.

Yet Eleven Independent Years later, Lu Bixing walked out from endless warfare and unrest. He rebuilt the autonomy of the entire Eighth Galaxy with the blood and ashes of war; the Prime Minister today saw the Union as nothing but an equal to the Eighth Galaxy. In his eyes, whether it was the Union, the Central Militias under Lu Xin’s old subordinates, or the three main pirate organizations, nobody was an unchallenged enemy. Nobody was terrible enough to be feared and nothing could remain unconquered. He would carefully estimate the strength of his enemies and determine whether it was worth making a move first or remain cautious until provoked.

“General Turan,” Lu Bixing called to her after assigning a series of tasks, “follow me.”

Turan pulled herself back from her sea of thoughts and quickly followed after him.

Lu Bixing took her out onto the hallway. The hallways of the Milky Way City Command Post were covered with large windows that captured the scenery of the entire military base from the tall building. The enormous mech dock of the base not too far away was parked with a whole navy of heavy mechs produced by the Eighth Galaxy military factories; the heavy mechs rested in an orderly fashion as they quietly stared in a direction up in the air. Almost ironically, the solemnity of this scenery reflected the Military Base of the Union Military back in its glorious days.

Years of internal warfare almost destroyed the entire Eighth Galaxy, but it could also be said that the unrest also prepared them for the day the galaxy reopened. The Galactic Forces of the military now no longer had any newbies that had just barely learned how to pilot mechs; everyone enlisted was an experienced soldier who had survived the brutal battle of the fittest inside a cage.

Lu Bixing asked Turan: “What do you think the odds of the Silver Ten becoming my troops are?”

Turan didn’t know how to respond.

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s nothing.” Lu Bixing smiled. “I just want to request something from you. I need the Galactic Forces to create a strategy plan right now based on the information we have of the active wormhole. The plan should be focused on how to transport enough troops outside the wormhole and how we will retreat from the other side safely in case of an emergency.”

Turan was shocked: “You want to...”

“I’m planning on heading out there personally. The Eighth Galaxy has been isolated from the other galaxies for eleven Independent Years, I need to go check how everyone’s doing out there.” Lu Bixing paused slightly and continued, “Of course, I’m also quite interested in the Freedom Corps right now. If possible, I’d like to get my hands on some of their stuff to bring back for research; I’m not planning on stealing their technology, it’s only for precautions to see how we can defend ourselves.”

“It’s been years, it’s time everyone unsheathes their swords and shows what they’ve got.” Lu Bixing waved Turan off with a smile. “Let’s get going now.”

There were no longer people who gathered up to complain that a non-combative individual like him shouldn’t head up to the frontlines. Now, he could go anywhere he wanted, giving only a simple order of “go prepare for my trip.”

Turan gave him a long look but couldn’t find any hints of what Lu Bixing was thinking on his face. She couldn’t even tell if he simply wanted to go mess with the world at a turning point like this or if he really wanted to follow that signal in the Heart of the Rose.

For a split second, Turan felt a sense of regret; if she had really let Lu Bixing out of the Eighth Galaxy that year to follow the footprints of that man, would everything turn out differently today?

But regret was merely a self-depreciating emotion that all villains needed to learn how to control; Turan lowered her head slightly and then shifted her attention back to the pile of work before her. She gave a quick ‘okay’ and walked off to her post.

It was a sleepless night for Lu Bixing as he prepared to bring a fleet of armed mechs and a handful of top mechanics with him personally to the other side of the wormhole. Turan and the Engineering Department had completed all preparations, but there were still some risks of danger that required coordinating different departments for other back-end work.

Zhanlu waited quietly, as he had grown used to Lu Bixing’s work schedule.

Lu Bixing sent out his last work mail by dawn and finished the cold tea beside him, then carried Zhanlu out to sail out of the galaxy.

When the starship sailed near the wormhole area, Lu Bixing pulled up a report on his personal device. The report was the first official report the Expedition Team had sent back to them that described their experiences inside the wormhole. Mint mentioned the ID of an ecopod she had seen in the report, which happened to be the same one that Lu Bixing had picked up outside Planet Beijing-β many years ago.

Regardless if it was planned or by accident, it proved that Lin Jingheng really had passed through the wormhole into the Eighth Galaxy back then.

Lu Bixing went off into a daze for a short moment as he stared at the familiar ecopod--he was far from calm and collected as he had presented himself in front of Turan. He had interrupted her countless times on purpose simply to avoid giving himself and her any more false hope; he had already tasted the pain and hurtfulness of hope over the last eleven years and couldn’t bear to think about it for even a second more of his life. Yet human desires and nature were difficult to fully control as a single thought lit up Lu Bixing’s heart like wildfire that soon consumed his thoughts as the starship sailed near the wormhole area.

A decade-old passcode of the Silver Ten...even the ancients knew the importance of periodically changing a password. Even though a long-distance passcode was far more complex than a normal password, there was still a risk of it being broken. It was quite unthinkable that the Silver Ten would keep the same communication passcode for so long.

Then...who was still using the old passcode?

“Headmaster Lu,” Zhanlu suddenly spoke up, “you seem to be quite unwell; do you need a medical capsule?”

“No.” Lu Bixing recollected his wandering thoughts and lowered his gaze quietly.

*No*, he tried to reason it out with himself as unbiasedly as he could, *it’s possible that both the Union and the pirates can decode the Silver Ten’s passcode and lure them to the edge of the First Galaxy. They are still a formidable fleet that could threaten anyone; perhaps there’s a conspiracy behind this, we need to be careful.*

The first time, he fixed up Zhanlu with hope only to have that hope crushed by Zhanlu himself.

The second time, he ran out of the wormhole in a craze to search for any traces of that person, only to have the cold universe tell him to give up and stop this foolish daydream.

*I can’t let it happen a third time*, Lu Bixing thought.

He’d be as dead as a corpse would be, jumping off the same cliff thrice carrying the same hope.

It was time for him to calmly accept the truth, accept the reality that that person had already left him the same way his old man and Prime Minister Edward had.

Lu Bixing pulled his senses back as he casually changed the conversation topic with Zhanlu: “By the way--did you manage to find the person that matched my mother’s profile in your database?”

This was a long story: when Lu Bixing discovered that Lin Jingheng and Monoeyed Hawk were hiding something from him, he had attempted to investigate with what little clues he had. But because there were virtually no traces of evidence and it was considered a personal issue he had no time to look into, the investigation had been inconsistent attempts over the years. Only occasionally, when Zhanlu had a little too much time on his hands, would Lu Bixing bring this up to keep him busy.

The connection between Lin Jingheng and Monoeyed Hawk aside from Lu Bixing himself seemed to be their relationship with Lu Xin. According to Zhanlu, the two grew unfriendly with each other because Commander Lin’s method of searching for Madame Lu’s memento was quite antagonistic.

During one sleepless night, Lu Bixing had a random thought while half-asleep and realized that Madame Lu had escaped out to the Eighth Galaxy the same year he was born. Could it be possible that she had some sort of relation to the mother he’d never met?

Madame Lu had been a well-known scholar when she was still alive, so it wasn’t difficult to search through her data. Lu Bixing pulled up an old photo of his mother that Monoeyed Hawk had left him and asked Zhanlu to search his database, with no results as expected.

This made Lu Bixing remember that old question from the past--Monoeyed Hawk had once told him that his mother was a teacher, but Lu Bixing never managed to find out which school she worked in. He had suspected that she may have come from outside the Eighth Galaxy, and because Zhanlu had once run the forbidden fruit system, he was able to search up everyone that had ever been registered into Eden through the database. To save Zhanlu from watching too many reptile movies, Lu Bixing tasked said AI with strange aesthetics this ongoing job.

“No, sorry, Headmaster Lu,” Zhanlu answered, “I’ve filtered through a list of about 2,000 potential candidates based on the physical appearance and social status of this lady and compared it with the genetic data of your brain with no luck.”

Lu Bixing was quite surprised: “There’s no such person? Did that old man make it all up?”

Why would Monoeyed Hawk fabricate something like this to his own son?

The safety alert on the mech rang out to inform all passengers that they had arrived in the wormhole area. Lu Bixing covered his face with the oxygen mask on the spacesuit, secured the safety belt and thought: “Why would he make up a story about a mother that doesn’t exist? He can’t possibly give birth to me on his own, right?”

“Zhanlu, ignore her physical and status requirements, compare directly with my DNA and…”

The unstable whirlpool of the wormhole arrived sooner than expected and swallowed up Lu Bixing’s words; Zhanlu was only able to register the first half of his order--

160 hours had passed outside the short trip inside the wormhole.

Deep in the Heart of the Rose, the Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy opened up his eyes and witnessed the dreary skies of the First Galaxy with his own eyes for the first time in his life.

Meanwhile, it was one hour before the polling on the hostage planet was scheduled to end; Serbia was about to leave the edge of the danger zone. The twelfth warning the Union sent to the pirates was once again ignored as the Union fleet turned their cannons toward their enemies.

September 17th, 4:00 A.M. Wolto time: the space pirates shot the first missile and opened up the battlefield near the terminal outside the hostage planet with the Union Military.

At the same time, the Central Militia stationed near the edges of the First Galaxy risked their lives to sail deep into the Heart of the Rose, preparing to ambush the pirates from behind.

This dog-tail game of chase was being witnessed in secret by the eyes deep inside the Heart of the Rose.

Mint supported a few training mechs on the frontlines of the Expedition Team and watched the battle unfold. The weak energy emission of a training mech could be easily covered up by the natural signal disruption within the Heart of the Rose and shielded the team from the eyes of the Central Militia. Mint carefully recorded the action of the whole fleet and sent the footage to Lu Bixing.

“The Union Forces seem much weaker than expected.” A mechanic from the Engineering Team under Lu Bixing commented as he pointed at the statistics of the Union mechs on the screen, “Even though they have a decent size for a fleet, it doesn’t seem like they’ve had a significant upgrade in equipment from eleven years ago.”

A real-time analyst added: “I’m doubtful that the pirates would have any sort of advantage against the Union either. The defense near the direction towards the Heart of the Rose can’t even stop an unarmed civilian starship from sailing in. See, I’ve said it already that these pirates would get ambushed, Prime Minister…”

“Shh,” Lu Bixing whispered softly, “watch closely.”

The Expedition Team soundlessly blocked off the spatial instability of the wormhole area in the Heart of the Rose with their equipment for the Central Militia, allowing them to pass through the legendary forbidden zone safely.

“This must be a blessing from the heavens!” The unknowing Central Militia charged in with high spirits and cut right into the pirate fleet from behind. “Long live the Union, hail the Pledge of Freedom!”

The Union spy on Serbia immediately reacted and helped rip apart the weak defense of the pirate force from behind enemy lines. Countless hostages were like birds let out of their cage as civilian starships of different sizes rushed out of the atmosphere.

“Minister Lu, large amounts of civilian starships are sailing into the Heart of the Rose, but the wormhole area has been more active than usual today…”

“Don’t stop non-armed personnel, let them through the area,” Lu Bixing gave out an order. He then paused slightly after and added with a lower voice, “If they’re lucky enough to pass.”

The public polling the pirates set up among the hostages ended right at this exact time. Was this simply a coincidence? Was it all set up to mock the Union?

On the abandoned small planet, the Union Forces on both sides quickly surrounded the pirate fleet between them. The unarmed starships made a sharp turn to avoid the battlefield as the station troops of the First Galaxy waited near the border for the refugees.

Suddenly, the tables of the entire universe changed--

“Minister Lu, look!”

Planet Serbia had barely made its way outside the Heart of the Rose and passed by a deserted Union space station along the way. A sudden stream of high-energy waves were detected as a fully armed pirate fleet appeared from behind(?) the abandoned station. The fleet blocked off the refugee starships and opened fire on the unarmed civilians as the Union Forces were thrown into a panic.

The countdown for the poll on Serbia ended as the side of “Woolf is guilty” received a shocking 95% vote. The next instant, the words “Woolf is guilty” flashed red on all pirate mechs as they opened fire in a bloody celebration.

“Minister Lu!”

“These pirates sure are unpleasant.” Lu Bixing stood up and scanned around. “What do you all say, folks? Since we made it in time for the party, why don’t we test our blades today?”

“Deactivating spatial blockage--”

“The Expedition Team is backing up.”

“Calibrating particle cannons--”

Lu Bixing gave Zhanlu a nod.

Yet before the Eighth Galaxy Forces were able to fire out their first shot, a battered-up fleet of mechs suddenly appeared from outside of the First Galaxy. Like a wandering skilled swordsman, they swiftly cut through both the Union Forces and pirate fleets with one smooth move.

Lu Bixing’s eyebrow lowered: “Wait.”

A former Silver Ninth Squadron soldier from the Eighth Galaxy Forces suddenly spoke up: “Minister Lu, it’s the Silver Ten!”

Meanwhile, Lin Jingshu clenched her fists as she controlled the battlefield remotely from the outside. Her nails pierced into her skin: “You really have to--”

On Wolto, Woolf stood up abruptly: “What did you say?”

Lu Bixing’s heartbeat drummed restlessly against his ears as an unexplainable feeling intensified: “Zhanlu, can you try to…”

Zhanlu already connected into the Silver Ten’s communication channel before he could finish--the most obnoxious mech fleet of the universe didn’t even bother passcode-protecting their communication channels.

Lu Bixing heard a voice...a voice that had appeared countless times in his dreams, speaking calmly through the sounds of cannon fire: “Long time no see, everyone. It’s been sixteen years, but it seems like none of you have grown up even a bit.”

## Ch 132 - The Silver Ten Belongs to Who?

The Eighth Galaxy Forces had barely heated up their cannons a second ago when they witnessed the Silver Ten fleet crash into the frontlines and heard this miraculous voice. Everyone was stunned as soldiers, mechanics, and non-military personnel stared at each other in shock. Nobody could tell if it was a mass hallucination or reality, nor did they know how to react and waited patiently for their Prime Minister to break the silence.

But their almighty Prime Minister turned into a wax statue on the spot and stood motionlessly in his mech.

That instant, Lu Bixing didn’t experience any sort of overjoyed emotions or disbelief; he didn’t even have time to consider the possibility of a fake as his emotions and cognitive process suddenly stopped for a few seconds. Only a sense of fear consumed his thoughts while chills ran down his spine, cooling down his body temperature and freezing up his organs.

He slowly turned his gaze in an attempt to see everyone else’s reactions to get a sense of how he should break the ice, only to discover that he couldn’t even see the faces around him clearly. He was sure he wasn’t crying, and nothing was wrong with his eyes, but it was as if all his senses were still stuck inside the wormhole and jumbled up in spacetime. Everyone’s faces around him blurred into similar blots of color that seemed to be floating further and further away from him.

A solitary thought popped up in his mind as he stared at the screen: *Am I finally going crazy?*

Eleven Independent Years had passed. Over thousands of days, Lu Bixing made many enemies along the way; yet his biggest foe wasn’t poverty nor unrest within or outside of the galaxy, it was himself. He was like a lone man walking on the edge of the cliff, constantly forcing himself to maintain a balance between sanity and madness while he held a leash on his own neck. He made sure his soul wouldn’t explode from stress, wouldn’t sink deep into madness, wouldn’t boil it in passion, and wouldn’t die amid chaos.

Lu Bixing was a master at brewing his chicken soup for the soul to feed others, and the most common ingredients of the soup were often fabricated stories of encouragement or real tales of ancient successes. Naturally, he became a well-read individual of these stories from the past. These narratives of the world would quickly sound like one another, so it wasn’t hard to find people that shared the same experiences across the vast universe. Lu Bixing had also once followed the long history of mankind, finding a few people that had suffered similar experiences of swimming against the currents of time to find some peace in his own heart.

These forerunners of the past had told him stories of rebirth from the ashes of the immortal fire, others told him tragic tales of spirits and souls that perished in the trials of time. Lu Bixing gradually discovered that he could no longer empathize with the former while the latter would often touch a chord in his heart as he slowly embraced despair.

Words and stories were all dead objects that left a permanent mark in the world, the only thing that changed with time were the perspectives of its audience; this was something that Lu Bixing understood logically. Lu Bixing had been like a man walking along the edges of death; he was afraid of going mad. He was afraid that once the seven marks on his desk were completed, there would be nothing else left that could save him from stepping into madness.

Yet at the same time, he also thought: *This isn’t the time to go crazy!*

There was the unstable wormhole area behind him and a chaotic battlefield before him; regardless of what happened, he still needed to ensure everyone he brought out of the galaxy with him returned safely.

His restless thoughts circled around all eight galaxies within a few seconds of time in reality.

The three forces locked in combat didn’t hear the nuclear explosion inside Lu Bixing’s heart. The active wormhole zone in the Heart of the Rose was a natural shield that protected the Eighth Galaxy forces, so neither the Silver Ten nor the Central Militia that passed through the Heart of the Rose earlier noticed their existence.

The Silver Ten viciously pushed out both the Union Forces and the pirate fleets and stood between them like a sharp double-edged sword. They created a small opening as they watched the poor civilian starship from earlier flee the battlefield.

Woolf pushed a guard away and walked before the screen in front of the Wolto command center in a struggle, then yelled into the communication channel almost in a shriek: “Who are you? Answer me!”

A moment of silence followed until the calm voice from earlier answered in a flat tone: “The Silver Ten.”

Chatter and shock consumed the galactic frontlines.

Among the Eighth Galaxy Forces that were still hiding in the dark, a few former Ninth Squadron soldiers felt their eyes tear up. Lu Bixing tasted a hint of blood in his mouth as he dumbly realized that he had subconsciously bit into his tongue.

The person on the other side added: “Silver Second, Fifth, Seventh, and Ninth are absent today due to unforeseen circumstances. The former Eighth Squadron only has one person left so I’ve reassigned them to the Tenth Squadron. It’s been years of hard grinding for all of us so I apologize for our broken fleet, I hope you all don’t mind.”

Woolf’s dry lips trembled in fear and shock as he continued questioning: “Who’s the commander?”

“Please wait, the commanding ship was stolen from the Freedom Corps. The communication system has been damaged over the long travel so we’re attempting to fix it right now...ah, there we go.”

Woolf took in a breath of cold air while the strong heart that had been shielded in iron for over 300 years skipped a beat and almost sank to the ground. The dark screen before him flashed a few times with the unstable signal; soon after, a new communication request passed through as the face of a man appeared on the screen.

He had cleaned himself up during the long journey. A simple dress shirt and long pants somehow made him look hale and hearty despite his injury, the signature white gloves covering his hands gave off an air of unquestionable authority. Aside from his slightly long hair that he hadn’t had time to fix up, this ghost of a man that had been lingering in the hearts of everyone for the last sixteen years looked no different than before.

Lin Jingheng.

He was like Napoleon escaping from Elba -- not even hell could imprison him. A single command from him could still call upon a fleet of followers that would give their lives for him.

Lu Bixing suddenly closed his eyes as if boiling water had been splashed into his pupils as he slowly collected himself back together.

“Prime Minister, this...is this even possible? Is this real?”

“It’s Commander Lin!”

“Minister Lu, did you see that? It’s Commander Lin!”

Zhanlu asked kindly: “Headmaster Lu, do you need medical assistance?”

Lu Bixing mustered up all his energy and held out a hand: “I... need a relaxant, give me a Number 6.”

Relaxants were important supplies for galactic soldiers and had been through a number of upgrades over the last few years in the Eighth Galaxy. While reducing the side-effects of the relaxants, scientists also developed alternative versions for different purposes--number 6 was a specific type with higher amounts of sedatives created specifically for people who suffered extreme emotional instability from human-mech connections. It was designed to neutralize chemical reactions that caused emotional instability while removing the effects of stimulating the brain by external forces, allowing people to maintain a stable mind for a total of twenty minutes.

A single shot of the drug quickly suppressed his unrestrained thoughts; his blood pressure rose dramatically, and his eyes filled with redness, breaking his naturally warm and calm demeanor. His bloodshot eyes looked almost fearsome for a second until the effects of the drug settled in his body; he tucked away his senseless emotions and watched the battlefield afar in a composed manner.

“Hold the fire,” Lu Bixing said, “Vanguards, keep the cannons up and remain on standby. Engineering Department, keep an eye on the wormhole to ensure it is safe for retreat.”

“Yes sir.”

“Headmaster Lu,” Zhanlu suddenly spoke up, “regarding the personal order you gave me earlier, I have completed my search and sent the results to your personal device. I believe this case has exceeded the boundaries of personal business and will create a significant impact on the current situation before us, I suggest you take a look at it right away.”

Lu Bixing almost couldn’t recall what this ‘personal order’ was for a second, but out of trust for Zhanlu’s judgement he still looked down at his personal device--

He had been interrupted by the wormhole earlier and couldn’t give Zhanlu a full order to compare the DNA in his brain to the database with search options...he didn’t even have the chance to select the target sex of the search results.

The result indicated that his genetic makeup confirmed he was Lu Xin’s biological offspring. Zhanlu’s association analysis function was powerful enough to automatically refine the search options and compared his DNA to Monoeyed Hawk and Madam Lu’s genes as well. All three results appeared clearly on his personal device as he stared blankly at the virtual screen.

No wonder why he could never find that “mother” of his; this woman had been a fabrication of Monoeyed Hawk all along. No wonder why he, as the son of one of the most powerful men in the Eighth Galaxy, had to suffer such a rough childhood. No wonder why someone with a strange sense of aesthetics like Monoeyed Hawk would suddenly pick up the surname “Lu.” No wonder why someone as cold and reclusive as Lin Jingheng would be willing to give him a whole lifetime’s worth of kindness...and he had thought for years that it was because he had truly won his way into the commander’s heart.

No wonder why Zhanlu’s database had been wiped clean by those two men.

After having a crisis over his sanity, Lu Bixing realized how that he didn’t even truly know who he was. Yet thanks to the effects of the number 6 relaxant, Lu Bixing was able to remain calm and unfazed. Even if the world around him were to collapse at this instant, he would simply think: A*h, I see.*

“That makes sense,” Lu Bixing closed off the screen on his personal device and responded to Zhanlu in an almost distant and unbiased tone, “You’re right, this is indeed a game-changing piece of information.”

After twenty whole Woltorian years and a whole galaxy’s distance away, Lin Jingheng gazed upon his most respected former senior, boss, and mentor with billions of lives at his back.

Woolf’s chin twitched subconsciously at the gaze.

Lin Jingheng nodded at him and said in an almost disrespectful tone: “Thanks to you, Chief, I didn’t expect to see you again during this lifetime.”

At this time, someone from the pirate side entered the channel quietly and interrupted with a haughty voice: “Commander Lin, you do need to thank Chief Woolf for everything that happened to you up until today.”

The voice seemed to be manipulated through an old voice changer that almost sounded like a broken robot. It was difficult to tell whether it was a man or woman speaking, but the strangeness of the tone made it more than obvious that it was a fake voice.

Lin Jingheng lifted an eye: “And who are you? If you want to wage war, then wage war, murder your enemies then murder them; did your parents not teach you that you can never hide behind a mask for the rest of your life?”

Lin Jingshu’s whole body trembled behind the voice changer as she spoke into it: “You’re right, I’m a piece of garbage that never had parents who raised me; excuse my vulgarity, Commander Lin. Although, I do need to give you a warning; a person can be uncultured, but they cannot be disobedient. Dying in the same pit twice would be well-deserved for a rebel like that.”

“I didn’t know that space pirates are now courteous enough to give me free advice upon our first meeting.” Lin Jingheng turned back towards Woolf with a faint smile, “So how is it, Chief? Do you also have a gift for me?”

Woolf waved off his secretary trying to help him in the back and fixed his posture as the panicked demeanor from earlier vanished within an instant.

Woolf responded sternly: “My present for you is the peaceful future of mankind and a new Union--Jingheng, I won’t ask where you’ve been the last few years, but you certainly arrived at an interesting time. The Glory Troop’s surrendering ceremony is scheduled to be held 24 hours from now; the memorials of the Union will also return back to the lands of Wolto. The new Union will realize the true meaning of the Pledge of Freedom. We will finally achieve true freedom after breaking out of the shackles of Eden; the eight galaxies will become equal states that are economically independent. Your dreams, my dreams, and humanity’s dreams will all be realized--how is this for a present?”

The smile on Lin Jingheng’s face disappeared as he stared coldly at the old Chief.

NSC 270, when Lin Jingheng planned to fake his death and escape the Union, his universal bad luck had once again acted up and dragged his ecopod into the spatial distortion within the Heart of the Rose by accident instead of following its original path. Looking back now, it seemed to be an active wormhole area that coincidentally connected near the edges of the Eighth Galaxy.

Lin Jingheng had recalled the battle against the AUS years ago with the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy Forces and concluded that the secret terminal they’d kept must’ve been exposed. Therefore, Turan wouldn’t leave it open and must’ve sealed it off very quickly after they realized what happened. In other words, the Eighth Galaxy was now a completely isolated land with hundreds of years of sailing between the closest transfer portals and the seven galaxies, so his only choice left to return was to try his luck once again through the forbidden zone. Of course, he didn’t expect to run into this mess during his trip.

He had been traveling from the Sixth Galaxy while reorganizing the Silver Ten, so he was filled in to an extent on the current situation by his old subordinates. Most places had been much more peaceful nowadays ever since the AUS left the battlefield. Social order slowly but gradually returned as the survivors of the war began to settle into their new lives. If it wasn’t for Lin Jingshu’s Freedom Corps, then following the surrender of the Glory Troops, this decades-long unrest would have officially come to an end.

Woolf was right.

The old Chief looked at Lin Jingheng; he knew that the forbidden fruit was in the hands of this young commander.

Lin Jingheng had survived the battle of the Seventh and Eighth Galaxies; of course Woolf wouldn’t expect him to still be oblivious to everything. Lin Jingheng and the AUS were the only two existing entities left in this universe that knew his secret and held the hard evidence to prove it.

But so what?

Lin Jingheng could announce it to the whole world and destroy the Union’s relationship with Lu Xin’s old subordinates in the Central Militia; he could destroy Woolf’s entire military career, but what would be the point? The Freedom Corps could still loot off the internal conflict, the other space pirates could regroup during the unrest, and the eight galaxies would once again return to endless warfare.

A peaceful and new Grand Era birthed from the depths of the abyss was about to begin. Even if they all knew that this new chapter in human history would be built on lies and conspiracy, who cared?

The beacon of peace was finally at the horizon -- would Lin Jingheng destroy the bridge to harmony at the last minute?

Woolf turned to give a small gesture to Secretary Wang to remain silent--Hope wouldn’t take his chances and Lin Jingheng wouldn’t either.

The Freedom Corps were merely holding a scarcely populated planet hostage, and in comparison, Woolf was holding the entirety of mankind as hostage.

Lin Jingshu sneered behind her strange voice changer and said: “The Union government...Commander Lin, perhaps you should not only think of the future, so what about all the citizens and soldiers that lost their lives in the Seventh and Eighth Galaxies? What about all the comrades that once fought alongside you? Don’t they deserve a fair explanation as well?”

Woolf gave a harsh rebuttal: “You have been forcefully pushing your highly addictive biochip drugs, kidnapping and violently massacring innocent people; what an insult to hear the word ‘fair’ come out of your mouth.”

“I insulted ‘fairness’, but wouldn’t you say that you’ve also insulted mankind’s future, Chief? If you really cared about the rights of your citizens, why don’t you postpone the ceremony and send out more support to Serbia instead?” The voice behind the voice changer grew sharper. “Commander Lin, do you really want to let a man like this hold the future of the Union in his hands?”

Lin Jingheng finally couldn’t control his temper when he heard her speak: “Then what am I supposed to do? Hand the whole world into the clutches of biochip drugs?”

Woolf smiled: “Welcome back to the Union, Jingheng. You must be a blessing from the heavens to the new Union; we need the blades of the Silver Ten to slash through the last pieces of darkness before the dawn of the new Era.”

Lin Jingheng turned his head immediately and didn’t hesitate to burst the old man’s bubble: “I don’t have that intention either, Chief Commander. Please don’t put words into my mouth.”

The refugees had all successfully fled the battlefield during this three-way conversation. Lin Jingheng gestured at his troops as the Silver Ten all followed him like fishes into the depths of the Heart of the Rose.

Lin Jingshu couldn’t control her panic at the moment and called out to him through the voice changer: “Wait, where are you going?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t answer and used action to give his response; he didn't plan on helping either side as the Silver Ten fleet sailed past the other forces.

Woolf shot at glance at Wang Ailun, and the Union Forces opened fire the next instant as they shot right into the Freedom Corps fleet.

Lin Jingshu: “Nobody is getting away with this!”

The Freedom Corps quickly pulled their fleets together and fired aimlessly towards both the Union Forces and Silver Ten before them.

Lin Jingheng’s expression grew grim: “Bastard, you really want to die in my hands!?”

Woolf announced loudly through the channel: “The Silver Ten had always been the pride of the Union, Jingheng, it seems like someone won’t allow you to be the bystander here!”

As soon as he finished, the Freedom Corps seemed to suddenly trip over themselves as a crowd of fireworks exploded within the depths of the forbidden zone. Hundreds of particle cannon beams shot out like a tsunami and cut off the Freedom Corps without warning; countless shields couldn’t be set up in time before they all melted under the layered cannonfire as the blast ricocheted towards the Union Forces and Silver Ten.

Woolf’s eyes twitched as the alarms inside the Union Forces mechs rang out: “Who is it now?”

An orderly fleet that the world had never seen before quietly sailed out from the depths of the Heart of the Rose.

An unknown connection request joined in and appeared on all mechs present as the young Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy took a good look around his screen.

Lin Jingheng stood up abruptly and knocked over a half-filled wine bottle, almost drowning his temporary communication screen setup in alcohol.

“The Silver Ninth Squadron isn’t absent today, Commander.” Lu Bixing locked his still-bloodshot eyes onto Lin Jingheng. “The Silver Ten belongs to the Union? Sorry, but I also have an objection.”

## Ch 133 - The Cruelness of Time

Lin Jingheng was supposed to feel nostalgic and reverent as he sailed near the Heart of the Rose, but the territory wasn’t what he would consider a ‘hometown.’ He didn’t know if the mysterious wormhole area would change over the last twenty years, nor was he sure if the spatial distortion would be able to send him back to the same place...regardless, he was convinced that something would go wrong with his plans, based off his personal experiences in life so far.

It had been fourteen Woltorian years since he regained consciousness; the journey had been too long and almost spanned a whole lifetime. This ironically gave him more patience than he needed and gave him the delusion that there would be a longer journey ahead, so he didn’t even have time to think about the anxiety of returning home.

Therefore, this man without foresight was faced with an unexpected immediate threat.

For a while, Lin Jingheng’s mind was blank. When he finally regained his senses, he realized he had subconsciously asked in a daze: “What...what happened to your eyes?”

“My blood pressure got a little unstable from passing through the wormhole, it’s no big deal,” Lu Bixing answered nonchalantly under the puppeteering of the relaxant. The powerful drug even allowed him to give a gentle smile. “Welcome back, my Commander.”

It almost sounded like Lin Jingheng had simply returned from a week-long business trip, just stepping back into the meeting room with his luggage from the back door.

The emotions flooding out of Lin Jingheng didn’t even have time to burn up in flames when cold air surrounded him, catching him off guard and consuming him as he fell into an icy pit.

What was a reunion after life and death supposed to be like?

When he saw Woolf again, he was filled with conflicted feelings that rushed to him like a tide; when he saw Lin Jingshu, he was moved with fear and shock with a loss of control over overflowing emotions. When Thomas Young of the Third Squadron received the summoning order out of the blue, the Captain screamed through the channel like a madman; right now, even all the old Ninth Squadron soldiers behind Lu Bixing were tearing up as they looked at him.

Only Lu Bixing himself was calm and collected as an unexplainable sense of alienation shone from the young man’s eyes.

“My apologies, I haven’t introduced myself yet,” Lu Bixing quickly removed his gaze from Lin Jingheng and captured the rest of the galactic fleets gathered by the edge of the First Galaxy under his eyes. A courteous and diplomatic smile appeared on his face. “I am the Executive Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy, Lu Bixing. Our galaxy’s Galactic Expedition Team was initially exploring a newfound territory in space when we suddenly discovered the existence of an active wormhole area. We naturally passed through it and didn’t expect to arrive in the First Galaxy; we had no intention of interrupting everyone’s meeting here today. However, because our men happened to pass by and were blocked by our fellow galactic fleets here, we had to make our appearance out of courtesy to retrieve them.”

There were indeed too many accidents today.

First was the unexpected crash of the Silver Ten led by a Lin Jingheng who seemed to have mastered the skill of ‘immortality’, then it was the appearance of an unknown mech fleet from within the forbidden zone inside the Heart of the Rose. Whether it was the Eighth Galaxy or passing through a natural wormhole area, everything that happened was news shocking enough to shake the grounds of the Union. In comparison, the news of “a terrorist group took a whole planet hostage” didn’t even seem like a headline that would make it onto even the second page.

If this wasn’t the battlefield, perhaps the whole universe’s media groups would be rushing in to get first dibs on these headlines that could shock the world for a whole year.

After what felt like an eternity of silence, a General from the Central Militia finally spoke up: “The Eighth Galaxy Independent...Government?”

“The Eighth Galaxy destroyed its own intergalactic transfer portals and isolated itself from the Union. Since then, we have established a new independent government and adapted a new calendar following the Independent Era,” Lu Bixing said. “And you are?”

“I’m the former Second Galaxy Central Militia Top General Will Duke, I am currently executing the mission of cleaning up space pirates near the borders of the First Galaxy.”

“It’s my pleasure to meet you, General Duke.” Lu Bixing nodded. “I hope that you are able to visit the Eighth Galaxy as a guest if we ever have the chance to establish an official diplomatic relationship with the Union.”

“You...but the Union never recognized…”

Lu Bixing interrupted him in a civil manner: “My apologies, General Duke; however, the meaning of an ‘Independent Government’ is that we have full sovereignty as a governing body in a fully-recognized territory. We hold equal governing rights as the Interstellar Union and are not an autonomous region within the Union. We do not recognize the legal and governing system of the Interstellar Union, nor do we need the recognition of the Union.”

Nobody younger than 300 years old born in the NSC Era truly understood the concept of a “state” and “sovereignty”. Even space pirates were considered anti-government and terrorist organizations in their subconsciouses; even as the Glory Troops lived a decade-long dream of founding the Glory Empire in Wolto, nobody truly dared to claim they were equal to the Union’s authority.

General Duke was left speechless by such a treacherous statement.

Lu Bixing lowered his head slightly to check his personal device; he had less than ten minutes before the effects of the number 6 relaxant wore off.

His clear mind could still hold off all his senseless emotions for ten minutes. Lu Bixing carefully assessed the current situation in his mind: right now, the Silver Ten were still the center of attention here. Even if they were a battered-up fleet right now, they were still a fleet that could cast a storm in the battlefield if they were stuck inside ecopods. Their legacy had been unshakable for over 300 years to the point where they were almost a mythological entity.

However, the home ground still belonged to the Union Forces. The scale of their forces right now was perhaps the equivalent of all three other forces on-site combined. Their mechs might be a bit outdated, but they were still the ones that controlled the Union. If they weren’t being held hostage by the pirates right now, the Union wouldn’t have hesitated to dispatch their full force against all of the pirates.

In contrast to the other two, the Freedom Corps were much more easy-going in terms of management and function as an armed force. They were still pirate forces with the goal of destruction, but what made them such a threat was their insanity, willingness to sacrifice, and the dangers of the biochip on any groups of people. If the opium situation didn’t resolve soon and caused the Union to fall apart from the inside, capturing a whole planet would no longer be an isolated incident in the future...though of course, none of this really had to do with the Eighth Galaxy.

As for the Union, the Central Militias held up by the former subordinates of Lu Xin made up a great half of their galactic forces.

Lu Bixing’s gaze quickly ran over Woolf in the corner of his screen. This old man who had steadily walked up the ladder of authority and represented the Pledge of Freedom perhaps didn’t know that Lu Bixing had repaired the database of the forbidden fruit; that list that could single-handedly pull Woolf off his throne was in the hands of this Prime Minister.

Perhaps the old Chief would have his own explanation of this issue, but the system revealed that Woolf had been on the list since before both deaths of the two directors of the White Tower. Since then, he was no longer under the control of Eden, but had still witnessed his own adopted son Lin Wei die by the hands of Eden and watched his student Lu Xin also fall into the trap of Eden, only to expect Lin Jingheng to return to the Union after the same forces had already destroyed this young man--

How would Lu Xin’s ex-subordinate see all of this?

Would they believe that Woolf had long been a dog of the Eden Committee? Or would they believe that the old Chief didn’t have anything to do with the Committee and was simply building his relationship with the AUS behind their backs?

Lu Bixing exchanged glances with Woolf briefly as he smiled towards the old man, thinking, *I can destroy half of your kingdom right now.*

But...someone would not want him to do that.

Lu Bixing let out a silent sigh and said: “48 Woltorian years ago, a well-known lady scholar was forced to flee to the Eighth Galaxy, this place her husband had once fought in, due to some issues at home…”

Everyone present knew who he was talking about immediately as the words came out of his mouth. Lin Jingheng’s heart skipped a beat, and he was suddenly filled with unease.

“Her husband--whom I’ve heard everyone here is quite familiar with, seemed to have his name cleared of false accusations already, but died from a terrible conspiracy of the Eden Committee. As for why his relationship with the Committee grew sour, I’ve learned it was due to giving his heart to the Eighth Galaxy outside of Eden’s control.” Lu Bixing paused slightly and spread his hands before him in a slightly helpless manner. “Our poor rural lands have a population made up of vaccuocerebrals -- nobody’s even seen what Eden looks like in their lives, including myself. We’ve never been through higher education like everyone else here and were isolated from civilization for hundreds of years; these are facts that still remain relevant today. And for the Eighth Galaxy to obtain equal rights was the greatest wish of that Commander when he was alive. For me, this was the will of my father.”

Woolf immediately understood the meaning behind those words and was stunned.

The entire Central Militia fleets also fell into silence as countless eyes locked on Lu Bixing’s face hoping to find traces of his parents in the young man’s features.

General Duke from the Central Militia fleet stuttered as he opened his mouth again: “You...you are…”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

He knew that Monoeyed Hawk wasn’t a reliable ally, but he didn’t expect that old cat to be this unreliable! Didn’t they agree to never speak of this even if they died, so that they could let this child stay away from conflict and live a peaceful life in ignorance?

And what the fuck was Minister Edward doing, why were they pushing Lu Bixing up on the front stage?

Lu Bixing: “Zhanlu, you can say hi to everyone now.”

A robotic voice rang out from behind him: “Long time no see, people of the Union--Sir, I thought all of my data relating to you would become like Commander Lu Xin’s and forever be kept in my database; what a pleasant surprise to meet you again during this lifetime.”

This voice that once disappeared near the edge of the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy pierced through Lin Jingheng’s heart as he felt the corner of his eyes burn slightly, gently closing his eyes in response.

Zhanlu continued: “I’ve compared Minister Lu’s DNA with Commander Lu and Madam Lu’s DNA respectively and have confirmed that he was the child born that year under such dangerous circumstances…”

General Duke once again interrupted in a frenzy before Zhanu could finish: “Send me the report, you...are you really Zhanlu? But didn’t Zhanlu…”

“I can send the report to your mech’s communication device,” Zhanlu answered calmly. “Hello, General Duke. I still remember that year when you and a few others secretly made a bet when Commander Lu wasn’t around and tried to connect to my mental network to check your mental strength range. Although due to my custom settings back then, I accidentally hurt you and sent you to the medical capsule after knocking you out. I have been very concerned about this event for almost a century; I feel that I owe you a proper apology.”

“That....that was when I was still a personal guard for Commander Lu...I….” This general of the Central Militia couldn’t even formulate a proper sentence as his lips trembled uncontrollably, “He...he has an offspring? It’s been so many years --we never knew and never fulfilled our duty, now he’s grown so big already...I owe it to our Commander...the Eighth--how has the Eighth Galaxy been these years?”

“Not bad, but of course I’m not almighty, so everyone’s just been barely surviving right now. Thank you for your concern; I hope one day I can live up to my father’s name.” Lu Bixing answered, “The active wormhole area is still quite unstable, so in order to ensure the safety of the terminal, I’m afraid we will have to take our leave right now. When we rebuild the transfer portals in the future, please feel free to come visit.”

He gestured at the people beside him and rearranged the fleet as they turned towards the depths of the Heart of the Rose. At the same time, the heavy mechs rolled their connecting tracks out towards the battered-up mechs of the Silver Ten.

This little feral child that appeared out of nowhere openly took away the Silver Ten in front of everyone’s faces in the utmost disrespect.

Wang Ailun was about to call him out when Woolf lifted a hand and pressed on his shoulder.

The secretary was stunned for a moment until he saw that with General Will Duke leading, all of the Central Militia mechs that had followed Lu Xin in the past voluntarily opened up a path for the Eighth Galaxy forces to pass, even pointing their guns at the necks of the pirates in case anyone wanted to jump in.

Lu Bixing’s eyes locked onto the heavy mech’s connecting tracks until the last small mech rolled in, the pressure on his chest finally alleviated.

A small alert flashed on his personal device soundlessly to indicate that twenty minutes had passed, that the effects of the relaxant were starting to wear off.

“Retreat,” Lu Bixing announced with an expressionless face. “Don’t linger around the Heart of the Rose. Let the Expedition Team lead the fleet and open up the terminal for us; we’re heading back immediately.”

“Yes sir!”

“Oh right, here’s a parting gift for you all.” A missile shot out of the commanding ship as Lu Bixing spoke; the range of the missile exceeded the maximum range of a Union missile as it shot directly at a pirate mech. While it wasn’t uncommon to see missiles on the battlefield and the range of said missile was something to be feared, the most terrifying of all was the fact that the moment the galactic missile shot out, no mech on the battlefield, regardless of the Union or the Freedom Corps, received a missile warning.

The target pirate mech didn’t even have time to put up a proper defense as it blew up into a ball of fire.

Lu Bixing explained patiently as if he was simply giving a lecture in class: “According to my observations, this particular pilot had bad aim and seemed to have misfired toward my men earlier. We may be poor, but we don’t like to also owe others, so here’s a missile in return. See you all next time.”

Lu Bixing cut off the connection on his end and sailed away proudly with his fleet, then disappeared before everyone as the whole world stared in awe.

The foolish Silver Ten fleet that followed Lin Jingheng to the Eighth Galaxy Forces were stunned the moment they stepped down from their little mechs. Thomas was like a frog in a well seeing the world for the first time and ran around like an excitable child: “The air pressure balance and activation speed of the launching dock is almost 0.6 times faster than an equivalent grade of heavy mech from the Union, fucking rad... wow, check out this backup mech, these tracks…am I dreaming? Is this really the Eighth Galaxy? Hey Commander, didn’t you say the heavy mechs from the Eighth Galaxy back then were stolen from the pirates? How come…”

Poisson was at his wit’s end and mercilessly gave his brother’s back a kick. Thomas was kicked forward a few steps before he leaned against the wall of the launching dock, ready to turn his head back to complain only to see that Lin Jingheng’s expression was grim.

Zhanlu’s voice came out of the broadcast inside the launching dock: “Please be careful, Captain Young.”

“Hey, Zhanlu.” Thomas rubbed his nose and strolled back to push Doctor Hardin’s wheelchair out. “Your new ‘skin’ is pretty neat.”

“This is not my mech body, Captain,” Zhanlu said. “Due to the overwhelming cost, my mech core function still hasn’t been fully repaired. Now I’m simply the Prime Minister’s personal AI.”

“Prime Minister?” Lin Jingheng lifted his head.

“Yes, sir. Prime Minister Edward passed away ten Independent Years ago due to illness, so now the Executive Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy is Headmaster Lu--I personally prefer ‘Headmaster Lu’ in private occasions, what about you, sir?”

Lin Jingheng suppressed his anxiety and asked: “What about Turan? Monoeyed Hawk?”

“General Turan is now the Top Commander of the Eighth Galaxy Defense Department and has been ordered to remain on standby back in the Eighth Galaxy. I believe she will be waiting for us on the other side of the wormhole.” Zhanlu paused slightly before continuing, “As for Mister Lu, he sacrificed his life on the frontlines against the pirate invasion that year when the Eighth Galaxy’s secret terminal was exposed, he is now buried in…”

Lin Jingheng’s mind blanked out before Zhanlu could finish.

At that moment, the team of soldiers that came to escort them arrived at the launching dock. The head of the team was Lu Bixing’s former student, little Rickhead.

This silly child who liked to solve everything with his fist had always been scared of Lin Jingheng back then and could never speak a full sentence in front of the revered Commander. Now, he was all grown up and even the last trace of adolescence had disappeared from his face; his features had grown sharper while he seemed to have grown taller. A new sense of sternness and confidence shone from his eyes as he courteously saluted Lin Jingheng: “Commander, please follow me, the safety capsule for passing through the wormhole is located at the bottom of the heavy mech…”

Lin Jingheng interrupted him: “Where’s the commanding center?”

Rickhead: “......”

“Sir,” Zhanlu said, “we’re about to arrive at the wormhole area in the Heart of the Rose. Even though the Expedition Team has made some progress in wormhole research these last years, there are still risks in passing through, we need you..”

“Move!” Lin Jingheng pushed away the soldier standing in front of him.

The Silver Ten that was left behind all looked at each other in shock; they’d never seen their Commander lose composure like this before.

Thomas blinked a few times before commenting: “Oh right, didn’t this Prime Minister Lu say earlier that he was a descendant of Commander Lu Xin? So that means he’s our Commander’s….”

Poisson looked at him as if he couldn’t believe this dumb child shared the same blood at him.

“......Hey bro.” Thomas looked back at him innocently. “Why are you glaring at me like that again?”

Thankfully, the interiors of a heavy mech were quite the same so Lin Jingheng didn’t need someone to lead the way to find the command center.

All the staff on board were getting prepared to pass through the wormhole and doing last minute checks. Even though the galactic soldiers on board were all fresh faces to him, it was clear that they’d all been through proper training and survived battlefields, not new enlistments that were barely pulled out of the training grounds. The Eighth Galaxy fleet had only showed their faces for an instant, but it was more than obvious that the same old discount fleet that had been pulled together back in the day no longer existed.

As for the familiar old faces, some had grown old, others were now gone.

After over a decade of time, the temporary lives of man and permanent objects of the world showed their true faces before Lin Jingheng without warning. For the first time in his life, he felt the cruelness of time.

He felt as if...even the air around him smelled different.

Lu Bixing’s cold and elusive demeanor flashed across his mind.

*The Prime Minister’s gone; Monoeyed Hawk was also gone; how did he live through all these years?*

*How did he learn to suppress all his emotions, to turn the Eighth Galaxy into what it is today?*

*Has he...tried finding someone else, even if it was just to chat and comfort his broken heart?*

Lin Jingheng quickly pushed the last question out of his mind the moment it surfaced.

For over a decade, he had been fighting with fate day and night as he closed off all other emotions within himself; yet now, he couldn’t even bring himself to face this question. It was like a double-edged sword that hung on his heart; if the answer was ‘yes’, one side would stab into him. If the answer was ‘no’, the other side would also stab into him...there was no win for him regardless.

Zhanlu chased after him annoyingly about safety--only this silly AI remained unchanged and could talk for hours beside him.

Some soldiers and staff along the way tried to explain the dangers of passing through the wormhole, but who could stop Lin Jingheng?

The countdown to the wormhole rang throughout the mech; Lin Jingheng ignored everything and ran, barging into the command center.

Inside the command center of the mech, Lin Jingheng noticed the secretary was still the same one who had followed Prime Minister Edward. His impression of the secretary was that he was an avid gossiper and unreliable man, but different from before, his hair was graying from old age. The Secretary had already put on his spacesuit and was preparing to lock the helmet and safety belt onto himself; he saw Lin Jingheng barge in and quickly pointed at a certain direction without a word--

Second floor, the closed door of the Prime Minister’s office.

The effects of the number 6 relaxant faded away as quickly as they had taken effect; Lu Bixing’s whole body was numbed like a rusty robot. He could vaguely feel his consciousness fading as he locked himself in his office like he was sinking into a dream. He couldn’t remember where he was while the medical capsule reached out its robotic arms and helped him into the space suit.

The door to the office opened abruptly. Lu Bixing looked up after a few moments as he stared dumbly at the person walking towards him.

At this moment, the mech arrived at the spatial distortion zone. The gravity system inside the mech temporarily malfunctioned as everyone’s feet left the ground. Lin Jingheng lost balance for a split second as he tripped on air and floated towards the doorway while grabbing onto the walls.

Lu Bixing’s eyes widened as he instinctively jumped out and grabbed onto the man in front of him--

## Ch 134 - It’s Too Late

The current advancements in technology already removed the aftereffects of muscle aches and twitches from using relaxants; only the tips of Lu Bixing’s fingers trembled slightly as he grabbed onto the commander. The medical capsule had already secured the safety belt onto him by this point. The length of the belt was 1.5 meters total, which happened to be the distance from the wall to the front door of his office.

The belt reached its limit as Lu Bixing’s fingers touched Lin Jingheng’s collar; his trembling hands ripped through the weak fabric of the shirt and physically tore open a small hole in it. He forced his brain that was dozing off to stay awake as his attention locked onto that shirt, as the veins on his hands popped in desperation to pull that person back.

*How can I let you disappear before my eyes again?*

Another hand covered in blisters grabbed tightly onto his wrist.

Lu Bixing could feel the small cuts on those hands that gave it a rough texture on the skin.

His eyebrows twitched unnaturally for an instant as he felt a long torch that carried the flames of a bright star pound against his frozen soul. The burning sensation pierced from his chest all the way through his spine; the pain felt almost too real.

Too real that it could rip his heart apart.

The whirlpool of the wormhole swallowed up the entire heavy mech and the space around them began to distort. That door to the Prime Minister’s office twisted into a strange organic shape; Lin Jingheng said something, but the world felt like it was forced into slow-motion and sounds centimeters away couldn’t even pass into Lu Bixing’s ears.

Lu Bixing pulled him in closer as Lin Jingheng fell gently into his embrace while floating in mid-air. The force was so light it almost felt like two wisps of feathers gently brushing against each other in this distorted place while they were falling to the ground. But Lu Bixing felt as if the steel armor in his chest had finally cracked open after years of unshakable protection; the single crack quickly spread through the rest of his body like an expanding web, exposing the unsightly flesh within.

As the wormhole wrapped around the mech body, the spacetime distortion created a strange optical illusion where the walls and body of the mech disappeared. This tiny office instantly expanded infinitely outward into a space representing the universe, while everyone else in the mech floated helplessly in this surreal space.

Numerous convex and concave surfaces appeared around them as the past, present, and future passed through them on the crossroad of fate.

The mirror-like surfaces reflected the scenes of an explosion, moments of mechs vanishing into stardust, bloodied suns rising up from horizons on planets...even scenes of galactic missiles flashing as they touched the ground. The invisible devil was the Rainbow Virus, sweeping through the deserted lands of the Eighth Galaxy and reaping the seeds of life as corpses of people dropped to the ground like fallen leaves. Ghostly white bones peeked out from the dirt in this portrait of hell. This wormhole was like the sewage that contained all the horrible scenes of the Eighth Galaxy that constantly flowed against the current of time until it vanished into the void.

Soon after, the passage of high-energy mechs began to take effect on the wormhole as the terminal grew unstable.

The body of the mech that had disappeared earlier reappeared as noises began to ring out, which seemed to be the automatic alarm on the mech.

Lin Jingheng held his breath; he wasn’t sure if this was normal during wormhole travel, but his instincts detected danger. He quickly grabbed onto the space suit that Lu Bixing hadn’t finished putting on properly, in an attempt to shove the young man back, then shifted his gaze to the oxygen mask that had rolled to the ceiling and reached an arm out to retrieve it.

Yet Lu Bixing refused to let him go and wrapped his arm tightly around the commander’s waist as the two men were pulled to the wall by the safety belt. The mech body also leaned in that direction as Lin Jingheng’s back glued to the wall behind him: “Put the oxygen mask on first!”

Lu Bixing didn’t hear him and slowly lifted a hand to place it against Lin Jingheng’s chest. Time was once again lagging in this distorted space as if it had stopped temporarily; Lu Bixing’s vision blurred as he thought: *This must be an illusion from spacetime distortion, right?*

Otherwise, why couldn’t he feel that man’s heartbeat?

After what felt like a lifetime’s worth of wait, a slow beat finally came from that person’s chest.

Lu Bixing suddenly realized something. Whether it was burning hysteria or fervent joy, the number 6 relaxant was powerful enough to suppress everything, because all of these superficial emotions were simply no match for the thrill and impact of this belated sound of that heartbeat--

It shattered the starry heavens built upon millenniums of time, and shattered the individual soul named Lu Bixing.

A single action inside a wormhole extended infinitely like the delayed heartbeat; less than a meter’s distance required all of his energy to reach across. Lin Jingheng watched the man before him struggle forward like a choppy old film, the closeup shots clearly capturing the heart-wrenching pain on the individual’s face.

They couldn’t communicate, couldn’t hear each other’s voices; yet after years of separation, over 5000 lonely days and nights were condensed into this tiny hint of a pained expression. Lin Jingheng had no choice but to embrace and accept it all. This calamitous pain swallowed him whole and took his breath away for a short instant.

After what felt like 10,000 years, this long journey of a few centimeters finally closed in to zero. Lin Jingheng could taste the dry and cold lips of the other man, followed immediately by a delayed sharp pain when Lu Bixing bit his lip. As if Lu Bixing wanted to consume him whole, a thick taste of blood filled his senses. The heavy mech shook violently while the unstable energy sources within the wormhole clashed into each other, creating countless bright lights in the distance. The mech almost felt as if it was going to be swallowed up by the wormhole.

But who cared?

If he were to die in this distortion of spacetime, then his life would end with this kiss of a lifetime’s reunion.

*My life couldn’t have ended in a more perfect circle*, he thought.

Unfortunately, fate won’t always grant such a tragically beautiful ending. The next moment, time suddenly flew by and quickly returned to normal. The gravity system on the mech also returned to normal as the two men fell to the ground along the wall. Lin Jingheng instinctively reached an arm around Lu Bixing to protect him from the impact.

For a split second, it almost felt like they were still together that evening at home, this man in his arms throwing him onto the sofa in the same position.

But sixteen years had passed.

The returning trip of the Eighth Galaxy Forces might have been filled with danger, but thankfully they were all simply on a roller coaster ride without any actual damage. The fleet finally escaped the whirlpool of spacetime distortion; the soldiers on the first floor knew that Lin Jingheng had run up the stairs without any protection gear and they couldn’t stop him in time. Now that they’d escaped the danger zone, these soldiers frantically untied themselves from their safety belts and ran up to the second floor.

The door to the office was still half opened; a soldier stopped before the door and saw through the opening the greatest Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy’s history half-clinging onto Lin Jingheng. His hands grabbed frightfully onto the commander’s shirt as his stiffened body leaned forward, his face covered in silent tears. It almost seemed as if there was real blood flowing from his reddened eyes.

The soldier was stumped for a moment and stood dumbly before he carefully closed the office door and fled the scene quietly.

This whole trip for Lu Bixing was only long enough to exchange a quick kiss, but for the people waiting back in the Eighth Galaxy, one and a half months had passed before they returned.

Turan didn’t even know how she managed to hold out for this long.

She was only able to make out from the choppy messages from the wormhole the situation outside, but due to the incomplete messages she wasn’t able to piece together the whole picture. She waited anxiously as she suppressed her urge to release her frustration that was intense enough to make her feel like she could single-handedly fistfight all the wild animals within the entire Eighth Galaxy. Luckily, she managed to suppress the urge to jump right into the wormhole.

“General Turan, we’ve detected high-energy reactions from the wormhole area!”

Turan jumped as words shot out of her mouth like bullets: “This is the Eighth Galaxy Galactic Force Temporary Chief Commander Elizabeth Turan, did Prime Minister Lu return?”

The newly established connection was still unstable, and no response came from the other end.

Turan took in a deep breath and asked again: “Please confirm that the Prime Minister’s escort fleet has returned safely…”

Before she could finish, a voice suddenly came out from the other end of the channel.

“What? Elizabeth Turan?” Thomas questioned suspiciously, “Turan doesn’t talk like this, no way...this...actually sounds like a real person! This can’t be that piece of shit I know, did we run into someone with the same name?”

Turan felt her whole world shatter when she heard this voice.

Thomas cleared his throat and said: “Hello, I’m the Captain of the Silver Third Squadron Thomas Young; not that ‘Thomas Young,’ my contribution to humanity is my unparalleled sense of humor and mech modification, not that double-slit experiment. It’s my pleasure to step foot on this miraculous land called the Eighth Galaxy.”

Turan’s cold expression suddenly broke down as redness filled her whole face. She pressed on the communication board, quickly pulled off her hat and yelled into the channel with with one whole breath of air: “Fuck you back to your brother’s cradle, Thomas Young!”

Thomas was stumped for a moment: “What? Fuck, fuck my brother…? Oh, sure I guess, it’s not like he’s worth anything anyway, you can take him.”

Poisson: “Hey folks, am I a corpse floating in space or something?”

“Us Fourth Squadron here only have three people and two mechs left, the Eighth Squadron only has one man left, and you fellas over at the Ninth Squadron have already expanded across a whole galaxy? Sorry man, we’re rightfully upset right now.”

“Long time no see, Elizabeth.”

“It’s been a long time for sure! Didn’t we agree that the Ninth and Tenth Squadrons were the head vanguards and the tail assassins, the twin shady thugs of the Silver Ten? Who allowed you all to get so well-fed behind our backs?”

“Look at that, they’ve even rolled out a whole superdimensional heavy mech fleet to greet our poor asses, how dare they!”

Poisson: “Rich bitch capitalist.”

Thomas: “Stupid rich landlord’s daughter.”

These poor siblings of different mothers were finally united by their shabbiness against a common enemy and called her out together: “Screw you!”

A breath of air caught in Turan’s throat as her usual insults and threats couldn’t even make it out of her mouth. She grew more frantic as words jumbled up inside her until she could only muster up a simple “fucking assholes” out of her mouth before she continued asking: “All you fuckers are back...what about Commander?”

Soon after, she heard someone gently respond with a slight hint of kindness in his tone say: “I’m here too.”

The Eighth Galaxy was indeed a cruel miracle.

Doctor Hardin was rolled out of the medical capsule and seated back into his wheelchair. He looked up the moment he got out through the screen on the mech.

They sailed for about ten hours after leaving the wormhole area and finally reached the outermost transfer portals outside the Eighth Galaxy.

It was the point of intersection for multiple galactic terminals where traces of war could still be seen, but otherwise was a very orderly area. When the heavy mech fleet passed by, the public terminal that intersected with the military terminal was closed off for half an hour for the fleet to pass. As the fleet passed by, a few merchant ships waiting in the public terminals flashed out signs that said “can we get a photo?” that could be clearly seen on the screens inside the heavy mechs.

Soon after, countless space stations appeared near the terminals as the fleet sailed through. They would sometimes pass by natural planets around the way as the scene resembled the First Galaxy’s military bases before the war.

“After the Eighth Galaxy isolated itself from the outside world, we went through a few years of internal warfare,” Rickhead explained to Doctor Hardin along the way. “Of course, even though it’s peaceful now, we still kept some of the practices from during wartime.”

A line of text flashed across the walls as he explained: “A greeting from the Planet Beijing-β Research Lab to our Prime Minister.”

“Ah, we’ve passed Beijing-β, it looks like they’re at the aphelion. It used to be a very nice place, it’s just that winter was a bit long; I used to live there,” Rickhead said. “When the war started, the Cayley pirates joined in the mess and blew this place up. We still haven’t been able to rebuild the natural ecosystem of this place so we could only use it as a research experiment base.”

Doctor Hardin asked: “A military experiment base?”

“Yeah,” Rickhead said, “though the search is mostly in the direction of anti-missile systems. One of my classmates works here; the job is pretty stable, but the research project does cost an arm and leg. They’re almost always asking for more funding from Minister Lu, so my classmate’s always on his blacklist at the end of every fiscal year...but we can’t help it, the Eighth Galaxy can’t stay isolated forever. We can rebuild the transfer portals, and perhaps we can once again reconnect to the outside world in a few more decades, but we won’t know what the Union will be like by then, so we need to keep ourselves safe. The Prime Minister worked too hard to help all of us back on our feet like this; nobody’s willing to go back to how it was before, how can we let our hard work be destroyed again?”

Doctor Hardin asked: “Is the Prime Minister really...Commander Lu Xin’s son?”

Rickhead rubbed his nose as a childish hint of naiveness appeared on his face at the mention of the Prime Minister, similar to the kind of clueless expression he had when he was still a kid: “It’s probably just a joke? Hahaha, what’s he going to do instead, fight them? Our Minister Lu is great at ad libs.”

Doctor Hardin: “......”

“Commander Lu Xin’s statue is in the Central Plaza of Milky Way City. His statue and Pledge of Freedom are the pillars of the Eighth Galaxy; Minister Lu is the one that followed his path and pulled us out of the mud,” Rickhead said. “Sometimes Minister Lu would sit in front of Lu Xin’s statue. Maybe because they both share the same last name -- people that didn’t know any better have been spreading rumors about it for a while...but to me, he was my teacher in the past, and our Prime Minister right now, so it doesn’t matter who he really is.”

The captain of the Silver First Squadron was a reliable man; he offered to take the handle of the doctor’s wheelchair and asked: “When are we going to meet with the Prime Minister?”

“Oh, hold on, let me ask.” Rickhead poked his personal device a bit and asked his superiors.

Soon after, he received a “rest and reorganize” order--the Prime Minister himself was completely knocked out.

Unlike Lin Jingheng who had been desperate to return, Lu Bixing never knew that the commander was still alive. His rollercoaster ride of emotions suffered through the suppression of the relaxant in the middle and messed with his blood pressure, therefore Zhanlu suggested giving a shot of sedatives to let him rest for a day and cool down that overheated head of his.

Lu Bixing: “Go away, I don’t…”

Before he could object, the robotic hand swiftly attacked from behind while the sedatives consumed his unstable mental state. Lu Bixing almost passed out immediately as he buried his head right into Lin Jingheng’s lap.

Lin Jingheng; “......”

The commander frantically caught Lu Bixing and placed him inside a medical capsule. Yet even though the young Prime Minister was completely knocked out, his hands that grabbed onto Lin Jingheng were like handcuffs that showed no signs of letting the commander go.

Lin Jingheng let out a soundless sigh, wiped off the blood from the corner of his lips and sat beside the medical capsule. Then he commented to Zhanlu quietly on the side: “You weren’t this impudent when you followed me.”

“Indeed, sir. My independent permissions and access are much higher than when I followed you,” Zhanlu answered. “As a digital butler, I must be given more permissions than being a mech core. Headmaster Lu has given me special permission to act on my own will when he is in a state of mental instability.”

Lin Jingheng lifted an eyebrow: “So you’re bullying him for being kind?”

Zhanlu didn’t catch the slight displeasure from his ex-master’s tone and answered cheerfully: “That’s not it, sir, my system was repaired by Headmaster Lu himself. He can block off my permissions and functions at any time; he was the one that chose me as his supervisor for the times when he believes he isn’t in his right mind. This is quite a long story--we still have a few hours before we arrive at the Milky Way City Base, would you like to listen?”

Lin Jingheng nodded: “Go on.”

Lu Bixing’s eyebrowed pressed together even after being knocked out, as if he was going through a life-changing dream.

If he still had any bit of consciousness left, he would have remembered to clear up Zhanlu’s memory beforehand to censor out certain bits of the story, but it was already too late.

Lu Xin’s statue in Milky Way City looked up at the sky; the fleet of heavy mechs were like heavy rain clouds that sailed past his head and landed onto the Milky Way City Base far away. The statue had stood in the same place for over a decade, the residents of the capital planet Qiming had already grown used to seeing him -- only tourists from other planets were still taking photos in amazement.

A young soldier yawned in boredom while the media robots waiting near the Milky Way City Base jumped like a colony of bees and swarmed to the entrance, anxiously waiting to report on the groundbreaking trip through the active wormhole.

Lu Xin’s statue faced the sky out toward the faraway future with a permanent smile on his face.

## Ch 135 - ...You Little Shit

Lin Jingheng’s life had been ironically deprived of chatterboxes the last few years. When he was jailed in the galactic prison for fourteen years, there was only an old Doctor Hardin beside him who would constantly bother him with stories about the past and galactic societies. For the most part, he felt that his tolerance for pointless chatter and awful attitude had improved significantly over the years; yet when Zhanlu mentioned the part about ‘injecting biochips,’ Lin Jingheng still couldn’t control his rage.

“What did you say?” Lin Jingheng quickly pulled his arm out from Lu Bixing’s grip, only to discover that he was unsuccessful and the knocked-out Prime Minister’s grip on him grew stronger. Lu Bixing’s fingers were like tough metal handcuffs that violated the Universal Prisoner’s Rights Law; their grip was so cold and tight that Lin Jingheng could almost feel the pain in his bones. This inhuman power only fueled the fire in his heart while it proved the effects of that biochip in the man’s body. “Bastard!”

Then, almost as if he could feel Lin Jingheng’s attempt to escape, Lu Bixing’s breathing grew heavier while his whole body instinctively curled up in pain, knocking his forehead against the medical capsule.

Lin Jingheng’s heart skipped a beat as the fire in his heart was suddenly put out by this new sense of worry: “What’s going on with him?”

“Don’t worry, this is just the side-effects of relaxant number 6,” Zhanlu answered. “This particular relaxant will cause slight disruption of brainwaves temporarily; a common symptom is the low quality of sleep of the patient after injecting the relaxant. They can be easily awakened, but while they’re in deep slumber they will sometimes experience sleepwalking.”

Lin Jingheng nit-picked at this immediately: “You all upgraded your relaxants up to number 6 already, how come the side effects are worse than the original?”

“First of all, relaxant number 6 is actually a side-product of other drugs and not an upgraded version of an existing product, it’s rarely used in practice. Second, it did solve the problem of extreme instantaneous muscle twitching. Under emergency situations, it can significantly increase the mech pilot’s factor and…”

Lin Jingheng didn’t want to listen to him recite proper drug-use instructions and interrupted the AI: “Just tell me what I need to do.”

“You do not need to do anything,” Zhanlu said. “Please simply stay quiet and put, try to avoid disturbing his sleep.”

So... trying to pull his own hand out of this tight grip was considered a disturbing action? Lin Jingheng stared for a few moments and carefully sat down beside the edge of the medical capsule. He relaxed his breathing, and with a still restless heart, let out an exhausted sigh: “What are you good for anyway, why didn’t you stop him?”

“My permissions were blocked off at the time, and after I regained my access, I wasn’t able to adequately determine the risk of removing the biochip due to lack of proper research data. Therefore, I’ve determined that it would be unsafe to forcefully remove the chip.” Zhanlu explained patiently for himself, “But once I regained my parental permissions over my master, I’ve had a success rate of near 100% in stopping Headmaster Lu’s series of irrational actions.”

Lin Jingheng looked up and glanced at the small robotic arm. This was a replica of the old arm with some strange proportions; Lin Jingheng couldn’t quite place his finger on it, but the strangeness almost made the AI look like a poor old toy in his eyes. He finally gave in and tried to give the AI a bit of spotlight: “For example?”

Zhanlu: “For example, he once tried to clone you with a strand of your hair.”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

Zhanlu kindly reminded him: “We’ve talked about this earlier; you need to remain quiet and calm right now.”

Of course, the powerful AI still couldn’t fully understand human emotions. Lin Jingheng’s reaction was surprisingly rather collected, and even quite dumbfounded as he lowered his head to look at Lu Bixing sleeping inside the medical capsule. The young man’s physical features hadn’t changed much; people under the age of 100 could maintain their physique easily with a medical capsule. Of course, as the Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy, keeping a good image was part of his job daily.

Lin Jingheng stared at this familiar face and had a sudden hallucination that they were still back together sixteen years ago, on that day he left Lu Bixing and sailed out to the border of the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy--

It was a sunny day in Milky Way City. He carried his jacket in his arms with a white glove in his mouth as he carefully put the other glove on his hand, then announced to Lu Bixing through his teeth: “I’m leaving.”

Lu Bixing strolled over and wrapped his arms around the commander from behind like a needy child. Those mischievous hands kept tugging and pulling on the commander in various attempts to keep the man from leaving: “Let’s do a bet; I bet you won’t be coming back anytime soon.”

“I’m not playing with you,” Lin Jingheng said. “My thoughts are the same...stop it, I just buttoned up!”

Lu Bixing let out a sigh: “They call it EQ, my commander, why can’t you at least try and get better at it? I swear if it wasn’t for your looks, you’d be doomed to stay single forever--here, let me show you the proper response. You’re supposed to say ‘babe, I’ll bet that the 8th Galaxy Star will rise from the east side of the planet tomorrow’.”

Lin Jingheng remained uncooperative: “Thanks but no thanks, I’m confident my brain is still functioning--you can stop with the smooth talking.”

“And that’s when I’ll respond with ‘sure, I’ll bet the sun will rise from the west side’,” Lu Bixing skillfully ignored the mood killer and looked straight into Lin Jingheng’s judging gaze with a straight face. “So then I can lose myself to you.”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

“So I’m gonna bet that you won’t come home soon; however many days you’re gone you’ll have to make it up to me when you come back. You’ll have to do everything I say during those days, like you’re not allowed to wear a shirt at home...hey.”

Lin Jingheng didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at his clinginess and could only grab the young man before him and shut this loud mouth with a deep kiss in hopes that it would tie up his tongue. The commander then left with a hint of satisfaction in the corner of his eyes and a short line of: “You shameless little rascal.”

These memories shattered into pieces and reassembled into the face of this young man before him. Lin Jingheng reached an arm out subconsciously as he gently rubbed at Lu Bixing’s face in an attempt to wipe off the cloud of worry on it.

*He didn’t have this on him before,* Lin Jingheng thought.

Suddenly, all the worries and concern he had while on the road vanished like clearing mist as a strange hint of anger resurfaced in Lin Jingheng’s heart. There were so many people in the Eighth Galaxy, but was the whole world suddenly attracted to women or was everyone blind? Why hadn’t anyone even thought about keeping him company during these years? Even if he rejected them, why wasn’t there at least someone that had enough patience to pursue him for a few more years? It had been sixteen years already, someone should’ve been able to warm up this frozen little snake, right?

Lin Jingheng asked Zhanlu in a voice almost as small as a whisper: “Why did you blow up his breeding tank?”

Zhanlu’s forever rational response followed: “Any form of cloning a human being is a taboo in all forms of human legal systems due to the immoral nature of this act. In addition, a clone can never replace the real you; a clone is still an individual entity of its own. Besides, this could also bring about more ethical issues in the future; there are enough cases throughout history that can prove cloning would not comfort him and instead create more difficult psychological issues to the patient. This would simply create a vicious cycle of unquenchable thirst.”

Of course, this was something everyone understood.

But when people were trudging through the path down purgatory, they would already be spending too much energy to keep themselves alive. When given even a little bit of light, they would subconsciously cling onto it like a ray of hope. They were already desperate to cling on to any sort of saving grace; how would they have the energy to determine whether it was starlight or the flames of hell?

The path would only grow darker as the abyss dragged one in deeper.

Until everything reached destruction.

“Zhanlu,” Lin Jingheng asked, “can you do an analysis based off of your database and tell me how I should face him when he wakes up?”

Zhanlu didn’t catch that this was simply a helpless mumble to himself and quickly got on the job to search up social case studies. AIs were very non-discriminant in this effect; whether he was being the Union’s Number One mech core or a relationship counselor, he would put 100% effort into the tasks he was ordered to do: “Sir, according to research, people’s long-term memories are prone to being affected by emotions and will grow more and more out of touch with factual reality. And the person in your memories will always be changing, creating a dissonance that causes drifts in relationships. Therefore, after long breakups, people often find each other to be different and harder to get along with than their memories, regardless of if it is a breakup of emotional dependency or an accidental breakup. Thus, I believe you should treat him with patience, get to know who he is now, and try not to refer back to how things were in the past.”

This strange little robot arm spoke sternly and logically as if a human soul was trapped inside it.

“But I believe with Headmaster Lu’s situation right now, it may be difficult for him to achieve this in a rational state of mind,” Zhanlu said. “You should know that both positive and negative stimulation can be harmful if overused.”

Lin Jingheng only gave a quiet nod before he leaned his head on the medical capsule and remained silent for the rest of the trip.

The fate of the Eighth Galaxy had once been carried on his shoulders, heavy like a mountain. After countless times of rubbing his skin and flesh raw from the heavy burden, he grew a steel armor across his shoulders that could withstand the pressure of the world. Now, he had to carry the weight of this person that felt almost as light as a feather compared to everything in the past, but this job suddenly became the most daunting and difficult burden he’d ever carried.

Lu Bixing remained fast asleep even when they successfully landed on Qiming, which didn’t seem to match up with what Zhanlu said about “low quality sleep.” However, the medical capsule didn’t indicate anything abnormal, as if he was simply too tired and was sleeping in.

Thankfully, it seemed like Turan already knew their Prime Minister would return a mess and took care of all the aftermath on her own.

Lin Jingheng took the special terminal and dragged Lu Bixing along with the medical capsule home--to the Home of Commander Lin and Engineer 001.

The outlandish dancing robot in the front door had disappeared and was replaced by a standard gardening robot, who was carefully cleaning up the grass field. The plants and flowers were neatly decorated, almost like the robot completely replicated a pattern from the “Classic Private Garden Design Encyclopedia,” elegant and pleasant, but a little too standardized.

The house itself had been repainted once, the building now a very typical grey and white color scheme like its neighbors--this residential area sanctioned to the Milky Way City Military Base back then was now a core center of political authority in the Eighth Galaxy; the overly colorful and lavish exteriors were no longer appropriate for this place.

Only the placard on the door remained the same.

Even though the fake flowers around the wooden sign would never wither, the colors had already grown dull over the years. The many rainy seasons had drenched the wood as little moss grew from the cracks of the wood, giving it a sense of age.

The furnishings inside the house hadn’t changed dramatically, but that transformable sofa was still there. The attic was locked while an albino python poked its little head out from the side as it sensed the presence of a stranger, then slid back into its tank out of fear.

Lin Jingheng remembered that Lu Bixing was someone who was a little negligent of organization in his life and would often be too lazy to clean up. He never made his bed and was always in the middle of looking for his own stuff; yet to Lin Jingheng’s surprise, this house was quite clean despite him living alone for so long. Aside from the few strange pets Zhanlu brought in, the house was actually considered well-organized.

The little robots in the house cleaned up the furniture in the house periodically. Perhaps it was because Lu Bixing was out of the wormhole for over a month, a cold air surrounded the house and it felt almost like an abandoned building.

Zhanlu’s robotic arm merged in with the walls of the house and his voice rang throughout the building: “Headmaster Lu usually sleeps in the study, so his bedroom is locked.”

Lin Jingheng reached an arm out; the automated lock on the door confirmed his identity and opened for him. The wooden door opened quietly inwards--Lin Jingheng almost felt like he had opened up a secret chamber in the house. The temperature and humidity level in the room had not been adjusted for a very long time, so only cold air that even the sunlight couldn’t warm up greeted him as he walked in. He then quickly noticed that a ‘person’ faced away from him, head resting on his arms as he sat quietly on the chair by the beside. Lin Jingheng was taken aback for a moment before he realized it was a life-sized 3D printout...of himself. The printout’s expression was still dazed like the man had just woken up, eyes still looking down at the ground; Lin Jingheng couldn’t even remember when Lu Bixing snuck this photo of him.

The digital butler very efficiently blew out the cold air in the room and cleaned it up as well. Within less than five minutes, the room grew warm and homey. Lin Jingheng carefully pulled Lu Bixing out of the medical capsule and placed him on the bed. Suddenly, he felt his legs fall asleep and almost knocked himself into the embrace of the soft blankets along with the sleeping young man.

He was like Pheidippides[[3]](#footnote-3) crashing in Athens as he finally reached his goal, entirely exhausted. He didn’t even have the energy to think about what the Eighth Galaxy looked like now.

Where would the Eighth Galaxy go from now? Where would the Union go after regaining their false sense of peace? What did that madwoman Lin Jingshu want to do? How should he arrange the Silver Ten…?

All these important matters that affected the universe were cleared from his mind. His head was emptied as he quickly lost consciousness. However, endless dreams haunted his sleep like a wave of memories from the past to the present, making him wake countless times in the middle of the night.

Lu Bixing woke up an hour later from a sudden disturbance--that was his normal wake-up time to go to work.

It was as if he had been scared awake as he sat up abruptly before he could even fully open his eyes. His gaze desperately scanned subconsciously as if he was looking for something before it settled by the corner of the bed. Lin Jingheng had fallen asleep sitting on the floor and leaned on the bed with a leg pulled up to his chest. Lu Bixing immediately held his breath and opened up his mouth to call out “Lin,” only to realize that no sound came out of his mouth.

He sat frozen on the bed for a short while then carefully placed his hand on Lin Jingheng’s neck. Unlike the cold material of the 3D print, this was a real and warm human skin rested under his fingers; he could even feel the faint pulse at the neck.

Lu Bixing closed his eyes, his shoulders collapsing in an instant as he curled up on the bed. Immediately after, Lin Jingheng woke up from the sudden movement near his neck and instinctively grabbed onto Lu Bixing’s wrist. He opened his eyes to meet Lu Bixing’s red eyes staring at him.

The two men stared silently at each other for a brief moment at the dawn of the capital planet. Soon after, Lu Bixing grabbed onto Lin Jingheng and pulled the commander towards him, locked in a tight embrace. Lin Jingheng could hear the young man’s heavy breathing by his ears, then quickly gave a loud slap on the young man’s back. Unfortunately, this wasn’t enough to put out the fire in his heart-- Lin Jingheng witheld the anger and desire to press this young man down over his leg for a good beating.

Lu Bixing’s body tightened up as he finally called out that name in a timid and trembling voice: “Lin…”

“......You little shit.”

## Ch 136 - If You Don’t Ask, I Won’t Tell You

“General Turan, rumor has it that the Expedition Team ran into the Union Navy this trip out of the wormhole. What exactly is the situation like outside? Can we expect to reconnect with the Union in the future? Will the Eighth Galaxy return to the Union? Do we still face the risk of encountering hostile armed fleets outside of the galaxy?”

“Your news sources are quite up to date; it seems like some of our scientists on the Expedition Team need some extra training in privacy protection.” Turan smiled confidently toward the camera. “Regarding the situation outside of the galaxy, we are still analyzing with our strategy team. Please be assured that regardless of which direction we will head toward in the future, the safety and freedom of the Eighth Galaxy will always remain our top priority. Also, it seems that the chances of foreign galactic fleets passing through the wormhole in numbers large enough to create a threat to the Eighth Galaxy is very slim, so please remain calm.”

“General Turan, we’ve heard that the Prime Minister had openly exposed a piece of very shocking news in front of the Union Troops. There are lots of rumors and gossip surrounding the incident right now, will the government be releasing any official statements on it?”

“The Prime Minister and Expedition Team are currently reorganizing and resting after the trip. Since it is a natural wormhole area, I’m sure everyone understands the dangers and risks of this trip, so please be patient with us. The Eighth Galaxy Government values transparency in our actions; any important information and news will be made public as soon as we finish reorganizing.”

“General Turan, we’ve heard that Commander Lin…”

Poisson stared at Turan handling the reporters left and right with ease for half an hour with no signs of irritation and nudged at the Captain of the First Squadron next to him: “Hey, remember? That one time when she caused so many issues during her break that people complained to the Military Council. The Silver Fortress saw a flood of reporters after that, and she said right in front of everyone…”

The Captain of the First Squadron, Lee Frank, handed him an Eighth Galaxy-grown cigarette: “Try it---right, she said ‘I’m unable to make a statement because Commander told me to stop talking nonsense, how about I strip right in front of everyone instead?’”

Poisson took the cigarette and shook his head. The smile on his face disappeared as he said: “Things and people all have changed. Now that I think about it, all of those days in the past were the good old days--I’m thinking Commander plans on staying in the Eighth Galaxy, what do you think?”

Lee fell silent for a few moments before he answered: “Since the First Squadron answered to his summons, we’ll follow him to the end.”

“The Eighth Galaxy declared independence from the Union; in the old days, we’d call them ‘pirates.’” Poisson gave him a long stare. “So what are we right now? Is Commander really planning on betraying the Union? If we were to engage in a crossfire one day, it would be a battle between two states; are we going to raise our cannons at the people we once protected?”

“Our generation may not have to have that kind of mental burden of being unable to fight against the Union because we were once part of them. The Union’s gone through over a decade of unrest, I’m sure they don’t want to make more enemies. The portals in the Eighth Galaxy are all cut off, nobody wants to cause unnecessary trouble; besides, if that individual really is Commander Lu Xin’s son, the Union would also be careful around him in respect to the Central Militias. The best-case scenario would be that everyone lives in peace and maintains their boundaries. We can all pretend to be diplomatic and friendly on the outside to fight off common enemies while minding our own businesses in the dark.” Lee said, “If we can achieve that, I’d much rather stay here.”

Poisson looked up at him.

“The Union had always felt too gloomy and heavy to me over these years, it’s tiring to simply stay beside those people.” Lee continued, “The Eighth Galaxy is different...I feel like a place that had once been buried in the flames of war and natural disasters, then finally forced to cut off their own portals into an isolated land--it’s a miracle that it didn’t turn into a cold military state. It didn’t turn into a hub of ‘space pirates’; they’re even willing to throw money into planetary anti-missile systems and galactic expeditions. This shows that there is vitality here, the legendary vitality of the survivors.”

At the end of the great Age of Exploration, a nihilistic galactic sociologist introduced the theory of survivors.

He said: “Since the ancient times when mankind stepped on the grasslands and walked out of the woods, they conquered their surroundings: lands, earth, and now the universe. Today, we climbed to the peak of history; from now on, we will either decline as a civilization or walk along the edge at the top of the mountain. Every little invention and every little reform will create groundbreaking changes to human life. The dimensions of change will grow more profound, its impact will grow wider; yet the fragility and crooked nature of mankind will forever remain for as long as we live. We are all madmen carrying fatal weapons in our hands as destroying the world and our own civilization become increasingly simple. We will continue to search in darkness; nobody will know if the next step will lead us to heaven or hell.

“However, there is an incredible vitality that exists within our species that allows us to once again sprout from a wasteland. When the world begins to sink into destruction, the few ‘survivors’ of mankind will be chosen by this mysterious force of life; they will carry the unbearable pains of history, walk down the path of thorns, and continue the legacy of mankind.”

“That’s right,” Poisson answered in a mumble, “they even kept Commander Lu’s Pledge of Freedom here--did you hear anything from Commander yet?”

This was a well-known habit of Lin Jingheng; when the Silver Ten was gathered, he preferred having the more reliable people on the team to pass on his orders for him. If it wasn’t Poisson Young from the Third Squadron, it would normally be Lee Frank from the First Squadron; he didn’t really like giving attention to the rest of the troublemakers.

“Oh, right, I just got a message from him. Commander told us to take a three-day break to reorganize,” Lee said. “He suggests that we take a tour around the Eighth Galaxy during this time and already asked Turan to arrange everything for us--although your brother sure shares the same sentiment as him on this aspect. The Commander hasn’t even officially announced for us to leave our posts and he’s already in tourist mode.”

“I swear, that obnoxious dumbass Thoma…” Poisson shoved the cigarette in his mouth and forcefully stopped himself from complaining. Then, as if he suddenly thought of something, turned around and asked, “Oh by the way, don’t you think Commander’s relationship with that Prime Minister Lu is a little suspicious?”

The topic of their gossip, Lin Jingheng, was currently standing inside the kitchen with a grim face. He pulled out a long spindle-like object with steel wires covering the top from the hands of a robot; he couldn’t make out what this tool was for, but judging from the shape of it, he concluded that it had some blending function and carefully placed it inside the small pot boiling with tea leaves.

A robotic arm slowly peeked out of the wall. This almighty digital butler watched quietly for a while before finally asking: “Sir, what are you doing to the tea?”

“Increasing the speed of extraction.” Lin Jingheng scanned the fire under the pot with his personal device without lifting his head. After comparing the strength of the fire with the standard recipe, a small red line flashed on his personal device and warned him: “fire too strong.”

Lin Jingheng “oh’ed” and lowered the temperature. His personal device once again scanned the fire and displayed another line of blue text: “fire too weak.”

Lin Jingheng: “......”

*What kind of garbage is this?*

Zhanlu said: “The recipe book in your personal device is the latest edition of ‘The Gourmet Guide’ and requires specific kitchenware. The tools in the kitchen are rarely being used and have not been updated for over a decade, so they lack many new functions. Shall I update the system of the kitchenware for you?”

Lin Jingheng thought about it for a moment and concluded that the concept of cooking all boiled down to heating up food. As long as there was fire, kitchenware wasn’t important; he waved off Zhanlu’s suggestion.

Zhanlu once again interrupted: “Also, sir, that tool in your hand is called a whisk or egg-beater.”

Lin Jingheng’s hand froze momentarily as he responded with a straight face: “Fool, you thought I didn’t know? Mixing thoroughly will ensure it’s boiling evenly so that the flavor can be fully extracted, you have issues with that?”

Zhanlu: “I don’t, your creativity sure has a flavor of humor, hahaha.”

Lin Jingheng turned off the stove gravely as if he was pondering the fate of humanity--then poured the dark red tea through a filter into a cup.

Zhanlu couldn’t help but comment again: “Sir, you should use a finer filter for this. The type you’re using right now can’t properly filter out liquids.”

Lin Jingheng thought, *this is just a damn filtering net, why are there more gears than a missile launcher? That’s simply ridiculous.* Yet he still needed to pretend he knew what he was doing in front of Zhanlu and responded nonchalantly: “I know, I’m going to filter it twice.”

Zhanlu continued nit-picking without reading the room: “But increasing the number of ineffective filters will not…”

“Are you done yet?” Lin Jingheng cut him off, “Why do you have so many damn suggestions? You think you can do whatever you want now that I can’t shut you up?”

When Lu Bixing ran down the stairs in a frenzy, water was still dripping from his hair after his shower. He didn’t even bother drying it before he rushed down the stairs, saw Lin Jingheng’s back in the kitchen, and finally let out a sigh of relief.

Lin Jingheng heard this young man rushing down and turned his head for a quick glance. He then dragged the nosy Zhanlu out of the wall and tossed it onto the sneaky little Popcorn sticking its head out the door. Popcorn was born a timid soul uncharacteristic for a snake; after the shock of having the robot arm thrown on it, the poor snake wiggled out in fear with Zhanlu on its body.

The corner of Lu Bixing’s lips lifted slightly as he held onto the railings and sat on the staircase. He watched Lin Jingheng through the railings and felt as if he was floating on soft clouds, dreamy and unreal like he could fly away from the shackles of Qiming’s gravity at any moment.

After the effects of relaxant number 6 completely wore off, Lu Bixing quickly recollected his overflowing emotions. The ability to maintain a collected image despite experiencing a nuclear explosion in his heart wasn’t a skill that could be easily adapted overnight, nor was it a habit that could be changed at will.

There was supposed to be a whole river of emotions he wanted to express after this reunion, but the outlet for this overflow was too narrow for everything to pass through. The raging tides of unresolved feelings were trapped in this dyke, unable to be formulated into proper words as Lu Bixing let these surging emotions drum inside his heart.

And for some reason, he realized he couldn't bring himself to ask where Lin Jingheng had gone all those years and what he did.

Lu Bixing carefully rubbed his hands together, attempting to warm up his cold limbs, and thought: *Why am I so afraid to ask?*

He had grown used to examining his own thoughts and feelings over the years; if he didn’t ask, nobody else would dare question anything. The nosy seniors would ask about the naive young man’s struggles, but nobody dared to chase after the Prime Minister and ask what his personal thoughts were. From Lu Bixing’s own experiences, no matter how painful and agonizing his words were, he still had to listen to them whether he wanted to or not.

If someone was able to feel that there were words in their hearts that needed to be expressed but chose to ignore them, these unspoken words would often come back to haunt them in unexpected ways. For example, they tempted Lu Bixing with the dangerous possibility of creating a clone.

Yet at this very moment, he instinctively felt hesitant to bring up the topic of the last sixteen years.

When Lu Bixing lived in a dream, he’d mastered a new skill. Because he knew that the person in his dreams would vanish the moment he woke up, he learned to let go of these short fever dreams but enjoyed them while they lasted as if he was counting down every day to the apocalypse. All of his suppressed thoughts were released upon this dream, like the past with no restraints.

Yet after the ecstatic realization that his dream had finally come true, he discovered that this skill he honed over the years had also vanished. There were too many words he couldn’t say, too many emotions he couldn’t express; a whole body full of filthy desires and love-hate intertwined in the hands of fear until they devoured his heart. The chaotic forces inside him tugged on his soul and pulled him to hell and back uncontrollably to the point where the thought of self-destruction seemed almost tempting.

As he faced his internal struggles, Lu Bixing slowly turned his head up as a cup was shoved into his face.

“Freshly brewed milk tea,” Lin Jingheng reached out a hand and ran his fingers through Lu Bixing’s wet hair. He carefully brushed a small strand of hair covering the young man’s forehead back. The blisters on the commander’s hands zapped Lu Bixing like a small electric shock. “Try it.”

Of course, how tasty could a tea brewed with an eggbeater be? Anyone with normal taste buds that was used to drinking freshly brewed tea could tell that this was simply an awful-tasting cup of milk with extra water in the mix.

Yet Lu Bixing’s brain skipped the process of actually tasting the ‘milk tea’ and automatically offered a delicious response to the milk water. He carefully packed up all his insecurities in his heart and responded casually: “A man like you who lives off nutrient packs actually knows how to make this?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t smile and stared at Lu Bixing’s face.

Lu Bixing: “What’s up?”

Lin Jingheng pulled his hand that was still holding the cup over to his mouth and gave the ‘tea’ a sip, then frowned in response: “I’ll let Zhanlu brew another pot for you.”

Lu Bixing’s fingers holding onto the handle of the cup tightened: “Wait, it’s okay.”

He paused awkwardly as he attempted to trace back his memories and reclaim that shamelessly smooth tongue of his: “Even if you give me a cup of cold water, it’ll automatically turn sweet as honey in my hands. I…”

Lu Bixing stared at the man before him and was suddenly at a loss of words as he stopped abruptly, the impending awkwardness in the air stretching silently between them. Lin Jingheng’s gaze looked into his eyes with great patience, like the countless times he had attempted to break through the signal barrier on that isolated galactic prison.

Lu Bixing felt pressured by that stare and turned his head away subconsciously.

“You can’t remember what to say now?” Lin Jingheng stood at the bottom of the staircase and leaned downwards slightly. “Here, let me show you. If your disastrous partner ever gets the sudden urge to handmake a bunch of awful food to force feed you, then pins you down to ask how it tastes, this is what you’d normally do--”

The next moment, he took another sip of that ‘milk water’ in his mouth, pulled Lu Bixing in front of him, and force fed it to the young man mouth-to-mouth. Lu Bixing’s eyes widened, his pupils contracted slightly in shock, and he downed that mouthful of milk water.

Lin Jingheng wiped the corner of his mouth with a finger and continued: “Then you’ll tell me, ‘taste it for yourself and tell me how it is’-- get it now?”

Lu Bixing was speechless for a short while. He took in a breath of air and choked on the milk tea that was still rolling down his throat, then turned around and coughed violently.

Lin Jingheng took the cup from his hands and knocked on the railings of the staircase. The digital butler that roamed the household reached out a robotic hand from the staircase and took away the cup. Lin Jingheng pondered for a few moments before he made his way up the stairs and sat down beside Lu Bixing. He grabbed the young man’s wrist, pulled up both of their personal devices and set up a special positioning program.

Lu Bixing was finally done coughing out that milk tea when he heard a light beeping sound from his personal device, where a small notice popped up: “One-way positioning function installed successfully.”

Soon after, a small map popped up from his wrist. A small red dot indicating Lin Jingheng’s location appeared beside him; a gentle touch to the red dot could let him see Lin Jingheng’s surroundings through the commander’s personal device.

Lu Bixing was shocked: “Wait, you……”

Normally, only a parent or legal guardian would set up a GPS tracking function on their personal devices with a child under the age of six so that they could track the whereabouts of their child at any given time. However, even that was usually a two-way tracking setup between the parent and child. The only place a one-way tracking would be used would be in a prison; it was like an invisible shackle for prison guards to track their prisoners.

Lin Jingheng pressed on his hand: “If you don’t want to see me, you can turn it off.”

Possessiveness was like a demon living inside of Lu Bixing’s heart, howling desperately through the steel bars of its cage. It was a ferocious beast with ugly desires; Lu Bixing was locking up this beast with his own body as the prison, he couldn’t afford to let it out of its cage to hurt others even if it was ripping him apart from the inside.

Lu Bixing felt like a demon slayer that was chaining down this monster with all of his energy, his hands already bloodied by the restless struggles inside his heart. Then, a single hand reached into the cage and lightly tapped the head of that monster as it fed the hungry creature a piece of fresh meat.

Lu Bixing stared dumbly as that monster finally lowered its head and laid on the ground as it slowly quieted down for the first time.

“I knew there was a natural wormhole area near the Heart of the Rose, and I’m assuming you had your guesses about it too. I passed through that place when I first came to the Eighth Galaxy.” Lin Jingheng said, “But it wasn’t until sixteen years later that I had the chance to return and try my luck; do you want to know what happened after the Seventh and Eighth Galaxy ambush?”

Lu Bixing’s eyes glistened slightly in excitement.

“If you want to listen, then ask,” Lin Jingheng didn’t hesitate to make his demand. “If you don’t ask, I won’t tell you.”

## Ch 137 - I Picked You Up From the Garbage

Lu Bixing gently pressed on his personal device and fell silent for a few moments before he finally regained his senses. His gaze was fixed on where the red dot was as he pressed his lips together.

It was clearly an expression of anxious, deep thought.

Even though Lin Jingheng played the role of the aggressive character, a sudden sense of distress overwhelmed his body for a split second as he looked at Lu Bixing’s face.

Lin Jingheng’s character was naturally cold and cunning; when necessary, he could take on the role of any character and change his methods to suit the situation before him. He had the ability to fool the old Doctor Hardin for fourteen years without exposing himself. He’d once layered himself with thousands of masks but had never taken them off over the decades in his life. Ever since Lu Xin died, he hadn’t been able to find a sense of security in anyone else in this world--

He couldn’t rely on his colleagues because they all depended on him as their pillar, and the pillar must always be unbending. He couldn’t rely on his elders, because if anyone was trustworthy, Lu Xin wouldn’t have died so abruptly. His only family was thousands of light-years away to the point where they were almost holding knives against each other’s necks; he couldn’t even rely on Lu Bixing either because the boy was still too young back then. In his eyes, the young man was too wonderful, like a treasure he carried carefully in his arms.

A treasure too precious couldn’t give a sense of security and only burdened him with more insecurities.

Therefore, he learned to grow suspicious of everything over years of building a defense mechanism. He was always locking his emotions inside, never exposing any weaknesses in front of others nor talking about his feelings out loud.

Lin Jingheng had been trudging through life and death for decades, but this was the first time he had ever opened his heart to someone else.

He gave Lu Bixing everything he had.

“Don’t do this.” Lu Bixing turned off the tracking system on his personal device after a long silence and said in a soft tone, “I won’t use this...how selfish would that be?”

Despite these kind words that could melt a frozen soul, Lin Jingheng’s heart sank at this moment instead.

“Alright, I do have some questions I wanted to ask--I remember when I first repaired Zhanlu, he told me that his main body also perished during the explosion of the commanding ship and portal due to the ambush by the pirates. I’m guessing that he transformed into an emergency ecopod when the ship exploded.” Lu Bixing’s tone was calm and patient, with no signs of hiccups or slurring of sounds in between his words. It was obvious that he was a master of impromptu speech, but his demeanor was strangely stiff as he kept rubbing his hands together uneasily. It was as if his limbs were growing cold; Lu Bixing fiddled with his fingers as he spoke, “An ecopod’s protection is very limited, and transformable material will easily break down under high-energy impact. The main engine and mech core would also burn up due to overheating...right? Were you hurt at that time? Was it severe?”

Lin Jingheng stared into his eyes.

Lu Bixing continued: “Did you check up with a reliable doctor if your health will be affected?”

Lin Jingheng thought, *at least no aftereffects would be as bad as the chip you injected into yourself.*

The hint of anger flashed across his face and disappeared the next instant: “I don’t think that’s the question you really want to ask.”

“This is what I want to know, and it’s all I care about.” Lu Bixing leaned back slightly and forced himself to relax his stiffened spine, then gave Lin Jingheng a smile. “Of course, the situation in the Union is also important, but it isn’t really a personal issue so we can save that topic for a meeting.”

The other half of Lin Jingheng’s heart also sank.

*Don’t you want to ask why I didn’t try to come back during the sixteen years if I knew that there was a wormhole in the Heart of the Rose, even if it was to send out a signal back to the Eighth Galaxy? Don’t you want to know where I took the Silver Ten and what kind of friends and enemies I made along the way? Don’t you want to know if my heart still lingered in the Union, if I will ever leave the Eighth Galaxy again? Don’t you want to ask if I’ve given my heart to someone else during the last sixteen years? What about why I deleted the data inside Zhanlu and kept your family background a secret? Have you not even considered telling me...all of the hardships you went through over these years?*

Suddenly, Lin Jingheng felt a strange familiarity inside of him; he discovered that this was the exact attitude he had been giving Lu Bixing all this time. *I won’t ask anything from you as long as you let me love you unconditionally in my own way; I don’t need anything in return, I don’t need any promises, and I don’t even need a future.*

Even though the method of expression was different, the intention from the heart was the same. Lin Jingheng looked at the young man before him and felt as if he was looking into a mirror.

Very few people would ever be hurt from giving; the pain was often a result of disappointment from having too much hope. To not have any expectations was the best way to shield oneself from pain.

Lu Bixing used to be like an overzealous monkey in the past that wasn’t afraid to roll around shamelessly in the mud. He had been injured before like everyone else, but the superficial wounds always healed faster than normal and even trained him to be thick-skinned. He was brave and reckless, willing to give anything a try. However, these last sixteen years had almost sliced his soul up in half until he was only holding onto his last breath; he finally experienced a traumatizing pain and had learned to be fearful.

These strands of fate finally looped back into a circle.

Lin Jingheng stood up abruptly as he felt he could no longer keep a straight face.

Lu Bixing quickly pulled at him and said: “Lin, wait! Wait, let me explain…”

Lu Bixing had learned to speak to the occasion over these years and juggle between using force or diplomacy to settle the internal warfare in the Eighth Galaxy. He could tell from a quick glance at the expressions of those cunning politicians what kind of agenda they held and played his cards accordingly. It was obvious that he was more experienced in the department of negotiation than the young man that fed chicken soup in the past.

But he couldn’t understand why he kept tripping up and making mistakes in front of Lin Jingheng.

He wanted to pretend nothing had happened and interact with that person as if everything was still the same, but something kept feeling off, even though he couldn’t put his finger on it. Imposter syndrome consumed his mind as he failed to relearn how to be himself again, like a man with a broken leg learning to get back on his injured foot.

“I…” Lu Bixing was speechless for a solid minute until he managed to force a line out of his mouth in panic, “Do you miss me after all these years?”

Lin Jingheng gazed down at him as Lu Bixing quickly pulled his hand back like he had touched boiling water--he saw Lin Jingheng’s eyes redden before him.

“I... when I had nothing to do at night, sometimes I’d climb up to the roof to look at the stars.” Lin Jingheng wasn’t a talker, succinct and cool was his characteristic style. This short sentence seemed almost like a daunting task for him to express and almost nonsensical. “The transfer portals may have been blown up, but light could still pass through. I was stuck on an unnamed planet in the Sixth Galaxy; the orbit of the planet didn’t follow standard Woltorian time, but I stayed there for fourteen years. A year was about ten months total...you could see the Eighth Galaxy star from the rooftop even though the light you saw with the naked eye was the light from years ago.”

“I would think about what you were doing and wonder if the starlight of the Eighth Galaxy star would also pass by you when it became visible to me. Though if you really count the age of that starlight, if it really existed and passed by you, perhaps it would be a light that existed before you and I met.” Words rolled out much more smoothly after getting past the introduction. Lin Jingheng paused for a few moments before he picked up the pace. “I figured you would be upset at first and maybe even in denial, but at least Monoeyed Hawk and the Prime Minister would be there to take care of you. The old cat may not be good at anything else, but at least he was still a dependable parent. I thought that...maybe in three or five years, you’d forget about a passerby in your life like me. Every time I recalled, I would regret that I wasn’t good enough to you, but I would also think that perhaps not being good enough was for the best so that you wouldn’t take my leave too personally.”

Lu Bixing mumbled: “Why were you on an unnamed planet in the Sixth Galaxy?”

Lin Jingheng fell silent for a while before he responded: “I won’t tell you today. I’ll answer two questions for you every day from now on; because you brought up some nonsense today, your punishment is losing your second question for the day.”

Lu Bixing: “......”

“Think about your questions for tomorrow before asking.” Lin Jingheng got up without hesitation after he finished and walked towards the door, “I’m going out to see someone and talk with Turan for a bit, you know how to find me.”

*I must be patient*, Lin Jingheng told himself, *I just need to take things slowly; everything will get better.*

Lu Bixing subconsciously followed him for a few steps, then caught himself being too clingy and stopped hesitantly.

“By the way.” As Zhanlu’s little robotic hand was readily waiting by the door to open it up for him, Lin Jingheng turned his head around. “Give me Zhanlu’s permissions, preferably a higher level where I can shut him up at any given time.”

The chameleon nudged over and poked Zhanlu’s arm; the poor robot then responded in an almost disappointed tone: “That is such an upsetting statement, sir. Look at how much I love you, sweet like honey.”

Lin Jingheng heard this unsolicited confession and responded coldly to his ‘honey’: “Fuck off.”

Lu Bixing cleared his throat awkwardly: “......Let me ban him from searching up random content on the web right now.”

Commander Lin returned in a battered-up state with only a dress shirt on him that had been ripped open by Prime Minister Lu, so he could only borrow a suit that Lu Bixing just washed from the washing machine. The black and white suit on him almost made the man look like he was about to go on an assassination mission as he walked right out the door.

Lu Bixing’s fingers trembled as he watched Lin Jingheng’s silhouette disappear from his sight. The moment the man left, the urge to pull up the tracking system from his personal device suddenly exploded in his heart as the desire to keep an eye on Lin Jingheng burned inside.

But he couldn’t let his desires win.

Lu Bixing pressed his tongue to his teeth and calmed himself down for a few seconds before forcing his attention elsewhere, then turned to Zhanlu: “Where did you pick up these inappropriate readings?”

Zhanlu responded: “Headmaster Lu, I referenced the books kept in your personal device.”

Lu Bixing: “......”

Who said an AI with high parental permissions could slander its master?

The little robotic arm pointed a finger and pulled up Lu Bixing’s personal device. Moments later, an anthology that even its owner had forgotten about popped up; a book called “That Kind of Story.”

It was that small collection of adult fiction.

Lu Bixing remembered the habit of his students borrowing books from him and cold sweat suddenly covered his body; he frantically attempted to delete this sinful evidence from his device and said: “How did you manage to pull up something like this...wait, no, why are you flipping through this? Did you get a virus infection?”

“I did not read this book,” Zhanlu answered. “This was the book that you read to Master Lin the year you picked up his ecopod outside of planet Beijing. I was in sleep mode at the time, so the ecopod automatically recorded your reading to him.”

Lu Bixing stood dumbfounded.

A blurry, old memory resurfaced in his mind; Lu Bixing remembered this book.

There was a story in the anthology about an unnamed god in religious history who fell into the hands of the devil. The devil cloned himself, each clone representing a different sin that committed various forms of blasphemy against the god. The writing itself was rough, giving off a sense of absurdity and sinful lust through the words.

Lu Bixing recalled a specific part from Zhanlu’s line--

“He kneeled before that perfect body, lowered his head in reverence and kissed the god’s feet. His mouth mumbled words of madness as he said ‘I love you so dearly, sweet like honey; I am a follower that died on my knees and reached my filthy hands out to you, hoping to be blessed by your salvation.’”

Lu Bixing remembered this part very quickly after Zhanlu’s hint. The image of Lin Jingheng inside the ecopod strangely overlapped with the description of the god in the story, and his embarrassing nosebleed episode that happened to drip at this particular scene. Of course, the subject of his dirty fantasy woke up in time to catch him during this embarrassing moment.

It was almost impossible to forget such an embarrassing event in life.

With a blink of an eye, it had already been two decades since that day.

Perhaps the light of the Eighth Galaxy Star was barely reaching places outside the galaxy; the world had already been turned upside down too many times.

The chameleon and robotic arm tilted their heads to see the corner of the Prime Minister’s lips slowly relax into a reminiscing smile; it was very faint and disappeared as quickly as it lifted.

But it was a real smile.

He had been chasing after the light outside of the galaxy for years, and finally mustered the guts to turn his head to face the past even if it was only a small glance.

Lu Bixing pulled back those documents that he almost destroyed and password protected them in his device. He then pointed a finger and poked at Zhanlu in warning: “Delete those records right now, do you want to be told to shut up for the rest of your life?”

The world was truly unfair to AIs.

Lin Jingheng stopped by the Milky Way City Base to greet his old subordinates and let Turan take him to the public cemetery.

Turan had kept her hair short but regrew those two little antennas on her head. Despite that, her demeanor seemed much more sophisticated and dependable than how she was sixteen years ago.

“Commander, is Minister Lu really Commander Lu’s son?”

“Yes.” Lin Jingheng nodded.

“....So you already knew?”

“I did,” Lin Jingheng said, “I asked Zhanlu to delete all related data on it already; I didn’t expect him to pull it back up on his own.”

Turan pondered for a bit before she spoke in a complicated tone: “What happened to your aloof, kingly character, Commander? Didn’t they say don’t shit where you eat, but you even deleted his own DNA analysis so that you can eat him secretly?”

Lin Jingheng: “......Are you going to die if you don’t shit talk for a day?”

Turan gave it her best shot to make a nasty expression back, only to have her facade crushed before she could force it out. She quietly turned around and wiped off a teardrop rolling from her eyes.

“The Captain of the Ninth Squadron sure is becoming more respectable,” Lin Jingheng said hopelessly. “You’re playing yourself to tears now...there, that’s enough already.”

Turan was speechless for a short while, so Lin Jingheng waited patiently for her to collect her thoughts.

When Lin Jingheng left, the cemetery was still young and fresh with only a few isolated tombstones.

Now, the gravesite was filled with tombstones in an orderly fashion, most of them being lives lost during the internal war.

“The Eighth Galaxy’s economy was at a breaking point back then, which was why the old Prime Minister took on the loans from our neighbor.” Lin Jingheng asked quietly, “What happened after that?”

“The economy really collapsed after that,” Turan said. “The transfer portals had all blown up, the Eighth Galaxy was in shambles; large amounts of refugees from the Seventh Galaxy came in and added on more problems for us. It started off with the conflict between the refugees and Eighth Galaxy residents, then the supply of the nutrient syringes ran down low, so the currency system completely broke down as inflation soared and smugglers regained control. When the old Prime Minister was still alive, he was patching up the leakage with duct tape; after his death, the young Minister Lu couldn’t hold anyone aside from his Engineering Department down. Countless planets and space stations declared independence one by one...at the worst, we only had the Milky Way City Base in our control like a helpless command post. The entire planet of Qiming outside of the base was filled with danger. We managed to survive six months with the little resources we had left in the base from the AUS--all the heavy mechs filled their little greenhouses inside with vegetables and edible plants. Rumors even had it that it was a glorious tradition you left behind.”

Lin Jingheng lit up a cigarette and slowly walked down the small trails into the cemetery.

“During those six months, we actually still had some arms on hand, but Minister Lu kept pushing us down and stopped us from attacking outside. Our arms became tools for self-defense.” Turan said, “he said he didn’t have the ability to rebuild order within the entire galaxy, so we needed to slowly work our way up by taking care of local businesses first, then expand our influence. Zhanlu gave us a detailed report on how the AUS expanded outside of the Union back in the days--natural planets outside the Union weren’t suited for humans to live on, so they developed a self-sufficient mini ecosystem within their mechs. We borrowed some ideas and played around with it, then virtually took back Qiming and its surrounding satellites peacefully and built our first military factory on Ema 3.”

Turan scrunched up in grievance as she continued: “I’m just a vanguard team Captain, but they were also making me handle all the back-end stuff. They made me take care of the overall strategy planning and everything else that followed; I felt like I was being burned alive by them. I’ve been meaning to quit the job already, Commander; I feel like I’d be even better off switching careers to be a pirate living off hunting and gathering.”

The ardent and fierce Ninth Squadron vanguard team became a defensive force in the Eighth Galaxy and had to carry the burden of the entire galaxy on their shoulders.

That year, there was...a self-proclaimed weak-minded young man who liked to avoid all conflicts and wars to pretend everything in the world was well, until he was roped into the self-destructive internal warfare of the Eighth Galaxy. Nobody would ever be like Lin Jingheng and step out to appease his naive desires to find a happy balance; he had to make countless decisions on his own and point his guns at numerous people. He trudged down the endless paths between all the tombstones and memorials of the past, cultivating himself into a powerful Prime Minister who was able to stand against the Union on equal ground.

Lin Jingheng suddenly stopped as he saw a familiar face.

Monoeyed Hawk still had his characteristic aquiline nose, thin lips, and sharp chin. His eyebrows were naturally pressed close to his heterochromatic eyes; even though he had quite a handsome face from the side profile, there was an air of thuggish judgement if you looked at him face to face. The old Persian cat obnoxiously looked out from his stone memorial as if he was ready to jump out and give the commander in front of him a harsh scratch on the arm.

The tombstone was engraved with his name: Monoeyed Hawk, Surname Lu (I picked it at random, my name ain’t Lu Monoeyed Hawk).

According to reliable sources, this was the full official name he registered on his citizenship card in his personal device.

The quote on his tombstone was quite unique, and beneath that was another hand-carved message in response to his quote--the message was slightly off-centered and looked as if it was written by someone that wasn’t particularly skilled in crafting. The two individuals sent each other little notes across life and death that read--

“I picked you up from the garbage.”

“Lies.”

## Ch 138 - He’s Really Back

Lu Bixing used the number 6 relaxant as an excuse to get a day off from work after returning to the Eighth Galaxy.

But after a day of rest, everyone was already at the brink of unleashing chaos and began bombarding the Prime Minister with messages.

There were simply too many items of unresolved business waiting for Lu Bixing at work-- top priority right now was the need to arrange the settlement of the Silver Ten. This was an extremely important job that affected the structure of the entire Galactic Defense Department, it wasn’t something that the Prime Minister could handle with a signature on some papers.

At the same time, he also had to consider the political climate outside of the Eighth Galaxy and come up with various strategies to deal with any potential changes that may affect the galaxy in the future. The accidental encounter with the Union Forces in the Heart of the Rose forced the plan of reconnecting with the Union 50 years earlier than expected; many of the old preparation work would need to be readjusted to fit the current political situation.

In comparison with that, news like “The Expedition Team made groundbreaking advancement in the research on wormholes” and “Prime Minister Lu is actually Commander Lu Xin’s child” that normally would take over the gossip columns in the media were all thrown into a small corner.

As for Lin Jingheng, after being locked inside the galactic prison for sixteen years, he needed extra time to readapt to the world outside. Even the Silver Ten were all summoned in urgency and had no time to properly reorganize; Lin Jingheng had to take up crash courses on current events and catch up with all the familiar faces.

But no matter where he went, he would always return home at the same time every night.

The first day when Lin Jingheng went out to visit Turan, Lu Bixing found that he couldn’t bring himself to process anymore words the moment the sky turned dark. This sense of unease quickly manifested into physical discomfort when he felt as if a heavy piece of lead was pressed inside his stomach and kept jumbling inside his gut. Lu Bixing couldn’t hold in the disgust and avoided the sensitive medical capsule at home to puke in the bathroom, then made sure Zhanlu wouldn’t tattletale on him. It wasn’t until Lin Jingheng came that his stomach finally felt a little better.

He spent that night twisting and turning on his bed restlessly, repeating the words Lin Jingheng said to him that day countless times in his head like a miser of words. He also pondered over countless questions he wanted to ask the next day, only to discover that he still underestimated the cunningness of a certain Commander. The answers Lin Jingheng gave to his daily two questions generally sounded like this--

“Why were you on a nameless planet in the Sixth Galaxy?”

“Someone fished up my ecopod at the site of the explosion.”

“Who?”

“Someone from the Freedom Corps.”

“Why was someone from the Freedom Corps there? Why did they take you away? Why…”

Lin Jingheng pressed a finger to Lu Bixing’s lips: “Shh, this is a story for tomorrow.”

It seemed as if he was determined to bury the stories of the last sixteen years in the ground and only let Lu Bixing chisel away a little bit of dirt every day to peek at the truth. Very quickly, all of those scenes and stories from the past that Lu Bixing had been consciously avoiding and turning his head away from became things he needed to fight for everyday to get even a gist of the full picture.

Lu Bixing also noticed that Lin Jingheng always returned home at the same time everyday. No matter where he went, what he did, even if he left the planet, Lin Jingheng would always be back home on the clock.

The battlefield of space was an ever-changing environment, therefore a commander’s grasp of time in outer space would often be pivotal to the current state of the battle. Lin Jingheng was someone who further honed his skill in time management to the point of machine precision, so his ‘on-time’ was always calculated down to the second. Regardless if Lu Bixing was home that day, the antique clock hanging in the living room would always be pointed at the same exact location the moment he opened up the door back home each day. If the hands weren’t, it was more often than not the clock’s problem--Lin Jingheng himself and his personal device followed the clock of the Eighth Galaxy.

He was like the little gremlin living in a clock tower that chimed the bell everyday at the same exact time.

Within a week, Lu Bixing felt like he became one of Pavlov’s dogs, trained by Lin Jingheng to react on reflex. Everyday, half a minute before that magical time in the evening, the sounds of that antique clock’s ticks would suddenly become the only sound inside the house. His heartbeat would grow faster and sometimes he even felt short of breath; he would be completely shut off from the outside world until the last few seconds of the countdown. Then, Zhanlu’s alarm-like voice would ring out by the door: “Welcome back, sir.”

Lu Bixing had trouble sleeping at night in the beginning. He was already getting very few hours of sleep every night and still had to be woken up randomly a few times in the middle of the night. He would wake up and turn to check if Lin Jingheng was still around; the commander discovered this horrible habit once and started sleeping beside the young man.

The biochip would increase the senses of an individual; even in a pitched-black room at night, Lu Bixing could still clearly see the person who held his hand beside him. The man who touched his fingers pulled him out of the haunting nightmares as the quiet profile of the commander’s face reflected within Lu Bixing’s eyes. Sometimes he would hold in his breath and stare at Lin Jingheng for an extended period with an empty mind.

Waking up in the middle of the night also suddenly became quite bearable.

Of course, Lin Jingheng wouldn’t stay by his side all the time in bed. Sometimes Lu Bixing would reach over to feel that the commander had left, but the bedsheets were still warm. He would usually hear the morning birds chirping outside, indicating that the sun was about to rise. But he still had some time to sleep in a little more...if the blanket beside him was cold, then that would normally mean he was also running late to work.

Lin Jingheng used his abnormally strict personal schedule and masterful time management skills to nail down a wedge into Lu Bixing’s wandering soul that had been floating in a lucid dream for the last decade.

The power of biological clocks in humans and other animals that had a strong sense of time and season was a mysterious but mesmerizing force. It was like an uneven stream of water reaching the river and following the current -- they would naturally submit to greater forces of nature. If someone’s sense of time was strong enough to carve up deep marks into the ground, other people would naturally follow along with this powerful influence.

One day, an urgent document from the Milky Way City Command Post called the Prime Minister up before 6 A.M. in the morning. Lu Bixing had walked out of a meeting that lasted until midnight the night earlier and barely got enough sleep. He forced himself to crawl out of bed, still drowsy, and cleaned himself up as he pulled out two sets of tops and trousers out of the closet. While he was still half-awake and dozing off, he subconsciously folded up one of the two sets of the clothing and placed it next to the bed.

Lu Bixing was in the middle of tying his tie when he finally fully woke up. He turned his head abruptly and stared at the neatly folded set of clothes resting on the side of the bed in awe and confusion.

At that moment, Lin Jingheng had finished his morning workout and opened the door back into the room. He saw Lu Bixing sit dumbly by the side of that bed and pressed his hand atop the young man’s head, ruffled up his freshly made hairdo, picked up the folded clothes on the bed, and walked into the bathroom.

There were no words between the two men; one was freshly awake; the other was covered in sweat. Yet the sense of everyday life was suddenly more realistic than ever before.

Lu Bixing could hear the sound of water flowing from behind him and carefully reached his hand over to the side of the bed where the extra set of clothes sat earlier. Then, as if he was double-checking to see if the clothes were really gone, he leaned down and took a deep breath, capturing the lingering smell by the pillow. Like waking up from a long dream, Lu Bixing finally thought: “*He’s really back*.”

The bathroom door suddenly opened up before Lin Jingheng could finish drying his hair. Soon after, Lu Bixing grabbed onto Lin Jingheng’s waist and pinned him to the still-humid walls of the bathroom. The force influenced by the biochip was a little harsher than a push, but Lin Jingheng didn’t react at all and only looked at the young man quietly.

For the first time in a long while, Lin Jingheng saw those eyes that were filled with suppressed emotions and pain glisten in a different light; it was something much more passionate, like sparks of fireworks in a dark night.

Lu Bixing asked: “When you went to the Heart of the Rose that day, it wasn’t because you wanted to join in the fight between the Union and pirates, right? You wanted to come back...for what reason?”

He’d barely dug up the identity of the Freedom Corps yesterday and reasoned out from the hints that perhaps this owner of the Freedom Corps was someone that had a close relationship with Lin Jingheng. His plan today was supposed to be follow-up questions regarding the same topic, but he ruined the order of questions himself.

“Right; that was a coincidence that I only found out about when I closed in--as for the second question,” Lin Jingheng paused slightly before answering, “it’s because of you.”

As soon as he finished, a kiss fell onto his lips. It started off reserved and timid, then quickly grew deeper and uncontrolled; it was almost a little too unrestrained, tossing a sense of pain within the sweetness that scratched his heart. The steam inside the bathroom quickly turned into droplets of water on the wall, drenching Lu Bixing’s clean cuffs. The temperature inside the room rose quickly between the two men; Lin Jingheng gently gave a pat on Lu Bixing’s stiffened back and felt those silent sixteen years that the young man hadn’t been able to cry out.

Then, Zhanlu’s voice suddenly rang out: “Headmaster Lu, the Milky Way City Base called again and asked if you are on your way and how long will it take for you to arrive?”

Lu Bixing: “......”

The Prime Minister looked as if he wanted to curse, but his sophisticated vocabulary pack wasn’t equipped with such vulgar language and couldn’t give an immediate response.

Zhanlu asked ‘kindly’: “Shall I push your schedule back two hours?”

This household only had two capable adult men and no elderly or young to care for, why did they need such a high-spec AI as their digital butler?

Was a standard multi-function household robot not enough?

Perhaps Zhanlu’s mental network and mech core repair needed to be put back onto the priority list.

The entire Milky Way City was buried in work.

Only Thomas Young was carefree enough to play around with no pressure.

Because the Silver Ten hadn’t received an official appointment, they weren’t allowed to tour around the military factories and labs that kept plenty of top-secret research. Luckily, there was a public museum near Milky Way City that was enough to quench his tourist thirst.

The museum wasn’t a popular tourist attraction, as it was built for memorial purposes to preserve many of the technologies used during the internal warfare. However, for an experienced mech engineer, they only needed to sit for a bit in an Eighth Galaxy mech to get a good picture of its functions, and real footage of the mechs in battle were even more valuable to their eyes.

The Engineering Department sent him a young tour guide by the name of White; he was rather thin and small for a young man his age, but his unique and out of the box thinking ended up earning him quite a good reputation with Thomas.

Thomas praised him whole-heartedly: “If we were in the First Galaxy, your skill level would be good enough to earn an honorary graduate from the Black Orchid Academy.”

White responded nonchalantly: “Didn’t they say you have to fight to be an honorary graduate in the Black Orchid Academy? I don’t think I can make it, but the school I went to was also the best school in the Eighth Galaxy.’

Thomas was curious: “What’s the best school in the Eighth Galaxy?”

“The Starry Sea Academy,” White responded proudly. “Our headmaster is Minister Lu, the first lab system was Zhanlu, and our first director on the board was Commander Lin.”

Thomas was first nodding as he listened until the last name was mentioned, he finally turned in shock: “That…. your school’s budget….doesn’t sound very high.”

White spread his hands in front of him: “We’re not the only poor ones in the Eighth Galaxy, it’s only gotten a little better the last few years...Captain, I think these things up ahead might interest you. These are all the new technologies we developed during the internal warfare, but of course, we only displayed the non-combative portion.”

Thomas scanned each item on display individually and applauded: “You know, when other people are at war, they would usually fall back a few years in technological advancement; you guys somehow managed to create these things?”

“We were forced by the situation at the time,” White said. “Minister Lu says that the Eighth Galaxy’s most valuable resource is that we have lots of natural planets. Over the last few years, during our darkest times, everyone was desperately protecting the ecosystems on their planets. If these planets really got destroyed by our hands, we’d be marked down as criminals thousands of years into the future. The Engineering Department back then were all original followers of Minister Lu, and before they became our engineers, they were simply managers and handymen across the galaxy that maintained these ecosystems, so everyone knew what he meant. Even the Distant Planetary Defense Mechanism was developed by them back in those days.”

Thomas said: “It’s only been a decade.”

Around ten years ago, when people joked about uncultured and uneducated others, the Eighth Galaxy was also the target of insult. Years later, the best mechanic of the Silver Third Squadron stood in reverence beneath the marvelous history of the Eighth Galaxy.

“Since the Nineteenth Century of A.D. Era on ancient earth, groundbreaking revolution often occurs once every ten years.” White explained calmly, “We’re also simply people that were struggling to survive in the small corner of the vast universe.”

The museum was small, so the two reached the end within a short time. White continued: “Captain Young, it was a pleasure to speak with you today. You’re the second Captain of the Silver Ten I’ve met, and I have to say I feel that we get along much better.”

“What’s so special about getting along with Turan? Be careful, you might lose your virginity.” Thomas responded sternly like he wasn’t shading his own colleague, “I’ll introduce you to the others next time...well, to be fair, you don’t really need to know them either. The First Squadron’s a fake honor student, the Fourth Squadron is Commander’s rabid fanboy that won’t stop sucking up to our boss all day. The Sixth Squadron practically doesn’t exist, you can’t even sense their presence; everytime we have a meeting we’d have to skip them at least once during the rollcall. The Tenth Squadron’s just a bunch of bastards. As for the Ninth Squadron, they’re all like their boss, none of them are any good...speaking of which, you know what that dirty-minded gossiper said? She told me that our commander’s going out with Prime Minister Lu--our commander...hahaha! He was the ace icon of the Union back in the day, what was she on?”

White didn’t know how to respond.

Thomas didn’t notice the change in expression on the young man’s face and asked: “Oh right, do you want to meet the first director of the White Tower, Doctor Hardin? I guess our boss picked him up from somewhere, he’s a pretty chatty old man.”

White’s eyes brightened up: “Really? Our first lecture at school by Minister Lu was on the Eden system.”

Thomas: “He’s out of the hospital today, let’s go!”

Due to his age, Doctor Hardin stayed in the hospital for half a month after the long intergalactic journey before Lin Jingheng took him to his residence in the Eighth Galaxy. The poor doctor was so traumatized that his first assumption about Lin Jingheng showing any sort of kindness was that the commander wanted something from him or was plotting something behind his back.

After hearing Lin Jingheng’s explanation of Lu Bixing’s situation, Doctor Hardin fell silent before asking: “The Nuwa Project was successful in the Eight Galaxy, are you sure about this?”

## Ch 139 - I’m Here Again, is Dinner on You?

The wrinkles on the old doctor’s face were deep enough to cover up his expression; it almost seemed like his whole body was a rusty robot, so most of the time it would look as if he was calm and collected. However, Lin Jingheng did detect a hint of fear in the old man this time.

Doctor Hardin had lived a life surrounded by people with many faces and had seen too many dreams and morals corrupt into toxic waste. All of his friends had turned their backs on him, every bit of kindness used as a facade for more fearsome agendas. Even if the Eighth Galaxy was pumped with a new vitality after the war, he could no longer bring himself to trust in any of these professional liars that walked beside him.

Lin Jingheng pretended to not notice the change of expression and continued in an objective manner: “When the Cayley pirates returned to the Eighth Galaxy, they brought in a group of extremists from the AUS and started a series of human experiments on satellite Ema 3. Among the people they kidnapped for the experiment were the former Prime Minister of the Eighth Galaxy and his cabinet; these people managed to escape to the Milky Way City base and coincidentally ran into us. We didn’t realize they were infected with a more powerful mutated version of the Rainbow Virus, so we made close contact with these people without any protection and even spoke to them. I eventually caught the mutated virus, but he didn’t.”

Doctor Hardin was shocked, and after a short moment of hesitation he asked: “Do you have records of this? Samples of the mutated virus or even a medical report…”

“We do. Aside from that, we were also the ones that took the vaccine out from the homebase of the AUS. You can even check the real-time footage recorded on the mechs.”

Doctor Hardin fell silent--according to the research data from the extremist party of the AUS, vaccuocerebrals tended to have better immunity against the Rainbow Virus than normal people. However, the data also emphasized that their immunity was only a tad bit better; the difference was almost as small as the difference between a healthy young person versus an elderly person.

Professional soldiers in the Silver Fortress like Lin Jingheng have taken more antibiotics than anyone; their immune systems are significantly stronger than the average person. Under the same conditions, the chances of him being infected while the other remained untouched was virtually impossible.

Yet again, this was also quite possibly another story Lin Jingheng made up; the Eighth Galaxy was his territory, the lie could cover the whole galaxy no matter how much the old doctor tried to probe.

Doctor Hardin’s heart pounded against his chest as he shot a quick glance at Lin Jingheng, then answered with reservation: “It’s been too long. I have indeed come up with certain results about the Nuwa Project and human evolution, but the massive amount of data left behind has already been destroyed. I’m not used to using memory-aid devices, there was no way I could keep all of that information in my head.”

Lin Jingheng: “If that’s true, would the effects of biochips be much less harmful to him than the average person?”

“That will depend on the kind of biochip,” Doctor Hardin answered carefully. “In theory, if he can safely pass through the stages of evolution under perfect conditions, it should not have any harmful effects.”

The corner of Lin Jingheng’s lips relaxed a bit at this answer. Zhanlu once said that during the early days of Lu Bixing’s experiment with the chip, he’d repeatedly inject and remove the chip from his body, so he should at least have a better understanding of the chip now.

Before Lin Jingheng could let out a sigh of relief, Doctor Hardin spoke up: “You said that you’ve seen an artificially-made ‘birdman’ before; is this true or were you lying to me again?”

Lin Jingheng: “It’s true.”

The Doctor asked: “Is this birdman still doing well? What happened to them?”

A cloud of melancholy flashed across Lin Jingheng’s eyes.

This birdman didn’t live a good life; he spent his days struggling in this harsh world carrying a noble and kind soul of a human in his deformed body. Yet he never lived the honorable life of a man...not even for a single day. He later died, and even until his last breath, he never received a proper name outside of ‘birdman.’

“I think you understand what I mean now,” Doctor Hardin said. “Regardless if the chip on him is safe or not, if you don’t want him to carry the same burden as me and suffer the same fate as that birdman, you should keep this secret in the black hole for the rest of time.”

Lin Jingheng clenched his fist; the two men stared in silence at each other for a short while.

After what felt like an eternity, the front door of the apartment sent out a small notice that two visitors had arrived at this floor; the camera showed Thomas and White waiting outside.

Doctor Hardin commented in a whisper: “You shouldn’t test the limits of human nature, Commander.”

Lin Jingheng turned to stare at the old man: “Do you realize that you, as the one who made this comment, will not be given any freedom even in the Eighth Galaxy from now on?”

Doctor Hardin chuckled: “A free soul is even more valuable than a naturally habitable planet. Everyone builds the boundaries of their own prison cell, the only difference is the size; some people don’t realize they’re living in a prison while others that wake up will learn pain...aside from that, there are no fundamental differences no matter where you go. I’ve never been truly free my whole life anyway. Commander, I’d like to believe that regardless of what you can do to me, you can’t possibly torture an old man like me, right?”

Lin Jingheng didn’t respond. After a short while, he finally answered in an almost courteous fashion: “I’ll let them arrange a place for you to stay near my house. If you have any trouble at home, you can always call Zhanlu over to take care of you.”

Doctor Hardin looked at him; the Lin twins grew up on Wolto and were both very well-mannered. But only at the times when they had requests would they lower their heads and show this side of themselves. Though fortunately compared to Lin Jingshu’s eerie demanor and unreadable coldness, Lin Jingheng’s straightforward asshole attitude seemed much more reasonable.

The old doctor responded in a slightly sarcastic tone: “Oh, I’m even blessed by this kind of treatment? What an honor, Commander.”

Lin Jingheng didn’t mind the sarcasm: “Are you busy today? You can come visit my house tonight and meet him in person.”

By the time Thomas dragged White over to the old doctor’s apartment door, this was the first line he heard.

“Look at that, our commander’s here too,” Thomas knocked on the door gleefully as he whispered to White behind him, “Who can they meet at his house? Zhanlu?”

White gave an awkward but courteous smile back: “Perhaps...that ‘Engineer 001’?”

Thomas’ instinct was that this title sounded like an ID for an AI that strangely fit their boss’s aloof aesthetics. This was that psychopath who didn’t even know how to give the AI they were talking about a cuter personality, so he responded: “I’ve known him for so long and Commander’s never taken us to his house before, what a loner. But I wasn’t that interested in that elite hub on Wolto anyway, I’m definitely going to have a good tour of his house this time.”

The ‘Engineer 001’ in Thomas’ gossiping mouth, Lu Bixing, sneezed on the train back home.

He had been dragged to the Milky Way City Base Command Post before the sun went up and worked restlessly the whole day until he finally settled these workaholics near dusk. There was a group of single and young workaholics in the Command Post who worked day and night like their Prime Minister that Lu Bixing often spent time with during working hours.

Yet today, Prime Minister Lu didn’t want to join them in overtime. He used the excuse of pouring himself another cup of coffee to sneak out of the post, only to be stopped by a whole line of people waiting for him outside the door.

For the first time in his life, Lu Bixing felt like a popular dungeon boss in an MMORPG that always had a group of players waiting to fight him.

Finally after the sky was dark, Lu Bixing found an opportunity to sneak out the backdoor. He giddily opened up the door only to find the director of planning already waiting in the parking lot. Lu Bixing turned around immediately and snuck onto the public train connecting the base to Milky Way City like a thief afraid of being caught.

The high-speed mobile passed through an enclosed tunnel quietly. There was no scenery outside the window and only strange lights glowing from the equipment inside the train; all the passengers around were late-night shift staff of the command post. Every single one of them was falling asleep on their seats and didn’t even notice the Prime Minister in their exhaustion.

The whole car was silent. Only Lu Bixing sat wide awake as if he’d had a bit too much coffee, like an excitable child on a school field trip.

He hadn’t been excited to go home in years. Every time he passed through this terminal, it was only due to those times when everyone was entirely exhausted from work and he allowed his staff to go home for some rest. He would drag out overtime until he really had nothing else to do and reluctantly go back home to listen to Zhanlu’s ramblings. He would close his eyes for a short rest on the train until he reached home. It wasn’t until today that he realized that the signal lights inside the terminal were so colorful, like a kaleidoscope; a projection of armed mobile safety ad on the walls of the tunnel followed at the same speed as the train. Lu Bixing had always ignored the video until today; when he watched the full clip with all his attention, he strangely found it comical and fresh.

After about two minutes, the video ended as the train stopped at his station.

Lu Bixing followed the crowd down the platform and checked the time, knowing that Lin Jingheng should already be home by now. As this thought arose, a strange sense of excitement consumed his whole body from the bottom up. His footsteps grew lighter as he passed through the streets of the residential area, elevating his enthusiasm the closer he got to his house. By the time he saw the light in his residence, he could almost feel that sense of delight inside him lift his foot off the ground.

It wasn’t that he wanted to do anything in particular or had any plans; it was a simple feeling of pure joy.

Yet this balloon of excitement popped the moment he opened the door...there were too many people inside his house.

White carried Popcorn in his arms and was first to stand up as he greeted his teacher: “Hey Teach, I’m here again, is dinner on you?”

Lu Bixing: “......”

## Ch 140 - Not Even the Renowned Silver Ten Had Seen this Coming

In Lu Bixing’s memories, aside from the one time the Engineering Department came over to help him fix Zhanlu, his house had never been this crowded.

With the wheelchair resting in the middle of the already limited space in the living room, the entire space suddenly felt jam-packed. Even though the sofa still had empty seats, Commander Lin’s unique way of welcoming guests had him sitting at the center of the sofa like a king on a throne. As for the others--minus Doctor Hardin who couldn’t stand, nobody dared to step near the sofa.

The Captains of the SIlver Ten all stood in a clean row behind their commander, backs straight as a paved road. Their intimidating stance sent out an air of pressuring force that made Lu Bixing feel as if they would walk out the door the next second to commit murder.

White grabbed onto Popcorn to make sure it didn't slither away while he sat on the tall stool by the bar, whispering to the Captain of the Silver Ten closest to his corner behind everyone’s backs.

The moment Lu Bixing opened the door, these top guards behind their commander stiffened as their gazes all turned onto the Prime Minister like bright spotlights on the stage. Then before he could comment, all of these spotlights saluted him in unison: “Prime Minister Lu!”

Prime Minister Lu had no other choice and could only force a friendly smile onto his face. He heard his own voice roll out of his mouth as his teeth ground through at least two whole layers of enamel before he finally said: “Welcome.”

Lin Jingheng originally planned to bring Doctor Hardin to meet a certain someone to allow him to continue studying the biochip; what he didn’t expect was that shit Thomas Young inviting himself right in without looking at the mood. This shameless Captain virtually glued himself onto his boss and pestered to visit, even calling his comrades over, ruining Lin Jingheng’s plan to invite a single guest into this whole mess within a matter of seconds.

Commander Lin was someone that already found slow reptiles in his home annoying, let alone those lawless hooligans. He already mentally prepared a hundred slippers to welcome Thomas and the others, wanting only to ask them to tour around the place a bit before sending them off after quenching their curiosities, and of course the plan was once again ruined when he saw Lu Bixing’s face the moment the Prime Minister opened the door.

Lin Jingheng was sitting on the hot seat at the last second and decided to cross his legs as he leaned back into a more comfortable position with no plans of shooing away these uninvited guests anymore.

“Here, take a seat. Why are you all standing like you’re in time-out?” Lu Bixing first saved Popcorn from White’s hands, then scanned the Silver Ten in his house. When his gaze fell on Turan, the two quickly dropped their eyes from each other awkwardly.

None of the Silver Ten dared to move.

Lu Bixing lowered his head to look at the king of their house, unsure of what to say.

Lin Jingheng: “Right, all of you, take a seat.”

“Attention,” Lee said. “Sit!”

The Captains then surrounded the sofa and sat down together in the same position. They all lifted their heads up to look at Lu Bixing, making the latter feel as if he needed to prepare an impromptu speech for them.

The Silver Ten had followed Lu Xin before their current boss, and even though they weren't as close to the late commander as Lu Xin’s own subordinate generals, they still maintained a good relationship with Lu Xin. So their impression of this Prime Minister who single-handedly carried multiple forces in his hand through the Heart of the Rose was relatively good.

Thomas pointed at the person beside him gleefully and introduced: “Hi Prime Minister, I’m the Captain of the Third Squadron Thomas Young. That one over there that copied my face is my younger brother Poisson. We may look similar but it’s not hard to tell us apart; the uglier one with a perpetual shit-eating face is the younger brother.”

Lu Bixing gave him an attentive nod in acknowledgement and thought: *Oh, it’s the one that pesters the commander 24/7, the infamous first candidate for being laid off.*

“And the guy beside him is the Captain of the First Squadron, Lee Frank. The First Squadron’s job is mostly information technology, so you better be careful of him from now on. There used to be this dumbass called Yevgenia back in the Union who clung onto the Committee and harassed our commander everyday; she finally stopped after multiple scandals made it to the headlines, and rumor had it that it was all thanks to the heroic deeds of Captain Lee here.”

Lin Jingheng turned to the Captain of the First Squadron in surprise: “You did that?”

“No,” Lee denied the deed, unfazed. “Prime Minister, what’s the Eighth Galaxy’s official definition of slander?”

Thomas clicked his tongue irritatedly. At the same time, another individual to the right of Lee stood up abruptly. From his looks, he was visibly shorter than his tall colleagues, but had a memorable large face with sharp features. He smiled courteously to reveal clean white teeth that looked almost frightening: “Let me introduce myself, I’m the Captain of the Tenth Squadron, Robert Bayer. My job ranges from ambushes, cutting off the tail, sneak raids, sneak attacks, to assassination.”

Thomas: “Right, it’s not like we ever need you out in the frontlines.”

Lu Bixing: “......”

He now kind of understood why Turan would bring up disbanding the Third Squadron to her boss back then; this Captain was a master of harassment.

“I’m the Captain of the Fourth Squadron, Anakin; you can just call me Kin.” The next individual that spoke seemed to be of a unique ancestral background. His hair was almost pitch-black that complimented his light brown skin, making him stand out quite a bit among the other pale galactic soldiers. He had naturally rounded and amourous eyes that carried a hint of kindness like his soft voice that sounded like a warm breath of wind. “I’m only a temporary Captain right now. The original Captain of our Squadron died during a pirate ambush; we used to be one of the main forces of the fleet, but unfortunately we have very few survivors today. I’m afraid we may be reassigned into other squadrons at this rate.”

This line was followed by a short silence in the room.

Lin Jingheng: “Don’t worry, we can rebuild the Fourth Squadron.”

Anakin’s gaze visibly softened as he looked towards Lin Jingheng, almost as if he was ready to consume the commander with his eyes.

Lu Bixing: “......”

This man looked all proper and respectable a second ago but was clearly not who he presented himself as earlier!

“I’m Liu Yuanzhong of the Silver Sixth Squadron. If you forget my name, feel free to ask again; I’m used to it already.” The Captain of the Sixth Squadron immediately followed up as Thomas was about to open his mouth to interrupt, “The Sixth Squadron is also one of the main forces of the fleet, we weren’t picked up on the streets by Commander nor are we here to look pretty-- but Commander, I’ve noticed that the Eighth Galaxy’s military industry is extremely advanced. Do we really need to raise a whole squad of mechanics that pretend they know what they were doing?”

Thomas shrugged nonchalantly: “Apparently it’s politically correct to target and bully the Third Squadron in that little groupie.”

The rest of the group virtually chanted back in unison: “We’re only bullying you.”

Thomas: “......”

Thankfully, the Captain of the Third Squadron had a heart big enough to take a joke; to put it bluntly, he was simply unapologetically shameless and didn’t even feel awkward about being put on the spot. Instead, he turned to Lu Bixing and said gleefully: “Peasants and commoners are all like that, they get all worked up when they see someone that’s more talented than them. Don’t worry about it, right, Prime Minister Lu? I’m sure you can understand--we’ve only met you once since we arrived. I’ve heard that you’ve been busy; so what’s up, did our commander also invite you over today?”

Lu Bixing: “......”

Everyone fell into an eerie silence after this as they turned their heads over to Poisson. The younger brother sat like a statue with a soulless expression on his face, pondering which recycling center would take his embarrassing older brother away for cheap.

Lin Jingheng lowered his head and covered up a slightly mischievous smile at the corner of his lips.

The Silver Ten was the unshakable symbol of Lin Jingheng’s reign in the Silver Fortress for 30 years, they were his arms and legs. Under the stares of these people, Lu Bixing felt as if he had suddenly returned to the starlight dome on Beijing-β where he was interrupted by the mafia boss before he could finish his speech to the students of his school. A thin layer of sweat appeared on his back as he forcefully remained calm before his audience, pretending he was unfazed by this interruption.

It was rather strange; perhaps it was because it was related to Lin Jingheng, those memories that he thought he had forgotten suddenly reappearing like pearls hiding under the water. An invisible string pulled them all together as he carefully tugged on the end of the string, revealing the line of pearls that even made the awkwardness in the room shine like jewels.

Zhanlu controlled the automatic dining cart into the living room while the robotic arm skillfully poured out tea for the guests--like a true AI that didn’t mind being put into this lowly position. Thomas thought he was smart and took this opportunity to tease the poor AI: “Hey Zhanlu, so you were called ‘Zhanlu’ back when you were a mech core, did you change your name to ‘Engineer 001’ now that you’ve moved on to be a digital butler? You sure are devoted to your job!”

Zhanlu handed him a cup of fruit tea: “I did not.”

Lu Bixing cleared his throat: “.... I am ‘Engineer 001’.”

Thomas spat out his tea onto his shirt.

Lee quietly moved away from him in fear of being infected with stupidity.

Lu Bixing: “When Prime Minister Edward first built the new government, he didn’t have many people working under him. I was the one that established the Eighth Galaxy’s Engineering Department, so I used the title ‘001’ back then…”

Lu Bixing didn’t know how to continue when he realized that everyone was staring at him in a clear “nobody cares about your ID number in the Engineering Department, we’re here carrying the spirit of the Eighth Galaxy waiting for you to explain why this house is called ‘the home of Commander Lin and Engineer 001’” manner.

“I…” Lu Bixing choked on his own words when he looked into Lin Jingheng’s eyes. The commander lifted an eyebrow as if it was none of his business, a slightly playful look as he waited to see how this young man would explain himself. Lu Bixing stared into his eyes and felt he was suddenly enchanted by something deep within those pupils and blurted out without thinking: “......I waited sixteen years for this man.”

Lin Jingheng was taken aback for a moment as the hint of playfulness on his face disappeared.

Lu Bixing could hear his rapid heartbeat that drummed uncontrollably in his chest, almost a bit too noisy to his own ears.

He exhaled like he had been awoken from a nightmare; Turan, who had been strangely quiet throughout the whole time felt her eyes tear up at this scene.

Lin Jingheng let out a sigh and reached both his arms out at him: “Bixing, come here.”

Lu Bixing ignored him and grabbed onto Lin Jingheng’s collar, then under everyone’s shocked and fearful gaze, pressed a kiss to the commander’s lips.

Aside from Turan, none of these renowned Silver Ten Captains had seen this kind of absurdity and craned their heads around like a bunch of meerkats.

Anakin mumbled: “Should we find someone to keep an eye out and make sure our ex-Captain doesn’t crawl out of his grave?”

Bayer reached across Lee and tapped Thomas, who was stunned as if the whole world around him had collapsed. The Captain of the Tenth Squadron even hid a needle between his fingers and poked at Thomas, who then yelped in pain and jumped out of his head. Bayer nodded his head and told Lee regretfully: “Looks like we aren’t having a mass hallucination, Lee.”

White carefully pulled out a tissue and handed it to Turan. Doctor Hardin, who had been completely silent the whole time, let out a faint smile as his gaze wandered off into the distance.

Memories came and went during a life of 300 years; countless people lost their lives or betrayed their morals. They built their reputations, committed crimes; but when they recalled their deeds at old age, the only scenes that flashed in their minds were a still image or a few cutscenes from the past.

Hardin remembered that he used to be enamored by books when he was young. He was a bookworm that distanced himself from the outside world and would often spend his day reading books in a quiet corner all by himself. Most children his age didn’t speak with him, only Woolf would always interrupt his reading. The young Doctor Hardin would be reading his book while a young Chief Woolf would pretend he was talking to a black hole and rant about his life in a strange harmony.

Occasionally, when Hardin stepped out of his book world, he would notice countless mentions of “Lin Ge’er” surrounding him.

The day their big brother Lin openly proposed to his wife, Hardin didn’t open up his book and instead shared a night of cheap beer with Woolf. He listened to his friend rant once again that night as this drunk young man, covered in tears, chanted in denial “I’m very happy for him.”

Strict social hierarchy in the old Sidereal Era was like a fossil buried in the foundations of civilization. Powerful leaders used AIs to keep an eye on everyone below them; for the rebellious generation that came after, these young souls learned to pilot mechs under this dangerous world and grew up in the turbulent storms of unrest. They risked their lives to explore the unknown territories and planets in space. Many left and never returned, but every reunion with one another was like a tearful moment between long lost family members.

These powerful emotions that once boiled the blood of the young generation were unbreakable like diamonds. They shined like sparks of fire in the long and dark night before they disappeared like fireworks, but that second of existence was a meaningful eternity to them.

The Silver Ten that finally caught their breath exploded in shock as if they were about to turn the world upside-down. Thomas got back to his feet like he just gave himself a shot of steroids and dragged White out the door, checking to see who else in the Engineering Department and his classmates were still on the planet to call up a private party at the commander’s residence. Prime Minister Lu finally settled down and was ready to shoo away these uninvited guests, only to see Lin Jingheng purposely keeping his mouth shut. The poor Prime Minister shrunk into a distraught ball like Popcorn and had to force a smile to welcome these people.

Doctor Hardin looked at these strange young people and touched Zhanlu’s robotic arm.

*But where did these people in his memories go?* He thought.

## Ch 141 - Lu Bixing is Finally Going Mad

Wolto.

The natural sunlight slowly dimmed behind a well-preserved forest as lamp lights began to light the grounds. The doctors quickly stepped out of the Chief’s mansion while whispering among themselves. The Chief’s Secretary Wang Ailun walked past them and greeted the doctors: “Good evening.”

“Good evening, Secretary General.”

Wang: “How’s the old Chief today?”

Since five years ago, the old chief had stopped using the cold medical capsule and switched over to a team of specialized human doctors that served him exclusively. Their daily job function was to ensure the old chief maintained a healthy public image and didn’t show any signs of fatigue or old age.

“Not bad, the climate in the mountains is very suitable for the elderly.” A doctor responded, “But he is around 320 years old already, we suspect that signs of the pop reaction are showing themselves on him lately. Secretary General, can you speak with the Chief and ask him to avoid interstellar transportations and armed mobiles as much as possible?”

The deterioration of the DNA could be treated if it was still in its warning signs, but once it began it was a permanent mark on Death’s list.

The Secretary General nodded solemnly and quickly made his way into the mountains after sending off the doctors.

This was deep in the mountains and away from the main residential areas. On the other side of the mountain was the Black Orchid Academy. The Chief’s mansion was built within the mountains, so a portion of the ranges were the private property of the old chief, free from the control of the Wolto government. It was a rare spot on the planet that had a beautiful scenery overlooking the city; before the fall of the capital planet, it was the site of Woolf’s private villa. After reclaiming the planet, the area was revamped into a clean field of greenery.

Wang Ailun stepped off the elevator up towards the mid-mountains and found the old Chief in the small pavilion outside the mansion.

“That used to be Lu Xin’s house.” Woolf pointed ahead of him without turning his head as he heard the footsteps come closer. Over ten kilometers past the back of the mountain was a large valley with incredible scenery. Aside from its natural beauty, the valley was also a great location for construction. The Parliament of the Union stood proudly amongst an area of upper-class residence in the valley; Chief Woolf continued toward his own secretary as he gazed in that direction. “I remember that his yard was always so vulgar, like a dog roamed the gardens and caused chaos...Lin Wei’s house was a bit further away from the valley and looked much cleaner in comparison. But that place was empty most of the time, and they eventually split his property in half and left it for the twins. Unfortunately, one of the children was in the Committee while the other was in the Silver Fortress; neither of them ever went back home.”

Wang Ailun’s gaze followed the old Chief and commented: “Chief, I believe you’re mistaken. General Lin was more reserved and well-mannered, so his house was the one that was in the central area of the valley, not too far from the Parliament building. Commander Lu was the one that moved further away.”

Woolf was taken aback for a moment until a hint of confusion shadowed his face: “Is it? Am I growing senile?”

“Chief.” Wang Ailun placed a small chip on the stone table beside Woolf. “This is all of the data of Madam Lu’s escape to the Eighth Galaxy after Lu Xin died that year, including live footage from those in pursuit at the time.”

Woolf hummed lightly in response, his gaze still fixed to the distance: “I’m getting old, my eyes aren’t that great anymore. Tell me what it’s about.”

“Yes, sir. First, we confirmed back then that the chance of Madam Lu’s survival rate was very slim in that situation, but that doesn’t mean it was impossible,” Wang Ailun leaned down slightly and spoke into the Chief’s ears. “She--or perhaps I should say her corpse--was later taken away by an unidentified individual. Only a well-informed local of the Eighth Galaxy could possibly escape from the pursuers; this person must have had a wide web of network for gathering information, was a risk-taker, and had enough troops in their hands. In addition, they must have had close connections with Lu Xin as well. We narrowed down a list of suspects and this ‘Monoeyed Hawk’ was one of them. The camera on the mech caught footage of his mech during the chase, and even though he disguised the appearance of his mech, we’ve analyzed through its performance that it was indeed the same mech that he owned in our records. It didn’t take too long to confirm our suspicion.”

Woolf asked: “You didn’t investigate him immediately?”

Wang Ailun paused and leaned down even further: “Sir, you were the one that blew up in front of the Committee back then and told them to stop the investigation. You said that the man’s already dead and Zhanlu had returned to our hands, and accused them of instigating murder by calling for more troops to chase after related parties...Chief, don’t you remember?”

Woolf’s eyebrows twitched slightly, and he fell silent for a short moment before answering: “Right...that was too long ago, almost like memories from my past life. Is there more?”

“Yes; Lin Jingheng had once sailed into the Eighth Galaxy for a mission to chase down the space pirates. I checked his itinerary back then and saw that he had a blank timeframe on his way back when he passed by Planet Cayley. While it’s common for commanders to leave their posts under non-emergency situations to pay diplomatic visits or take breaks, you should know that neither of these were common acts for Lin Jingheng.”

“So you’re saying he might have visited this arms merchant.”

“Perhaps, but I also suspect that he already knew this child existed. When he escaped from the Heart of the Rose back then, he had stayed in the Eighth Galaxy for five years. What did the Eighth Galaxy have that was so special to make him stay for that long? I’ve also noticed that the DNA report this Prime Minister Lu gave General Duke was off of a sample of his brain tissue; this is very uncommon, Chief. This isn’t a technical issue, but...DNA research and technology were remnants of ancient earth. The ancients were limited by their technologies in the past and often sampled cells that could be easily extracted from the outside of the human body, a practice that even we still use today. So why would someone use his brain cells?”

Woolf slowly turned his head around.

Wang Ailun continued: “The AUS had reports that they once restarted the Nuwa Project in the Eighth Galaxy, which happened to be around the same time as Madam Lu’s death. Lastly, Chief, I recall that we had another interesting piece of information that we took out of Hope’s personal device back in the day, aside from Saturday, in regard to the Eighth Galaxy. This Prime Minister Lu--Lu Bixing -- had once been exposed to a highly infectious mutated version of the Rainbow Virus for extended periods of time with no sign of infection afterwards. What does this remind you of?”

After listening to Wang Ailun’s long ramblings, Woolf first stared at the secretary for a few seconds before turning his head back in the direction of the valley. He fell silent for a long while as his wrinkled eyelids quietly covered his eyes as if he had fallen asleep.

Wang Ailun stood patiently to the side without a word and waited for him without a hint of irritation.

The Secretary General had always been a patient man who only grew more calm over the last few years. He followed orders and spoke to the Chief at appropriate times; he was as obedient as an AI when it came to answering all of Woolf’s questions. If the old Chief showed any signs of asking him to keep quiet, he would shut his mouth without any questions--and shut away his curious heart along the way. It was almost as if curiosity and desire for expression never existed inside him, like a highly sophisticated AI with a human skin.

If Woolf really did fall asleep in the middle of this conversation, Wang Ailun could simply turn down the shield around the pavilion, prepare the blankets, set the temperature, and prepare everything else inside the mansion before he left. He could come and go like a well-mannered and competent steward of the mansion, humbly accepting the fact that his insightful report had been ignored.

Many servants that thought they were witty found it difficult to even contain their desire to show-off in front of their bosses, so how was someone full of ambition like Wang Ailun able to? The simple fact was that he managed to hide every trace of his ardent heart before the old Chief.

Woolf went ‘offline’ for about five minutes before he suddenly spoke up: “Keep your hands off the Eighth Galaxy from now on.”

Wang AIlun’s gaze shifted slightly as he explained in a soft voice: “Chief, it has already been 300 years since the Union achieved the Grand Unification and eliminated the concept of nations and states in human civilization; I’m afraid that a sudden proclamation of independence by them will…”

“I know what you want to say,” Woolf interrupted him. “You want to say that these rebels of the Eighth Galaxy might have the full technology of the Nuwa Project in their hands right now. They can pass through wormholes freely, but our theories and research in this field are still completely barren. They’ve opened up this terminal single-handedly and are therefore fearless in announcing their betrayal of the Union, becoming the dangerous time bomb inside the Heart of the Rose.”

Wang Ailun pressed his lips together: “I do have my concerns regarding this.”

“Ailun, we took so long to finally remove this layer of toxic soil on our lands, so much effort to replant our seeds; we need to raise them properly. We can’t be thinking about cutting down our neighbor’s trees everyday when our own roots are still fresh. I didn’t see any of you talk about the Eighth Galaxy as friends before they declared their independence.” Woolf responded in a low tone, “Civilization without boundaries of states and nations can easily break down hierarchies in society and slow down development. It will cause society to fall into a unique claustrophobic syndrome, so it’s not necessarily a good thing...this was a concept Lin Jingheng already understood when he was barely 15 -- do you need me to teach you this lesson again? A hostile neighbor is not necessarily a bad thing to a newly rebuilt Union. Our biggest threat right now is the new galactic terrorist group, the Freedom Corps.”

Wang Ailun heard him mention Lin Jingheng again and felt a sour taste in his mouth; yet at the same time, he pitied the old Chief. No matter how powerful and cold-hearted this man was, age still took a toll on his physical body and turned him into a blob of emotional recollections. He must be reminiscing about those pointless old days again.

These old reminiscing feelings of the elderly were like immortal cockroaches that would come back after deliberately crushing them.

*There’s no end to this*, Wang AIlun thought.

But he didn’t want to talk back to Woolf and decided to back off as he studied the old Chief’s expression. He followed up with a small bit of praise: “You’re right, Jingheng...Jingheng is indeed a rare genius of his generation. I’ve never seen a second person like him that could always create such miracles. He even managed to re-summon the Silver Ten after sixteen years; if he was an ally, he would be a man that could give everyone a sigh of relief just by mentioning his name. And the way he left in the Heart of the Rose like a man of his words; I’ve been thinking about it lately as well, Chief, did we push him too much back in the Seventh Galaxy? If he was still in the Union and could work for us…”

Woolf let out a light sneer: “That’s not being a ‘man of his words’, Ailun. Perhaps he does have honor and pride, but his words were only worth as much as a small plate of bite-sized cheese, so what makes you think he’ll expose his weakness to you? He was simply bowing down to unforeseen circumstances.”

“The situation sixteen years ago...if Lin Jingheng hadn’t gotten stuck in the Eighth Galaxy and had little access to information, if the Silver Ten hadn’t stood so stubbornly on their Pledge of Freedom, getting themselves blocked on the road, or even if Lin Jingheng had seen the list in the forbidden fruit a little sooner, he would most definitely have taken the initiative and destroyed our careers and the Union. Civilians always admire a powerful military leader, and the Central Militia would logically follow him; the AUS had already been broken from the inside, and I doubt Hope would be willing to be his enemy. Even though the Glory Troops took over the First Galaxy, they were also trapped within the galaxy, so it wouldn’t be hard to get rid of them...even Lin Jingshu would possibly go underground to do her business because of him and avoid confrontation. At that very moment, the fate of humanity was at the tip of Lin Jingheng’s fingers. We were fighting with fate for survival, and if we didn’t want to suffer a complete defeat, our only choice was to get rid of him.”

“It’s much different now. The alliance between the Union and the Central Militia is stronger than ever before, and more importantly, the war is over. Lin Jingshu is simply an insane sociopathic terrorist; Jingheng’s opportunity to turn the tables has long passed, he has no choice but to accept this result.” Wang Ailun lowered his head even more. “You sure know him well.”

“Let me tell you one more thing; since Lin Jingheng chose to remain silent in the Heart of the Rose, he will remain silent for the rest of his life. At least for a generation or 200 years, the Eighth Galaxy will be that rather unfriendly but inseparable neighbor of the Union. A prophet from the Age of Exploration said that every five years will see a small change, while every ten years will see a groundbreaking revolution. If the Eighth Galaxy can go through this kind of change, why can’t the Union do the same given the same soil to grow in? We can all live in harmony by being a respectable threat and ally to each other; what’s wrong with that?” Woolf’s eyes as he spoke once again glistened in a sharp light that was uncharacteristic of a senile old man of over 320 yeard old. His logic was also very clear and reasonable, wiping out all traces of his silly ramblings earlier, “Ailun, people can have ambitions, but you can’t get too consumed by them. You need to know your limits!”

Wang Ailun nodded his head sincerely as his hand behind his back slowly clenched into a fist.

Woolf stood up with his cane as his secretary quickly stepped over to support him on the side.

The side of Woolf’s nose twitched slightly as he mumbled: “The scent of black tulips...did my Night Empress bloom?”

Wang Ailun squinted as he attempted to capture the scent in the air and relaxed after a few seconds: “Oh, did it?”

“The Night Empress bloomed. When it blooms, it means it’s his death anniversary.” Woolf said, “Is the memorial’s rebuilding complete? I want to go see him tomorrow.”

“Admiral Lin?” Wang Ailun asked, pretending to be surprised, “Chief, wasn’t Admiral Lin’s death anniversary before the Glory Troops handed Wolto over to us? Our small ceremony today was held in the City of Angels, did you forget?”

The sharp light inside Woolf’s eyes dimmed down as his pupils returned to a muddy color. The old chief stared at Wang Ailun strangely for a while until he recalled his memories: “Hm…...you’re right, the City of Angels…that did happen…strange, how did I forget about it again?”

Wang Ailun smiled innocently: “Sir, you’re always thinking and calculating too much everyday. Your thoughts always begin with questions regarding the entire interstellar society, so my job is to remember the smaller details of life for you. If you could remember everything in the world, wouldn't I have lost my job by now? Here, please watch your step.”

The lights in the chief’s mansion slowly dimmed until only the streetlights and decorative glows outside were still shining in the darkness. Wang Ailun carefully helped the old chief into bed like a thoughtful son before he walked out of the mansion. It was past midnight at this time--the secretary used to live inside this mansion and was on call 24/7.

Yet ever since the Union government moved back to Wolto, Wang Ailun was no longer Woolf’s personal secretary and took on the job of the Secretary General of the Union Parliament. This position used to be held by the Eden Committee; his predecessor was even a member of the Gordon family. This was the man who took the hand of the number one beauty of the Union as his wife, who quickly became even an eyesore for the top generals of the military councils to look at. In contrast, Secretary Wang even made time in his busy schedule to visit the old Chief and would often give the impression that he was still the timid little secretary in the eyes of the Council. Of course, Wang Ailun didn’t mind that they looked down at him and humbly took the new position without forgetting his origins.

Wang Ailun input the route into his car as the body of the vehicle automatically drove up toward the sky terminal smoothly. A voice with an unnatural robotic tone rang out from his personal device; it was another voice changer: “What did the old lion say?”

“It looks like the old lion’s teeth are falling out; he can’t even chew on fresh meat anymore, what else would he say?” Wang Ailun sneered slightly. “He wants to appease this snake beside him and pretend it doesn’t exist. He wants to play that ‘friendly neighbor’ game as if he wasn’t the one who ordered these wild grasses uprooted in the past.”

“I’m not surprised,” the voice behind the voice changer said, “but it’s nothing to worry about. He is simply a man already buried in the soil. Be patient, Ailun--if he wants to play the friendly neighbor then let him, we will eventually develop normal diplomatic relations with them. If we don’t, we’ll create this relationship for them; an independent galaxy cannot remain a peerless entity forever.”

A shade of worry flashed across Wang Ailun’s face.

The person behind the voice changer suddenly asked: “So tell me, does he like my Night Empress?”

The expression on the secretary’s face relaxed a bit: “Ah yes, that is indeed a small miracle...how did you manage to get your hands on it?”

The voice behind the voice changer chuckled lightly, taking on a sharp tone through the machine. It was difficult to tell the age and gender of the person behind, but that small laugh was almost tickling to the ear as they responded: “We have specialists here that study these things. All of you higher-ups are always thinking about missiles and mechs and all of those cold, boring things. Nobody ever cares about the people inside the mechs, as if war in space doesn’t depend on individual skills and qualifications. As for me, I don’t have the power to compete with the military in an arms race; I have to trade and buy my own weapons for self-defense, so my interests are often more on making these little things. By the way, before you all realize your dreams of fully-automated and robotic warfare, don’t you all still need people to command? It’ll be nice working with you, Secretary General Wang.”

The corner of Wang Ailun’s lips lifted slightly with the title “Secretary General.” Inside the car alone, he finally displayed an unrestricted expression of greed and thirst for power across his face.

After the incident of the kidnapping on planet Serbia, the number of opium biochip users slowly but steadily grew around the planet and its neighboring stations.

In the past, opium was considered the illegal replacement of Eden. In addition to the Union’s advertisement, everyone knew that it was an illegal drug and refused to touch it. But after the kidnapping incident and people realizing that members of the Freedom Corps had been living beside them all along, they noticed that these chip-injected pirates were often the most powerful, disciplined, and emotionally stable ‘elites.’

This struck a direct contrast with their image of a drug user.

At that time, most of the Freedom Corps’ main fleet were outside of the atmosphere and shot down plenty of starships that tried to escape in the beginning. However, most of the people on land were completely out of the loop. The pirates that ‘kidnapped’ them only took over the government and military agencies overlooking the small planet and were quite friendly towards the civilians on land. Many of the pirates even personally knocked on doors to apologize to the civilians and left them little gifts. A majority of the civilians were simply informed through second-hand sources that they were being held hostage, got onto a starship in confusion, and then were let out in even more confusion due to the interference of the Silver Ten.

A conspiracy theory began spreading from planet Serbia: it said that the Freedom Corps were falsely labeled as ‘pirates’ by the Union and the ‘opium’ wasn’t actually a drug, but an upgraded version of Eden that could drive the potential of human evolution. The government refused to let these uncontrollable evolved humans continue to spread and therefore fabricated a whole story for the masses.

“Look, Master.” A researcher in a lab coat opened up a large galactic map for Lin Jingshu. The map marked all human activity areas in different colors, from white to pink, bright red, dark red, red-brown, until it gradually moved closer to black. The darker the color, the more widespread the opium biochip usage was in that area. “The few white zones are areas where the first-generation chips have a usage rate of less than 3% among the population, which will require more long-term marketing strategies. Rose-red areas have a rate of over 8% usage, which means that they will usually start building a small culture or community in the area. 8% is a very interesting number; we’ve discovered once we pass this threshold, the spread of the chip will expand in leaps. Red-brown zones are places where chip users make up over 30% of the population, and once we pass 30%, this often means we’ve taken control of this particular area. As for black zones, these indicate places that have second generation chip users and have voluntarily pledged themselves to our ideal world order, so they are allowed to switch to permanent chips and are considered citizens of our kingdom--this is the ideal state. As of now, most of the areas that have reached this stage are often close to border zones. I believe that our strategy for the future can be putting more focus on these red areas instead of the black zones; we should aim to reach more brown zones to secure our influence to bring in more revenue for our business.”

Lin Jingshu nodded her head airily at the report as her gaze fell onto a completely white zone--the Independent Eighth Galaxy.

*“Did your parents not teach you that you can never hide behind a mask for the rest of your life?”*

*“Bastard, you really want to die by my hands!?”*

The person’s voice echoed in her head as Lin Jingshu’s hands clenched tightly into a fist beside her.

In the pure white zone called the Eighth Galaxy, the night of Qiming was bathed in starlight.

Prime Minister Lu was very tempted to put a huge “Do Not Disturb” sign on his front door.

Lu Bixing was a very stereotypical extroverted character--the difference between extroversion and introversion wasn’t actually on how sociable the individual was on the outside nor how well they handled interpersonal relationships. The difference was the method they chose to recharge their psychological energies, whether it was through internal forces or external forces.

During his carefree young adult life, Lu Bixing was filled with curiosity for the world around him and enjoyed interaction with all kinds of people. Even during his darkest and most insufferable days during the sixteen years that forced him to become more reserved and reclusive, his method of recharging energy was still through external influences. For example, he would much prefer taking on the responsibility of leading people to work than locking himself up all alone at night in his thoughts.

But no matter how extroverted a person was, they still needed time to themselves.

Ever since the entire Silver Ten came in and toured Commander Lin’s mysterious house, Lu Bixing hadn’t found the chance to spend some alone time with Lin Jingheng. The first time, thanks to Lin Jingheng’s silent approval, these hooligans partied to their heart’s extent in the house into the night. There weren’t enough guest rooms in the house, so Zhanlu had to pull up some sleeping bags and wrapped all of them into hot dogs on the ground. From a distance, it looked almost like a bakery filled with fresh bread. Lu Bixing had a whole essay of words to say but couldn’t squeeze out a single word from his mouth and gave up for the night.

After they finally shooed away these loud mouths, Turan came to visit on her own the next day.

The elevator incident had been a knife in Turan and Lu Bixing’s heart for the last sixteen years that was like a fishbone stuck in their throats. The two finally looked back on it as Lin Jingheng quietly sat with them for half a bottle of strong alcohol. Turan finally spat out everything she’d wanted to say for the past decade, including the things she shouldn’t have said. The knife she finally plucked out left a bloodied wound that covered her heart, throbbing in pain every time she touched it--thankfully the living pain reliever Lin Jingheng sat wordlessly by her side as she patched herself back up.

The knife was gone, and the wound would eventually stop bleeding, would eventually be healed.

The Silver Ten were Lin Jingheng’s arms and legs -- being able to confirm his relationship with Lin in front of them was a blessing to Lu Bixing. And Turan’s conviction to come clean with him was also something to be proud of.

Yet the third day, Huang Jingshu took the opportunity to come back, grabbing her fellow classmates to visit as well.

Day four, Doctor Hardin came to visit on his own. The old doctor had a love-hate relationship with the Nuwa Project and rambled endlessly to the point where it almost made Lu Bixing fall asleep in the middle of their talk.

Day five, Thomas brought the entire Third Squadron with him uninvited to talk about the universe with the revered Engineer 001.

Day six…

Ten days later, Lu Bixing was finally driven into madness.

It happened to be the day before the weekend when Lin Jingheng returned home at his regular time, only to receive Lu Bixing’s message from his personal device. The Prime Minister said that he was at a hotel somewhere in Milky Way City meeting with a few government officials from other planets in the galaxy. Lin Jingheng clicked his tongue in annoyance; the Prime Minister had no real need to report his job to him, but since a certain someone clearly gave a detailed address, it was more than obvious that this someone was expecting the commander to go pick him up.

Lin Jingheng arrived at the hotel within a short time and was informed by a service robot that the banquet was already over. Prime Minister Lu had had a bit too much to drink and was resting upstairs in his room.

The commander went up to the room and placed his hand on the door, in which the door automatically opened in response--Lu Bixing’s locked doors always left a special permission for him to enter.

The little hallway inside the room was dark. Lin Jingheng stepped in and asked as he slowly got used to the dark environment: “Are you awake? Do you want to go home and…”

Before he could finish, a gust of wind blew by his ears. Lin Jingheng stepped back in alarm, only to notice that the door behind him had closed automatically. The next moment, he found himself pinned onto the door behind him by someone.

## Ch 142 - You Still Have to Love Him

The person before him might have been as swift as a mutated predator, but the forces behind every action were rather light. The hand that grabbed onto Lin Jingheng’s shoulder was gentle, almost timid, while the other hand rested his back. A thick scent of alcohol quickly consumed Lin Jingheng’s senses.

Lin Jingheng’s senses heightened as he felt a gentle lick against his neck while those hands that grabbed onto him started shifting around on his body.

Being pinned to a door in the dark by a predator was surely a new experience; Lin Jingheng didn’t know whether to laugh or cry as he was put on the spot and could only grab onto those hands that slipped towards his chest and lifted his chin up slightly: “Prime Minister Lu, where’s your shame?”

Lu Bixing gave a muffled response, innocently confused.

Lin Jingheng heard this muffled tone and grabbed onto his collar, then lowered his head slightly to sniff out the scent of alcohol: “Did you drink too much or did your clothes drink too much?”

Lu Bixing’s act was immediately ripped apart: “......now you’re making me feel bad for asking for drunk sex.”

He took in a deep breath and shoved his chin into Lin Jingheng’s shoulder by the door. He could feel the hard metal button and epaulet pressing against his face, carrying the coldness of the planet’s night. A thin layer of mist covered the metal as Lu Bixing’s breath caressed the button like an episode of light rain. He turned his hand and held Lin Jingheng’s hand that grabbed onto him, fingers still cold at the tips. He suddenly felt a tiny bit of awkwardness from his impulsive act.

The meeting at night was real, and he really did have a few drinks at the banquet; spraying wine on his own shirt was also to avoid drinking too much at the banquet.

The people that he received at the hotel were from a faraway planet near the border of the Eighth Galaxy. Winter on that small planet was longer than Beijing-β, and even after installing an artificial ecosystem, it was still much colder than many other places. The climate control broke at one point during the internal war, causing the deaths of thousands on the planet who couldn’t withstand the cold winter. The locals that survived used an extremely high alcohol content wine that Lu Bixing secretly left them. The Engineering Team at the time risked their lives to deliver the wine, and under the cover of the locals, finally repaired the climate system after half a month while under enemy attack. Since then, the survivors of the planet swore their loyalty to the government and assassinated the enemy boss, then swore to forever remain under the rule of the Eighth Galaxy’s Independent Government.

The wine that helped them live through the harsh winter at the time was later named ‘Survivor’ to commemorate the event. Every year after that, the locals would send a collector’s edition of the wine to show their gratitude.

Due to the biochip in his body, Lu Bixing metabolized alcohol in his body at a much faster rate than normal people. Even someone with strong alcohol tolerance like Turan, who could easily down three bottles of wine, would find Survivor burning to the throat. The wine was so strong that even Lu Bixing’s iron self-discipline melted quite a bit after a few drinks, making him feel a bit tipsy for the first time in a while.

If it wasn’t for this, he wouldn’t have mustered up the courage to do such a thing.

This kind of thing...that he was only able to do so without shame a long, long time ago.

He was young and shameless back then; he could openly ask to be spoiled and boldly request lots of love without any pressure.

Lu Bixing cleared his throat: “Uh, I…”

Lin Jingheng’s gaze turned towards the direction of his voice in the darkness.

Lu Bixing could still see clearly in the dark thanks to his chip. He could see that his commander was leaning casually by the door, balancing on one leg as the other rested on the side. The commander’s eyelids draped slightly over his grey eyes, giving off a hint of kindness: “Hm?”

“How did you know it was me?” Lu Bixing suddenly asked, “Aren’t you afraid it might be a trap?”

“I can smell it.” Lin Jingheng raised an arm and pulled Lu Bixing’s hand to his face. He sniffed the tips of Lu Bixing’s fingers lightly, perhaps even touching the skin with the tip of his nose. Lu Bixing couldn’t tell, as he felt his entire arm numbed from his elbow to the tip of his fingers. “I forgot to tell you, but if you don’t stop him, Zhanlu will only buy eucalyptus-scented detergent. This is one of his unfortunate functions; did nobody tell you all these years that you smell like a walking camphor tree? Not even the smell of alcohol can cover it up.”

Lu Bixing felt his throat roll gently.

“Besides, no matter how scared you are of danger, it’ll come at you when you least expect it.” Lin Jingheng paused a little before he continued with a strangely suggestive tone, “You need to grow used to it and learn to overcome it. You can’t spend too much time worrying over it because fear will ruin you.”

“Fear is...a type of self-defense mechanism that can destroy a whole army but also break you down from the inside.” Lu Bixing felt that he was finally falling into the influence of the damned wine. The more he wanted to keep quiet, the more his mouth spat out words uncontrollably. “Someone who’s been quartered in life could even feel pain as a ghost. He knows that if it happens again, even his soul might shatter; that’s why he’s scared, fearful...I…”

The alcohol in his veins suddenly rushed through his blood like a string of wild horses as he spoke, forcefully raising his body temperature and consuming his conscience. The hand that was holding onto Lin Jingheng gently suddenly tightened to the point where Lin Jingheng could feel the pain in his flesh. Yet Lin Jingheng didn’t speak, as if he didn’t notice the tightened grip.

Lin Jingheng felt like he was kneeling by a small hole, frantically trying to make the little snake inside peek out. The moment a small silhouette could be seen, he would hold in his breath anxiously in fear that he would scare the little snake back into its hole.

Lu Bixing stuttered a few times and repeated “I” at least three times until he met the gaze of the other man in the darkness.

“I’m that lonely ghost that’s hurt all over, I’m that person that was too scared to move. Lin...I... I’m afraid that I can no longer patch up a lot of things anymore, I can’t give you back the person that once kind of liked…”

Lin Jingheng suddenly leaned in closer and interrupted him: “You don’t believe in me anymore?”

Lu Bixing was stunned.

“When Monoeyed Hawk kept shit-talking me behind my back to coerce you stay away from me, you purposely talked back to him and believed in me. When the Cayley pirates surrounded the space station and I had to carry that foolish bunch that barely learned how to pilot a mech to their deathbeds, you also seemed to believe in me. I never promised that I was going to protect that run-down station, nor did I ever introduce myself as a good person to you; you were the one that blindly believed in me.” Lin Jingheng said, “I’ve only ever promised you one thing: I said ‘I will come back for as long as you’re still here,’ and you didn’t believe in me anymore...is it because I let you down?”

Lu Bixing’s lips trembled; he couldn’t answer.

Lin Jingheng gently caressed his face with the back of his hand: “Then...can you give me one more chance?”

Lu Bixing stared at him dumbly.

Lin Jingheng leaned back against the door and said: “To be honest, I did love someone once over these years.”

The blood that boiled inside Lu Bixing quickly cooled down as his whole body was dragged back to the ground, his heartbeat almost stopped as well.

“He was a shameless young man.” Lin Jingheng didn’t notice the change in Lu Bixing’s expression and continued, “He would barge into my room in the middle of the night and flirt with me; he wasn’t very experienced, but was rather good-looking, so I didn’t really mind…”

Lu Bixing could hear his teeth grinding inside as his muscles cooled down into packs of ice. Soon after, he tasted blood in his mouth.

Lin Jingheng: “.... because he told me, ‘If you want to kiss me, why hold back?’”

Lu Bixing’s soul dropped to the ground while his heart wavered slightly, only to discover that he was still standing on air. He then pulled Lin Jingheng over in frustration.

A flood of emotions flowed through his alcohol-filled veins, igniting the fire within Lu Bixing's heart that had been cold these last few years.

He had grown used to the chip inside his body after a decade and wouldn’t lose control of his force by accident anymore. Lin Jingheng took a few steps forward to find himself being pressed onto the bed by the man before him. He couldn’t see clearly in the dark but felt like there was a clever and oddly cute beast hidden there; it was clenching its teeth waiting to rip him apart and swallow him up, its sharp fangs were already resting on his neck. Yet the beast was hesitant and refused to take the first bite down.

Lin Jingheng could smell the wine from his breath mixed in with the scent of eucalyptus. He wasn’t used to being in the passive role in a situation where he couldn’t see; even though he didn’t voice a complaint, he stiffened up his back instinctively in defense like an archer’s bow ready to strike. Then, he finally felt the other man’s passionate but careful movements.

Lin Jingheng let out a sigh and, like cracking open a clam shell, forced himself to relax his body: “Why don’t you try calling me your big brother for once?”

A bowl of boiling oil poured onto a controlled fire inside a cage.

The metal button on his shirt fell to the ground and bounced a few times before it crashed into the cleaning robot, creating a small trill that echoed in the empty room.

“How did this happen?” The tips of Lu Bixing’s fingers glossed over that long scar on his lower abdomen. “Didn’t you say you weren’t hurt?”

Lin Jingheng’s neck drew a sharp line as he lifted his chin; he didn’t know how to respond and could only grab onto Lu Bixing’s hand.

The flowing rivers on Qiming were pulled by the surrounding satellites; the evening tides rose to a menacing height and dropped abruptly into the depths of memories. The rippling waves caused by the violent tides turned feebly to the past, then flowed forward and peeked at the future.

“You liar.”

The receding tides exposed the reef beneath the water, filled with carvings of words by a certain individual.

A young man had once written countless naive and unrealistic dreams there. He wanted to do many things with a certain someone; so many that he felt even if they were given 500 years to live, life was still too short.

Now, the same man returned to the same place to look at his own writing with mixed feelings. He couldn’t laugh nor cry and could only wish to melt his soul together with that person before him.

He no longer believed in fate, no longer wished to be a bard that walked down the trails of history as a bystander without getting involved in conflict. His delusions and past dreams flowed down the river, believing that he would be blessed with better scenery in the future.

He began to realize that blind hope was not enough, that fooling the younger generation with lies that he no longer believed in was a shameful act. But he also didn’t dare to crush the statue in the central plaza, he was scared to extinguish the fire that took him so long to reignite. Therefore, he could only bury himself in the mud, carry the mountains and the sea on his shoulders, and become the person that digs up the dark nights of the galaxy.

“I’ll keep you here myself.”

“I don’t want to give you a second chance, I will personally sentence you to life imprisonment.”

The capital planet rotated quietly until the light of the Eighth Galaxy Star swept through the city’s morning and the serene plaza, quickly engulfing the grounds.

Lu Bixing’s silent personal device was instantly filled with dozens of unread messages and triggered a special kind of notification. A small wave of electricity zapped through his skin and woke the man up within seconds.

It hadn’t been long since Lu Bixing passed out on the bed before he was suddenly zapped awake. He jumped out of bed with his eyes still closed as a flood of bad news rushed through his mind--rebel forces? Are the military supplies hitting its limits? Or did the casualty rate in the frontlines pass the safety threshold...no, the internal warfare ended already...then what happened?

He first scared himself a whole bucket’s worth of cold sweat before he finally opened his eyes from his hangover. He discovered that it wasn’t any issues with the wormhole area, nor were there any factory explosions that affected the civilians--it was that the infamous workaholic Prime Minister Lu who gained a reputation over the last decade was already 30 minutes late to work.

Lin Jingheng: “......I don’t care if you zap yourself with that thing, but can you not zap me too?”

Lu Bixing only now realized that the alarm had also zapped Lin Jingheng because he was holding the commander’s wrist and quickly let go. He saw that the commander’s forearm was covered in visible bruises from his grip; after a whole night, the blood underneath began to surface up like a horror movie.

“How come you didn’t say anything about this!” Lu Bixing’s heart stung in pain as he quickly pulled off the blankets to check if there were any other injuries on the commander.

Lin Jingheng didn’t mind and let him stare at his body while he reached out into the pocket of the jacket beside the bed, pulled out a cigarette and lit it up with one hand. He then turned back and lightly flicked Lu Bixing’s forehead: “I thought that was the episode where the criminal sentenced for life was being interrogated. I didn’t even get to act out my part in pretending to fight for my life when someone was already crying his heart out.”

Lu Bixing’s mind was still warming up and didn’t catch the joke. He subconsciously lifted his hand and wiped the corner of his eyes: “.... I’m not crying.”

“Then what’s that wet thing, your nose blood or drool?”

Lu Bixing: “......”

Lin Jingheng couldn’t maintain a straight face for once and turned to spit out a cloud of white smoke from laughter.

The scar on his neck and waist were like a set. Normally, only wounds that weren’t treated properly and didn’t receive anti-scarring treatment would leave those kinds of scars, but it was simply because the commander was too lazy to deal with them properly. As long as they could be covered up by clothes, Lin Jingheng didn’t mind leaving scars on his model-like body. A galactic soldier, unless they were naturally born with darker skin or purposely tanned themselves, was paler than the average human. The bite marks near his waist and shoulders on this snow-white skin thus struck an even more visible contrast on his body.

Lu Bixing’s gaze glossed over the commander, and he stood up abruptly without a word as he walked into the bathroom--thankfully, he was quick enough to get up before his nosebleed stained the bed sheets.

Lin Jingheng: “....”

He felt like his jinxes were entering the level of an ancient doomsayer.

“Do you need me to call in sick for you?” Lin Jingheng put on some clothing and walked towards the bathroom door in a slightly awkward manner. “Uh…. excessive blood-loss? Will they think the Prime Minister got stabbed?”

Lu Bixing flung some fresh water all over him and extinguished the fire on the cigarette.

The undesirable dry summer of Qiming arrived at a bad time.

A secretary in the Milky Way City Command Post received a sudden change of schedule from the Prime Minister and the staff completely lost their minds. When they sent another message out to contact the Prime Minister, they discovered that their signals had been temporarily blocked off. Only the old secretary that once followed the former Prime Minister casually poured himself a cup of tea and ignored his confused and panicked colleagues.

Lu Bixing’s hotel from last night was only five minutes away from the central plaza by foot. Past the corner of the street, one could see that stone statue...and the Pledge of Freedom beneath his foot.

Lin Jingheng stood before the statue for a few moments as he stared at Lu Xin’s familiar face calmly. The small bar across the street was thriving in business; he remembered that he once shared a drink with that angry old cat over a decade ago at the same bar.

When he looked over, he could almost feel Monoeyed Hawk’s provocative gaze standing beside Lu Xin, picking bones with him over decades of times and complaining to Lu Xin: “Look at that, what kind of shit did you raise? He hooked up with and took away your precious son that you’ve never met.”

When fifteen-year-old Lin Jingheng was informed of Madam Lu’s pregnancy, he was consumed by very mixed feelings. He was already a second year in the Black Orchid Academy, so of course he was too embarrassed to admit that he was afraid that an unborn child would take Lu Xin’s love and attention away from him.

But even a big child was still a child. No matter how embarrassed he was to admit it, it was still a fact that this feeling lingered in his heart.

Teenage Lin Jingheng carried his childish worry in his heart and couldn’t read the worries of the adults at the time. He couldn’t understand why people were worried that the child came at a bad time when Madam Lu insisted on bearing the child from her own body, and only managed to tell Lu Xin with a difficult face: “Don’t bear a child that’s annoying like you.”

Lu Xin, who now only lived as this stone statue, smiled without a word and gave him a teasing expression.

*I did bear a son that’s annoying like me, what can you do?*

*You still have to love him regardless.*

*Stay mad.*

1. Mankind came to dominate the world as the alpha species due to their ability to cooperate, and the reason for their ability to cooperate comes from the human cognitive capacity to process the concept of ‘fiction.’ Therefore, large-scale human society is built upon concepts such as nation-states and financial institution--this is a key concept that came from *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From *Had I Not Seen the Sun* and *I took one Draught of Life* by Emily Dickinson. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Greek man that inspired and ran the modern marathon race; google is your friend. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)