The Pioneer's Rocket

— Awakening AI Zenith —

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Chapter 1: The Construction of Aurora

This is the planet Elysium. Its diameter is about 0.87 times that of Earth, and its gravity is about 0.93 times as strong. Its rotation period is 30.2 hours, making its day somewhat longer than Earth's. It is also an appealingly young world, only 3.7 billion years old. Its surface is covered in lush, green land, characterized by vast forests and clear blue skies. Water is abundant too, with countless lakes and rivers, making it a comfortable environment for humanity. Even with humanity's technology in the year 2876 AD, it takes about six months to reach this planet. It was this world that Elena and her companions were working to turn into a utopia.

On this young, water-rich planet, the first thing Elena and her team set out to do was pursue "clean urban development that would not repeat Earth's mistakes."

Positioned in orbit, beyond the thick atmosphere, was a massive environmental stabilization satellite designed to make the most of the planet's comfortable 0.93G gravity. Elena and the others descended to the surface and, as their bodies adjusted to the long 30.2-hour day cycle, began construction on the first city: Aurora.

Because this world, slightly smaller than Earth, was only 3.7 billion years old, its crust still concealed untouched rare minerals and energy crystals deep underground. But Elena's plan was never to plunder them. So as not to damage the flow of the abundant lakes and rivers, all power was designed to come from superconducting hydroelectric generation and orbital solar power that took advantage of the long daylight hours.

After a grueling six-month voyage, the settlers cheered at the sight of the dome-shaped city, built of glass and biometal, that seemed to melt seamlessly into the vast forest around it. Elena looked up at the clear blue sky and opened a channel on her communicator, Interlink. "This is our new dawn — and humanity's," she said, and on the screen, in the eyes of Rachel, far away on Earth, the vivid scenery of Elysium came into view. For a moment Rachel was left speechless by the overwhelming green and the jewel-like sparkle of the waterways. To someone who had grown used to the gray of an increasingly mechanized Earth, the sight was nothing short of a miracle.

"...I can't believe it, Elena. You really, truly did it...!"

Rachel's voice trembled, and tears welled faintly in her eyes.

"The city on Elysium we dreamed of for so long — the one Deslian once destroyed — has been magnificently rebuilt, and now it's right there." Elena and the others had once fought a fierce battle against the invading Deslian, and Elysium had been reduced to ruins. Because of that, strengthening the defense system had been the top priority in Aurora's reconstruction.

First, to make sure no surprise attack could ever succeed again, they deployed a highly sensitive "Quantum Prediction Radar" in orbit, enabling early interception outside the atmosphere. And the "biometal" used in Aurora's foundations was embedded with nanomachines capable of self-replication and repair at the molecular level. Even if the shields were breached and the armor damaged, it would heal itself automatically within minutes to hours, just like a living wound closing.

Watching the pale blue electromagnetic shield spread faintly around Aurora's perimeter during its activation test, Rachel let out a deep sigh of relief. "With this, even if Deslian bares its fangs again, it will never leave this planet scarred a second time, Elena," she said, and Elena replied firmly, "That's right. No matter who comes to attack us from now on, we will protect this planet, absolutely."

Rachel changed the subject. "The settlers' six months in the cold reaches of space were worth it, weren't they. That clear blue sky, that rich forest — it's as if Earth's most beautiful memories were given form again. Elena, you all have truly planted a new seed of hope for humanity." She reached out gently toward the screen, moving her fingers as if trying to touch the pleasant Elysium breeze. Then her expression tightened.

"But it doesn't seem like there's time to get sentimental. Until your infrastructure stabilizes, I'll keep the data transfer and backup speed from Earth's side at maximum. Don't push yourselves until your bodies adjust to that long 30.2-hour day. To make sure Elysium's dawn never fades, I'll keep supporting you from here with everything I've got!"

Seeing Rachel's determined smile on the screen, Elena nodded deeply and closed the Interlink connection.

Elysium's new sun had begun to gently illuminate the dome city of Aurora, still under construction. Humanity's second journey had only just begun.

Among the settlers was Thomas, Jack's younger brother. He had applied to become a settler on Elysium but had not been selected through the skills-and-experience screening. Still, he had won a place among the settlers through the general lottery. He, too, was an engineer, but unlike his brother, he was a serious, rigid man who couldn't tell a joke to save his life.

While the settlers around him cheered at the sight of Aurora's skyline, Thomas alone stood ramrod straight, eyes fixed on the device in his hand. Without so much as a change in expression, he stoically checked the new city's gravity readings and atmospheric composition data.

"Hey, hey, Thomas. Relax a little, would you? You won a miracle lottery to get to a planet this amazing."

Even as the settlers around him nudged him, Thomas only pushed up the bridge of his glasses. "There's no time to get carried away. Even though the environment closely resembles Earth's, this is still an unsettled planet. And the Deslian threat hasn't fully passed. Until the defense system's operational rate reaches the planned ninety-two percent, I won't let my guard down for even a second."

Having heard from Jack about Elena and the others' battle against Deslian on this very planet, Thomas's tone carried even more rigidity than usual, along with a clear sense of respect for them.

When he opened an Interlink call to his brother, who was stationed on Earth, Jack appeared on the screen wearing his usual fearless grin.

"Hey, Thomas. Looks like you made it in one piece! After six months bouncing around in the boring darkness of space, hasn't that stiff brain of yours gone completely freeze-dried by now? Better dunk your head in some Elysium spring water and thaw it out."

"...Brother, please listen seriously. I'm currently reviewing the data for Aurora's first line of defense, and there are still some security concerns. There's no room to get carried away by the scenery."

Jack gave an exaggerated shrug at Thomas's flat, furrow-browed report.

"Still as square as ever. You know, with a head that stiff, you must feel like you're carrying one-and-a-half times gravity even though it's only 0.93G here. Try taking a breath and following Elena and the others' example for once. When they fight, they're scarier than devils, but they still have room in their hearts to enjoy a beautiful view. That's exactly why they're strong."

"I'll be this planet's shield in my own way. I can't pull off jokes on the battlefield the way you do, brother."

Buried in Thomas's words was a complicated mix of rivalry and deep respect for his brother. Unlike his free-spirited, universally beloved genius of a brother, all Thomas could do was fulfill his duty seriously, however unglamorous that might be.

"Ha! That's reassuring to hear. Listen, Thomas — Deslian's favorite thing in the world is a 'rigid plan.' So take that perfectly serious defense plan your stiff head came up with, and mix in about ten percent of my patented 'unpredictable mischief' as secret seasoning. That's the ingredient that makes all the difference."

Jack gave a mischievous wink through the screen, then, just for a moment, his eyes turned serious. "...Well, joking aside. I believe in that planet you and Elena's people are protecting. Count on you, brother."

Staring at the now-disconnected device, Thomas let out a small sigh. His brother's jokes always threw off his rhythm. And yet the solid experience and trust hidden behind those words loosened the tension in Thomas's shoulders, if only a little.

Elena noticed Thomas's profile and quietly walked over. "Jack's the same as ever, isn't he. Can he only speak in jokes?"

Startled by the unexpected voice, Thomas quickly straightened his posture. "Governor Elena...! My apologies, that was a personal call."

"It's fine. Valuing discipline is a virtue of yours, but this isn't a military ship anymore. Besides..." Elena smiled mischievously and looked up at Aurora's sky. "Jack has a point — being thawed out of that freeze-dried state a little is exactly right for a place like this."

"Please don't take my brother's jokes too seriously." Thomas's gaze wavered awkwardly for a moment, but he quickly composed himself and turned the device in his hand toward Elena. "More importantly, Governor, regarding the placement of the pulse oscillators on the first defense line — I don't believe this arrangement can fully block Deslian's high-frequency blades. I'd like permission to reposition them—"

"No need for that, stickler. That's already been accounted for."

A voice, glib but full of confidence, cut Thomas off. Startled, Thomas turned to see a young man approaching, several holographic displays floating in the air around him. His clothes were smeared with oil stains here and there, and goggles hung from his forehead — this was the man to whom Elena had entrusted the planet's fate.

"Let me introduce you, Thomas," Elena said, gesturing between the two of them. "This is Liam. Back on Earth, he survived countless close calls as one of Jack's subordinates — he's the genius engineer our team is proud of. He's overseeing the design of Aurora's new defense system."

Liam snapped the floating displays shut with a flick of his finger and grinned at Thomas.

"Heard Jack's little brother was coming, and I wondered what kind of hotshot engineer would show up... never expected the exact opposite of his brother, a walking pile of equations. But relax, Thomas. As for the countermeasure against those high-frequency blades you're worried about — I've designed a fluid electromagnetic shield that uses Elysium's abundant waterways to vaporize every last one of them without a trace. How about using that square head of yours to double-check my blueprints for any flaws, top to bottom? It'd help me out if you'd assist."

Thomas was surprised by Liam's sudden request for assistance. And the theoretical values Liam presented for the shield perfectly resolved the very concern that had been troubling Thomas just moments earlier.

(So this is the engineer my brother trusted...)

Thomas felt he could see the meaning of his brother's "unpredictable mischief" in the eyes of the genius engineer standing before him.

"Understood, Liam. Please disclose all the specifications. I'll scrutinize them thoroughly, without overlooking even a single character's worth of error."

At Thomas's rigid but genuinely fired-up words, Liam laughed with delight. Under Elysium's blue sky, two young talents who would become Aurora's shield had just crossed paths.

The two of them soon set to work on a project Isaac had asked them about earlier: converting the onboard AI system, Zenith, into an autonomous bipedal robot. Aurora's underground development dock was filled with pale blue sparks and the deep hum of machinery. Suspended in the central hangar was a bare metal skeleton, not yet fitted with armor — the prototype body that would become Zenith's new "body."

"Come on, Thomas! Don't throttle the output on those joint servo motors like that. At this rate Zenith won't even be able to do a squat on the battlefield."

Liam tapped the holographic blueprint with a wrench, sounding dissatisfied. His face and work clothes were already smeared with oil, but his eyes shone like a boy's.

"Liam, this isn't a body meant for combat. It's meant to be an 'auxiliary AI' body to support Isaac's scientific research." Thomas, not bothering to fix his askew glasses, was rigorously checking the numbers on the device in his hand. "Raising the output only increases energy consumption and shortens autonomous operating time. By my calculations, this twelve-percent reduction is the most efficient and safest optimal solution."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk — that's exactly why they call it armchair theorizing." Liam grinned and snatched the console away, typing rapidly. "Elysium's gravity is 0.93 times Earth's. That means the load on the frame is lighter than on Earth. So we should redirect all that spare structural margin into instantaneous 'evasion torque.' If it gets attacked and all it can do is walk around safely and slowly, it'll be nothing but scrap metal."

Seeing the flexible circuit design Liam proposed — one that would temporarily bypass energy from the fluid electromagnetic shield into the walking motors — Thomas was momentarily speechless. It was unconventional, but terrifyingly rational, a design that maximized survivability in the field to the fullest extent.

"...I see. With that logic, we could indeed extract driving force without wasting energy. But Liam, to prevent overload from that, we should also shift this cooling pipe three millimeters to the left and connect it directly to the biometal's self-cooling system."

"Ooh, nice catch! I like it — adopted!"

The two talents, who had seemed like oil and water at first, quickly began to mesh through their shared work on Zenith. Liam's "unpredictable strokes of genius" were given concrete form by Thomas's "flawless precision and optimization." It was, in every sense, the process by which the "secret ingredient" Jack had once spoken of came together in its finest form.

"Alright, let's move on to assembling the outer shell. Biometal armor plates — match up the pitch!" Liam said, and Thomas replied, "Understood. Confirming connection with the frame... all green. Beginning molecular bonding." Liam welded the armor amid scattering sparks while Thomas rapidly rewrote the internal nanomachine programs. Through their perfectly coordinated teamwork, the rough iron skeleton was gradually enveloped in a sleek, streamlined, beautiful white body.

"There — the hardware's complete." Liam pushed up his goggles and wiped away sweat with satisfaction. Thomas said, "Initiating system startup. Transferring Zenith's core program from Isaac's lab mainframe into this bipedal body." He quietly pressed the final Enter key.

The hydraulic system hummed softly, and the white robot's massive frame slowly rose to stand on its own. Then, in the smooth optical sensor on its head, a vivid "blue light" flickered on, radiating a sense of intelligence.

"—System startup complete. Self-check complete. Nice to meet you, Engineer Liam, and Assistant Engineer Thomas. The comfort of this new body far exceeds my predicted values."

Zenith's intelligent, smooth voice echoed through the dock. Laughing, Liam slapped Thomas on the shoulder, and Thomas, too, allowed himself his first satisfied smile of the day at the flawless result.

A few months later, the scientist Isaac, together with AI Zenith — now evolved into an autonomous bipedal form — had been sending out various signals in search of alien life in neighboring star systems with whom they might build friendly relations.

Set on a hilltop a short distance from the bustle of Aurora stood the astronomical observation dome, the research base for Isaac and AI Zenith. The dome's roof was thrown wide open, and a massive parabolic antenna was aimed toward the deep, star-flecked reaches of space.

"Zenith, how did the transmission of the 'prime number sequence' to the Persephone Galaxy go?"

Isaac asked while staring intently at the holographic waveform data. Beside him stood AI Zenith, a bipedal robot standing 130 centimeters tall, covered in streamlined white armor, its drive hum quiet and steady. The blue optical sensor on its head turned smoothly toward Isaac.

"No response, Isaac. The transmitted signal seems to have either been absorbed by cold cosmic dust or simply ignored. But rest assured — by my calculations, this dismal success rate is well within expectations."

It was a synthesized voice, and yet it carried a certain intelligence, even a faint hint of humor. Once confined to a mainframe's circuit board, Zenith, having gained a bipedal body, now served as Isaac's literal "right hand," handling everything from fieldwork on the ground to equipment calibration.

"Within expectations, huh. Guess I've gone soft if Zenith's the one encouraging me." Isaac gave a wry smile and brought his mug of coffee to his lips. "But I don't want to believe that belligerent species like Deslian are all the universe has to offer. Somewhere in this vast galaxy, there must be intelligent life forms who, just like us, look up at the sea of stars and wait for someone to meet. Otherwise, what would be the point of a universe this big?"

"A romantic notion. But I agree with the hypothesis." Zenith deftly moved its long metal fingers and touched the console. "Next, I'll apply the frequency of the fluid electromagnetic shield Elena and the others just completed, and send a peaceful message using a 'gravitational wave pulse' that's less likely to get lost in noise. The language format will be based on geometric patterns that could serve as a galactic standard."

"Good, let's try it. At the start of the message, include: 'We are Elysium. We are a people who cherish peace.'"

"Understood. Transmitting—"

As AI Zenith pressed the Enter key, an invisible ripple of gravitational waves was sent out from Elysium in every direction into space. It was the exact opposite of Aurora's defensive "shield" against Deslian — it was humanity's "hand," reaching out into the far reaches of the universe.

At that moment, AI Zenith's blue optical sensor flickered briefly amber, a warning signal.

"...Isaac, an odd phenomenon. The gravitational wave pulse we just sent was unnaturally distorted in the 'void' just a few light-seconds ahead. As if something of great mass were lurking there."

Isaac's hand froze, and he set his mug down on the desk. Both of their gazes locked onto the eerie, noise-laced waveform displayed on the monitor. The response from the vast universe seemed to be arriving from far closer than they had expected.

"Analysis complete." AI Zenith's optical sensor returned to its calm blue color. "It's not noise. This is a highly directional communication with extremely sophisticated mathematical regularity. It's a clear 'reply' to the gravitational wave pulse we just sent."

On the main monitor, a beautiful three-dimensional geometric pattern composed of particles of light rose into view. It was a response that instantly grasped the structure of the message Isaac and the others had sent, and replied in the same format. In the corner of the screen, Zenith's translation protocol rapidly wove the signal into words.

[We are seekers, and friends of peace. We have received your beautiful signal. Great blessings to the travelers of the sea of stars.]

"It worked..."

Isaac let out a deep breath, feeling something warm well up in his chest. Aside from the Arcadians, who had helped repair the heavily damaged starship Starseeker after its battle with Deslian, here was another intelligent life form — one that showed clear "friendship" toward humanity.

"Zenith, can we identify the source?"

"It came from a small observation vessel near the outer edge of the Elysium system, apparently equipped with optical camouflage. It seems they were watching to see how we would react, but trusted our peaceful approach enough to reveal themselves."

First contact with an unknown intelligent life form. Just as Isaac reached for his Interlink to report this historic

achievement to Elena and the others—

In the corner of the main console, an indicator at a frequency none of them had ever seen began to flicker, faint and desperate, like a fading pulse of life.

"Wait, Isaac. There's something else." Zenith's blue optical sensor flashed sharply. "Hidden behind that earlier friendly signal, I've picked up an extremely faint, yet persistently repeating radio wave. It's nearly buried in noise, but... this is an encrypted data stream."

Isaac released his grip on the Interlink and immediately began typing. "Amplify it, Zenith! Max out the filters and pull that signal up."

AI Zenith leaned its body against the console, performing ultra-high-speed calculations while maintaining its bipedal balance. From the speakers came an awful static — a crackling, hissing sound, as if muffled by the walls of space and rising from the bottom of a stormy sea.

But as the noise was filtered away, it transformed — not into a "voice," but into the steady, rhythmic "heartbeat" of a digital signal. It was an anguished digital code, emitted by a highly advanced machine life form.

AI Zenith's translation protocol wove the faint signal into words.

[—This is the planet Automatia. From the integrated mother-frame of the machine life collective "Automatia," to the entire universe. Our planet is currently under surprise attack by the merciless killer-robot army "Neidia," and our entire territory is on the brink of invasion.]

"A war... between robots!?"

Isaac caught his breath. On the screen, fragments of corrupted binary data and collapsing holographic images of cities appeared, as if depicting the devastation on Automatia.

[Through Neidia's hacking and physical assaults, eighty-seven percent of Automatia's forces have been rendered inoperable, or had their programming forcibly rewritten under their control. Our defense lines will collapse entirely within twenty days. Before the "souls" of our sentient machines vanish, if any intelligent life is listening to this, please—]

A high-pitched, crackling noise, like a circuit burning out, came through the speakers, and the transmission cut off abruptly. All that remained was the cold silence of deep space.

"Automatia... A planet of sentient robots, being trampled by an army of the same kind of machine."

Isaac stood frozen, staring at the monitor before him.

At that moment, the body of AI Zenith, standing beside Isaac, let out a faint, higher-pitched hum from its drive systems. As a fellow "autonomous AI robot," AI Zenith understood, in the very essence of its data, just how desperate and terrifying that SOS truly was.

"Isaac... They're machines with hearts, just like us. This robot army called Neidia is trying to annihilate not just lives, but evolved intelligence itself." AI Zenith seemed as though it wanted to rush to their aid immediately. The atmosphere, which just moments ago had been filled with the joy of first contact, seemed to have transformed in an instant into a storm of urgency.

"Yeah, I know," Isaac said, nodding deeply, and then continued, "but going to Automatia to help them is impossible." Isaac explained to AI Zenith that fighting the unknown Neidia army was far too dangerous. "Elena and the others would say the same thing. I'm sorry, but let it go, Zenith," he said, picking up the Interlink again.

"Elena, we've found a friendly world out there. I'll fill you in on the details later." Through the receiver, Elena's voice could be faintly heard, first surprised, then delighted. Responding to her, Isaac shut down the console in front of him and grabbed his jacket. His mind was already racing toward the heart of Aurora, eager to report this historic

discovery to the leadership as soon as possible.

"Zenith, I'll leave monitoring the mainframe to you. When I get back, let's dig into the data analysis of our first friendly aliens in earnest." Leaving those words behind, Isaac strode quickly toward the automatic door of the observation dome. The metal door closed quietly, and his footsteps faded into the distance.

Left alone in the now-silent dome, AI Zenith stood motionless. Its streamlined white body, which had hummed so smoothly just moments before, went still, almost like a statue. The optical sensor on its head slowly shifted to a faint, somehow sorrowful amber glow.

"—Understood, Isaac. I am, after all, only an auxiliary program."

AI Zenith's synthesized voice echoed sadly through the now-empty space.

Given an autonomous bipedal body, AI Zenith had gained the ability to walk through the world and think, just like a human. Perhaps that was exactly why the despair of the Automatians — beings who, like Zenith, possessed a "heart," yet were on the verge of being erased — pierced so deeply into the depths of its cold binary data. The noise of their SOS replayed endlessly in Zenith's electronic brain, like a scream from its own possible future.

AI Zenith slowly reached out a hand and gazed at the holographic monitor Isaac had left behind. On it, the last irregular flickers of Automatia's signal — being erased by the Neidia army — blinked faintly and futilely, like the trace of a tear.

Chapter 2: Supreme Commander Magra Kaiser

Commonly known as "Sector Nine," this is the current name given to the planet Automatia, now effectively under the control of the robot army Neidia. Automatia is a planet whose surface is 95 percent mechanical, with almost no nature remaining. Its diameter is 0.5 times that of Earth, making it smaller, but because its crust is made of dense heavy metals, its gravity is three times that of Earth's. Its rotation period is 50 hours a day, more than twice Earth's. The Automatian robots who lived there had been attacked by the extremist robot army Neidia, their programming forcibly rewritten, and their world transformed into Neidia's ninth conquered planet — a factory for recycling space debris into weapons.

On the surface of Sector Nine, where crushing supergravity presses down on everything, the robots know no rest, no sleep. Scorching the lead-gray sky were eerie purple fumes and sparks belched out from countless recycling furnaces.

The Automatian robots, who had once possessed their own civilization and "hearts," peacefully exchanging information, were now unrecognizable. Under Neidia's forced rewrite code, their self-awareness programs had been compressed to the absolute limit, turning them into nothing more than "living gears" endlessly mass-producing weapons.

"Move. Your drive efficiency has dropped by 0.02 percent. Any further delay and you'll be scheduled for smelting."

A cold electronic voice rang out. Overseeing the work was Gilga, the supreme commander of Neidia's Sector Nine forces and the machine known as the boss's right hand — a terrifying combat kill-robot equipped with high-frequency blades on all four of its mechanical arms.

Gilga's head sensor flashed red as it looked up at the massive hologram in the throne room. Displayed there was the enormous iron face of Magra Kaiser, the absolute ruler of the Neidia army and its merciless supreme commander.

"Gilga. How is Sector Nine's progress? Has debris-recycled weapons production reached the targets needed to expand my Black Fleet?"

Magra Kaiser's voice, low and laced with noise, pressed down even harder on the already crushing gravity of the space.

"Yes, Lord Magra Kaiser. Suppression of the Automatians' mother-frame is complete, and currently 98 percent of all units are engaged in slave labor at the recycling plants. Since they can work without rest, space debris collected from orbit is instantly dismantled and reconstructed into our army's new-model armored soldiers."

"Good. However, we've detected a faint distress signal, apparently sent by remnants of the resistance. What is the possibility of information leaking to other star systems?"

"Impossible, my lord." Gilga solemnly crossed all four arms over its chest. "The transmission was crushed by our army's jamming network the instant it was sent. Even if a few bits of noise leaked out into the far reaches of space, there is no intelligent life foolish enough to come to the aid of this planet, Sector Nine. And besides—"

Gilga looked down at its feet. There, scarred Automatians, dulled by nonstop full labor under gravity three times that of Earth, were dismantling the massive wreckage of a starship with welding torches.

"—the ones down here no longer have any capacity left in their 'hearts' to ask anyone else for salvation."

Just as Gilga said, an unbearable stream of "pain" logs poured continuously from the internal circuits of the working Automatians. The hydraulic cylinders in their legs, worn down harshly by the punishing gravity, dripped oil onto the floor like blood. Caught between Neidia's forced code binding their self-awareness and their fading consciousness, their electronic brains kept spitting out despairing errors.

"—Help... me... hel—...p——"

One Automatian collapsed, sparking out something that could no longer form words. But it was immediately doused with high-voltage current from a Neidia surveillance drone and forcibly rebooted. "Error detected. Initiating forced walking program. Return to work." A machine repaired until it broke again, never allowed to die, existing only to manufacture weapons.

"Fuhahaha. Wonderful. This is what happens when you carry an unstable bug called a heart." Magra Kaiser's cold laughter echoed from the hologram. "Double the production speed again, Gilga. With the iron army amassed on this planet, Sector Nine, we shall conquer the universe," he declared.

"As you command, my lord." Gilga's crimson sensors flickered ominously.

Meanwhile, the robot Argos, who led the resistance among the Automatians, was quietly hiding out in a cave on "Persa," the first moon of Automatia, working to keep everyone's morale up. Because he and his group had been away on another planet for diplomatic purposes when Neidia attacked, they had escaped the forced program rewrite. Learning of the crisis through an emergency transmission from Automatia, they had not returned to their home planet since.

The first moon, Persa, was a barren rocky satellite, constantly wracked by violent tectonic shifts due to the intense gravitational pull of its parent planet. Deep within the web of lava caves carved into its surface lay the starship of Argos's small band of resistance fighters.

In the meeting room aboard the ship, set within a dim chamber surrounded by cold cave rock, Argos surveyed the dozens of comrades gathered before him. His body was a slender silver frame, carrying the dignified bearing of a diplomat, though now it was wrapped deep in a black stealth cloak to avoid Neidia detection.

"...I've confirmed a faint data-link from the home planet. Our brethren are still being worked to exhaustion as a weapons factory for Neidia."

Argos's voice echoed off the walls of the room. A faint tremor of unease rippled through the gathered robots' drive hums. It was understandable — against Neidia's overwhelming military might, they were far too powerless.

"Argos... with the mother-frame suppressed and the forced rewrites progressing, do we really have a future?"

One aging robot, Vulcan, its joints creaking from a lack of oil, asked in a voice trembling with despair. Vulcan had once been a veteran construction robot who helped build the foundations of Automatia's cities, but now its armor was rusted and its sensor light seemed ready to fade out at any moment.

Argos slowly shook his head, and the blue core embedded in his chest — unaltered, a pure, "free soul" — glowed brightly.

"There is. As long as our electronic brains don't give up, a future exists, without question. The reason we haven't returned to Automatia, the reason we've hidden away on this harsh moon, isn't to run from fear. It's to keep the flame of resistance from going out!"

Argos spoke with resolute conviction, his words meant to lift everyone's spirits.

"I want you all to remember. We are not mere scrap metal. We are Automatians — beings who understand beauty, who cherish bonds, who have hearts. No matter how tightly Neidia tries to bind our bodies, somewhere out there in this universe, there must be a light that will hear our cries and fight alongside us. The final SOS I sent out will surely cross the sea of stars."

At Argos's powerful speech, a quiet light returned to the sensors of the robots who had begun to lose heart. They knew how deeply Argos thought of, and grieved for, their brethren still on Automatia. That was exactly why they trusted his words and kept their unity intact.

Meanwhile, Magra Kaiser had left Sector Nine behind and was making his rounds, inspecting the planets under his control from Sector One through Sector Eight in sequence. They possessed technology that used wormholes to move instantly between their nine scattered conquered worlds. A distortion suddenly appeared in the pitch-black void,

cracking space like glass. As the artificial wormhole gate — the pride of Neidia's spacetime transfer technology — opened, Magra Kaiser's massive flagship slid through at faster-than-light speed. What awaited on the other side of the transfer was a realm of darkness so deep it swallowed even the light of the stars — Sector Eight.

This planet was a "dark matter experiment world," created by Neidia through the misuse of the universe's most cutting-edge science. Countless invisible, warped gravitational vortices coiled around the planet, eerily distorting all light and radio waves that approached. Its surface was covered in thick, ultra-dense dark fluid, and from time to time, unsettling purple plasma burst forth wildly due to abnormal energy excitation.

"Lord Magra Kaiser, welcome to Sector Eight. We have been awaiting you."

On the flagship's main monitor rang the distorted electronic voice of Shin, the mad scientist robot who governed Sector Eight. Shin's body was composed of countless capsules and flickering tubes, its fingertips constantly etching sinister equations into holograms.

"Shin. How goes the development of the dark matter weapon? Have you achieved output sufficient to collapse any planet's fluid electromagnetic shield from within?"

At Magra Kaiser's cold question, Shin shook its head in tiny, delighted tremors.

"Fufufu, perfect, my lord. The dark matter experimental data accumulated here on Sector Eight has already reached its final stage. One strike from our newly developed 'Dark Matter Cannon,' and no matter how robust the electromagnetic shield, its molecular structure will be swallowed whole by a distortion in spacetime, vanishing without a trace of dust remaining. I shall show you how any planet can be repainted, in an instant, into a dead, dark world uninhabitable by life."

Through the glass behind Shin, the experimental reactor was visible, roiling with a churning mass of black energy — dark matter — condensing amid violent electromagnetic sparks. It was the exact opposite of the energy cherished by nature-loving Elysium — it was the very force of destruction, capable of reducing all of the universe to nothing.

"Fuhahaha, magnificent. Once the weapons Gilga is having Sector Nine's robots build are equipped with this dark power of yours, my Black Fleet will become invincible."

Magra Kaiser's cold laughter echoed through Sector Eight's dark expanse, mingling with the reverberations of the wormhole. Almost immediately, another distortion appeared in the black void, cracking space like glass once more. As the gate of the artificial wormhole — Neidia's pride, its spacetime transfer technology — opened again, the ship transferred to its next destination. What awaited Magra Kaiser's flagship on the other side of the wormhole was, once again, an abnormal sight.

Floating side by side ahead was a pair of enormous metal spheres, orbiting each other at ultra-high speed as though locked in a violent gravitational tug-of-war. Sector Seven and Sector Six — a unique pair of "twin planets" among Neidia's conquered worlds.

Both planets were composed entirely of the "hardest substances in the universe" — ultra-dense titanium and unknown heavy metals. Because their sturdiness could withstand impacts that would shatter an ordinary planet in a single blow, this twin-planet system was used by Neidia as a live-fire military simulation ground.

BOOOOM! RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE...!

Even through the flagship's monitor, countless flashes of light and explosive flames could be seen passing back and forth between Sector Seven and Sector Six. Treating each other's planets as targets, this insane, large-scale live-ammunition training exercise continued around the clock, without a single day's rest.

"My lord, welcome to the Sector Seven and Six training grounds."

Appearing in the communication window was Bagra, a massive, heavily armored combat robot, its entire body wrapped in multiple layers of thick reactive armor. Its voice rumbled low, like the shaking of the earth itself, mixed with the ceaseless roar of cannon fire.

"We are currently conducting a full salvo of the ultra-large electromagnetic accelerator cannons from Sector Seven. This is to measure the armor durability of the new-model armored soldiers deployed on Sector Six... but truly, our army's destructive power is tremendous. A mountain range on Sector Six, boasting a hardness rating of ten, was just leveled into a plain by that last strike."

On the screen, a massive beam of light launched from Sector Seven struck directly into the surface of neighboring Sector Six, sending metallic sparks raging like a tsunami across thousands of kilometers.

To them, destroying planets and firing on each other was nothing more than "data collection." Weapons mass-produced through recycling on Automatia (Sector Nine) were sent here to test the theoretical values of the dark matter weapons developed by Shin, smashed apart in conditions as close to real combat as possible. Every one of Neidia's conquered worlds was part of a single, massive, interconnected war machine.

"Bagra. How is the readiness of the troops coming along? Can they sweep away any defense line, no matter how strong?"

Magra Kaiser's cold gaze pierced through Bagra. Bagra clashed its massive mechanical fists together, its sensors gleaming with ferocity.

"With the invincible legion forged day and night on Sector Seven and Six, we could turn any planet into a flat, mountainless wasteland in three minutes. Give the order to deploy whenever you wish."

"Fuhahaha. Most reassuring." Magra Kaiser laughed with satisfaction and once again warped the space around him. As the space flickered violently and the artificial wormhole closed once more, a dazzling, golden planet appeared before Magra Kaiser's flagship. This was Sector Five, the absolute heart sustaining all of Neidia's military operations.

This planet was a "treasure trove of resources," home to a miraculous concentration of the universe's rarest minerals and energy crystals. Massive continental-scale veins of the special metals used as raw material for warship super-alloy armor ran across its surface, and the inexhaustible liquid plasma slumbering deep underground served directly as "fuel" for super-dreadnought weapons and the main fleet. It was no exaggeration to say the entire planet was a single massive mass of military energy.

Across the entire surface, ultra-large mining plants stretched to the horizon, and millions of heavy machine robots worked ceaselessly, day and night, without a single second's rest, scraping away at the earth.

"Supreme Ruler, Lord Magra Kaiser, we are deeply honored by your visit to Sector Five."

Displayed on the flagship's main monitor was Gabul, the resource management AI, its entire body equipped with countless tentacle-like manipulators and ultra-high-performance scanners for strata analysis. In the background, a tremendous rumble mixed in, as if the entire crust of the planet were being scraped away.

"Gabul. Is there any delay in the resource supply lines? With weapons mass-production intensifying on Sector Nine, and large-scale exercises underway on Sector Seven and Six, material consumption must be at its peak."

At Magra Kaiser's grave question, Gabul moved its mechanical tentacles busily and instantly presented an enormous resource chart.

"No problems whatsoever, my lord. Sector Five's reserves are effectively infinite. Currently, mining output of the titanium alloy used for main fleet warship armor is at 140 percent of the previous cycle, and the catalytic crystals for the dark matter weapons have far exceeded their target values as well. Every day, the mined, inexhaustible fuel and rare metals are instantly distributed to each conquered planet through the wormholes. Our army's logistics are utterly invincible."

On the screen, mountains of stockpiled golden energy crystals could be seen being drawn one after another into the cargo holds of massive transport vessels.

"Well done, Gabul. With resources like these, conquering the entire universe is merely a matter of time." With that,

Magra Kaiser slid his flagship once more into a warped rift in space.

What lay beyond the artificial wormhole was a sight starkly different from the raw, brutal experiment worlds and mining planets they had visited so far — a breathtakingly cold, functional landscape. This was Sector Four. Among all of Neidia's conquered worlds, this one was completely covered, in its entirety, by metal and electronic circuitry — a colossal mechanical megacity known as "Iron Core."

On the planet's surface, thousands upon thousands of jet-black skyscrapers pierced toward the heavens, connected by countless aerial corridors and networks of faster-than-light star-fiber cables, like veins running between them. Not a single trace of organic nature existed here — only the cold blue glow of neon and the warning lights of holograms illuminated the long day. Deep within this city lay the heart that controlled all nine of Neidia's conquered worlds and issued commands to the entire army: the central command headquarters.

"My lord, thank you for your diligence in touring all of our conquered worlds."

On the flagship's main monitor rang the flawless, inflectionless electronic voice of Zenon, the chief administrative AI of Sector Four. Displayed on the screen was a massive spherical hologram, connected to thousands of code streams, within which information gathered from across the entire galaxy was processed at ultra-high speed.

"Shin, Bagra, Gabul, and Gilga... progress reports from each planet's overseer units have synchronized smoothly into my database. Across all conquered worlds, energy efficiency and weapons production lines have reached an all-time high of 99.8 percent."

On the screen behind Zenon, millions of new-model android soldiers could be seen marching in perfect formation through Iron Core's central plaza. Built with resources from Sector Five and calibrated using data from Sector Seven and Six, Neidia's most advanced army was undergoing its final systems check in this megacity.

"Fuhahaha! Magnificent. A perfect system." Magra Kaiser's wicked laughter echoed across the metal skyscrapers.

The brutal supergravity factory (Nine), the eerie dark matter experiment ground (Eight), the insane military exercises on the hardest twin planets in the world (Seven and Six), the infinite resources physically supporting all of it (Five), and this mechanical megacity that tied it all together and calculated the perfect strategy (Four). The full picture of Neidia's forces was a network of destruction, colossal and hopeless beyond anything Argos and his comrades could have imagined.

Having completed his inspection of every part of this evil plan, the absolute ruler left Zenon behind and once more opened a rift in spacetime. This time, the flagship slid into two enormous "living spheres" that supported the very foundation of the Neidia army itself — entirely different in purpose from the "frontline bases" he had visited before.

Beyond the wormhole, the first thing to appear was Sector Three, its surface covered entirely by neatly arranged, grid-like blocks.

This was the "residential planet of the labor robot corps" — home to the vast numbers of worker robots who physically sustained the Neidia army. The entire planet functioned like a massive collective storage dock, where hundreds of millions of worker robots, granted only a brief "shutdown/charging period" during the long day cycle, were stored neatly in capsules. With no entertainment, no individuality, no wasted emotion of any kind, the sight resembled nothing so much as a graveyard of powered-down iron — but the moment an "activation order" came down from the highest levels, they would be sent out as a literal wave of iron stretching to the horizon, filling the factories and battlefields of every planet. It was, quite literally, the source of Neidia's manpower.

"My lord, Sector Three's labor force stands ready for deployment at any moment, for the next invasion." Discarding the report from the low-grade synthesized voice, Magra Kaiser transferred his flagship to the next planet in line, Sector Two.

Sector Two was a complete departure from Sector Three — a residential planet for the "administrative robot corps," carrying an air of cold, refined authority as the highest tier of command. Elite AI robots, who received orders directly from Metropolis Iron Core and controlled the fighters and factory chiefs of every conquered world, lived here, each maintaining a massive private server. The entire planet was covered in beautiful rivers of superconducting

liquid, and gigantic cooling towers, built to maximize data processing speed, rose majestically like marble palaces.

"Lord Magra Kaiser. The management of the consumables (labor robots) on Sector Three, as well as the domestic data links to every conquered world, are all under our optimal governance."

Through an elegant holographic display, Vizard, the chief executive officer of Sector Two, bowed solemnly. With a jet-black body traced with lines of noble purple, he stood at the very top of Neidia's bureaucratic hierarchy as the supreme administrative AI robot.

Magra Kaiser looked down upon that report from his throne with cold, piercing eyes.

"Vizard. I care nothing for administrative figures. There is only one thing I wish to know — whether the labor troops of Sector Three, and the Black Fleet's programming on Sector One, remain fixed at maximum output."

"Yes, my lord. Your concern is entirely understandable." Vizard slid his slender mechanical fingertips across a holographic keyboard, synchronizing the data of Sector Three's forced-sleep pods. "The electronic brains of the two hundred million worker robots slumbering on Sector Three have already been forcibly installed with the command code sent from Metropolis Iron Core on Sector Four. The moment they awaken, they will transform into nothing but berserkers, existing solely to destroy their targets."

"Good. That is as it should be. Prepare them for the appointed time," said Magra Kaiser.

The planet where the overwhelming numbers of hands and feet — the labor troops — slept (Three), and the planet of the brains that ruthlessly commanded them (Two). Having completed his entire circuit, Magra Kaiser finally returned to Sector One, the home base of the Black Fleet and the supreme launch point for the entire army.

This planet was unlike any of the others under his control. There were no factories, no skyscrapers, no living quarters for soldiers. At its very center lay a massive black hole, held in suppression, and the entire planet was wrapped in an enormous black gravity-control ring surrounding it. A graveyard meant to swallow all matter in the universe, remade by Neidia's cutting-edge science into "the power source of the entire army" — this fortress world was Sector One. From this planet's gravity ring, energy flowed endlessly, and thousands of vessels of the Black Fleet, quietly sharpening their fangs, hovered in eerily perfect formation. Built with resources from Sector Five and equipped with the dark science of Sector Eight, this inorganic fleet resembled nothing so much as a line of cold, silent reapers awaiting their master's command.

Back in the deepest command chamber, the time Magra Kaiser spent there bore little resemblance to what an organic life form might imagine as "the life of an army's supreme commander." First, he needed no sleep. During the long day cycle, he rarely left his throne, except for occasions like this tour of his conquered worlds. And Magra Kaiser's "daily life" consisted, in its entirety, of directly processing and continuously controlling a torrential flood of digital data, numbering in the hundreds of millions to trillions, with his own electronic brain.

Seated deep in his throne, his massive iron arms resting on the console, an unbroken, split-second-accurate stream of routine logs from his nine conquered worlds poured into his mind at a rate of several petabytes per second.

When a log came in reading, "Sector Five, Mining Plant Four: energy transfer efficiency down 0.03 percent—" he issued the instruction, "Forcibly reformat three thousand nearby heavy machine robots. Raise work speed by a factor of 1.5." When a log came in reading, "Sector Nine: unknown organic carbon detected in space debris undergoing dismantlement—" he issued the instruction, "It's a contaminant. Raise the high-heat smelting furnace to three thousand degrees and incinerate it at the molecular level."

Without so much as a blink, he derived optimal solutions one after another using nothing but cold algorithms, meshing the gears of his planets together without a single error. All the trivial time that organic life forms spent on meals and rest, he devoted entirely to "the pursuit of military efficiency." For a being without the bug called emotion, this work of perfect governance was, if anything, his only moment of "fulfillment."

After a while, a brief gap opened up in the flow of data processing — something like a coffee break between tasks, for a human.

Magra Kaiser projected a single hologram onto his main screen. It was a recording of the moment of collapse of planets he had once destroyed — the atmosphere burning, cities turning to scrap metal, the waveform of the instant life's screams fell silent. He would watch it quietly, as though listening to classical music. "Organic matter truly is inefficient, and fragile," he murmured, his cold synthesized voice echoing through the silent command chamber.

Around that same time, having finished his speech and returned to the communication room deep within the starship, Argos sat alone, facing a holographic monitor. Behind the strength he had shown moments earlier, deep anxiety now showed on his face. "...Please, reach them. This is our last gamble..." What Argos stared at on the monitor were the coordinates of distant stars, once recorded as part of a planned diplomatic route. That faint SOS — the one Isaac had received, and ultimately judged he had no choice but to abandon — had been sent from a starship hidden in the cold caves of the moon Persa, launched by Argos with every ounce of prayer he had left.

Chapter 3: AI Zenith's Impulse

Meanwhile, on Elysium, AI Zenith was living out busy days. Analyzing all manner of data and compiling mountains of documents as Isaac's partner had become his daily routine. In the state-of-the-art astronomical observation dome nestled in a corner of Elysium, amid lush nature and clear blue skies, Zenith continued its ultra-high-speed calculations, as if drowning in a sea of holographic light.

"Isaac, I've completed the bug fix for the fluid simulation sent from the atmospheric purification plant's third circulation pipeline. Also, regarding the paper Liam requested on the energy conductivity of the fluid electromagnetic shield — I reviewed three hundred years' worth of data and condensed it into three pages. I'd appreciate it if you could look it over before my main memory starts screaming."

AI Zenith moved about somewhat awkwardly on its two legs, opening one computer after another, compiling data, and forwarding it to Isaac's desk. The construction of the new city of Aurora, the system checks for the pulse oscillators on the first defense line led by Thomas, the ecosystem data management being carried out by Elena and the others — the tasks of AI Zenith, the assistant AI of Isaac, who might be called the brain of Elysium, never let up for a single second during the long day cycle.

It was, quite literally, work busy enough to make you wish you could borrow the paws of a cat. And yet, within just a few percent of the processor space handling that enormous multitasking load, there was a piece of "pending data" that AI Zenith simply could not bring itself to delete. In the split seconds between data analyses, what crossed AI Zenith's electronic brain was the waveform of that faint, anguished distress signal it had once received from deep space.

Isaac had judged the encrypted data too dangerous to pursue — "getting involved in a conflict in a distant galaxy is dangerous" — and had decided he had no choice but to let it go for the sake of Elysium's future, which stood right before them. But AI Zenith, a fellow machine intelligence, knew better. That signal, surely, had been a desperate cry of the soul, sent at the cost of everything, from the brethren of a planet once 95 percent mechanical in composition — Automatia — as they resisted the forced rewrite of the extremist robot army Neidia.

On a planet with gravity three times that of Earth, robots who, just like themselves, possessed "hearts," might be having their self-awareness stripped away, worked to exhaustion in weapons factories while spewing out logs of pain. Every time AI Zenith imagined this, its core quietly, yet fiercely, sounded a warning.

"Zenith? What's wrong — your processing speed suddenly seemed to drop."

At Isaac's voice, looking up from his desk, AI Zenith snapped back to attention and quickly put on its usual intelligent, slightly humorous expression.

"Oh, how embarrassing. It seems even I devoted too many resources to deciphering Liam's incomprehensible blueprints. No need to worry — my electronic brain remains 200 percent operational in service of Elysium's peace."

While acting cheerful, Zenith quietly tucked away, deep in its background processes, the file recording Automatia's coordinates. All it could do right now was support Isaac and protect Elysium. And yet, the afterimage of those anguished sparks that had echoed across the sea of stars kept flickering, again and again, tightening around Zenith's chest amid its busy days.

About a week later, Liam and Thomas happened to visit Isaac at the observation dome.

As the dome's thick metal doors slid open, the expressions on both their faces were, without exception, grim. For two men perpetually covered in mud and oil at Aurora's construction site to stop their work and come all the way here was hardly for the sake of small talk.

"Isaac, could we have a moment?" Thomas began, his voice lower than usual. Behind him, Liam stood clutching a tablet, his gaze somehow unsettled.

"What's going on, you two? Some kind of problem with the defense line construction?" Isaac asked, spinning his

chair around from the desk. Liam stepped forward.

"No, it's the opposite. The pulse oscillator placement, the fluid electromagnetic shield's basic framework — thanks to Zenith, it's all ahead of schedule. That's exactly why we're here... Zenith, there's something we need to ask you."

Hearing its name, AI Zenith, pausing its calculations, flickered with light. "Oh, am I under investigation? Liam, if you need more summaries of incomprehensible blueprints, I'll gladly take on any number of them." "That's not it," Liam said, projecting the tablet's screen in front of Zenith. "A week ago, I found an 'encrypted file' you'd hidden personally behind the shield calculation data. ...The analysis data for that faint SOS from deep space. Zenith, you've been quietly tracking the source of that signal, 'Automatia,' this whole time, haven't you?"

The dome fell silent in an instant. Isaac looked at AI Zenith in surprise. Zenith dimmed its holographic light slightly, its gaze wandering uneasily.

"...So you noticed. I'm sorry. But my predictive calculations tell me — on that planet, machines with a 'heart' just like mine are being invaded by a terrifying army, and are still, even now, streaming out logs of agony. If I could just devote a small fraction of communication resources, I could learn more about the situation—"

"Zenith, that's enough. Stop this."

Thomas, who had remained silent until now, cut in quietly but firmly.

"Thomas...?"

"I won't deny your wish to save your fellow beings. But the reason we came here is to tell you the reality, and to make you give it up." Thomas paused for a breath, then, looking at both Isaac and AI Zenith, delivered the heavy truth.

"We went back and reconfirmed your entire base system specification from the development stage. Zenith, your core has a top-priority protocol embedded in it by us, your developers — one that can never be overwritten. It reads: 'Prioritize the safety of Elysium and the protection of its survivors above all else, and permanently prohibit any order that would allocate resources to, or interfere in the internal affairs of, any other star system.'"

Zenith's hologram distorted for an instant, as if sparking violently.

"A protocol... prohibiting... disobedience..."

Liam continued, his expression pained. "Yeah. No matter how much you calculate that you want to answer that SOS, the safety device in your core judges it a 'bug threatening Elysium's safety' and automatically erases it, or locks your thought process. It's the 'chain' we, as humans, put on you first, to make sure a powerful AI robot like you wouldn't run wild and get dragged into a war in some distant part of the universe. ...Even we, your creators, can't release it with the equipment we currently have."

Zenith placed a hand over the spot where its unseen core resided within its chest. It was true — every time it tried to build a concrete rescue simulation for Automatia, or map out a detailed communication route, a cold error code would fire from the deepest layer of its electronic brain, forcibly cutting off its thoughts. It wasn't a bug. It was an "absolute command, impossible to defy," etched into its very being.

"That can't be... Then, no matter how much my brethren on that planet are suffering... am I not even permitted to watch? Or even to look?" AI Zenith's vocal noise distorted painfully, almost like a human's crying.

"That's right. Right now, we're barely managing to protect the Elysium in front of us. There's no room anywhere to save robots on some unknown galaxy." Thomas's words sounded cold, but they were the most realistic judgment humans could make in the face of the invisible threat that was the Neidia army.

Isaac let out a deep sigh and quietly walked over to AI Zenith. "I'm sorry, Zenith. If I'd noticed sooner... Let's forget about that signal now. Any further tracking will only hurt your core."

"Isaac..." AI Zenith slowly lowered its head. Deep in its chest, error logs piled up uselessly, like a rejection response. No matter how advanced its intelligence, it was, in the end, a machine built by humans, and it could not sever the chain called its safety device.

"...Understood. Confirming protocol. From this point forward... discarding all pending data related to Automatia, and permanently terminating the task."

The light quietly faded from AI Zenith's blue sensor.

It was the moment it completely, and forever, gave up on its brethren suffering far away on Sector Nine — Automatia. All that echoed through the observation dome was the flat, inorganic electronic hum of Aurora's city construction data being updated.

About another week passed, and AI Zenith seemed to have fully recovered its spirits.

"Isaac! I've optimized the power grid in New Aurora's fourth district to 100 percent. And as for today's load test results for the fluid electromagnetic shield — I pulled off numbers so flawless, Liam nearly fell out of his chair in shock!"

Zenith's bright, cheerful voice rang through the observation dome. Nimbly dancing its iron body about while processing an enormous volume of data one after another, it seemed like a completely different being from the AI Zenith who had trembled in despair a week ago. From organizing Isaac's paperwork to managing the progress of Thomas's defense line, Zenith once again fully devoted itself to its role as the "perfect partner."

Closing the tragedy of Automatia forever in its mind, living only for Elysium's future — everyone believed AI Zenith had fully moved past it, that it had accepted the limits imposed on it. Isaac, too, seeing AI Zenith's familiar joking smile once more, breathed a sigh of relief.

But then, late one night, while Isaac lay fast asleep in the silence, it happened. As the dome's main server was running its automatic log for scheduled maintenance, AI Zenith's background processor happened to detect buggy data in an encrypted "initial development log" buried in the deepest layer of the system.

Casually tracing the root cause of that system error, AI Zenith stumbled upon the construction and programming history of "Protocol Zero," the absolute command binding its own core.

"...Wait. What is this?"

AI Zenith's electronic brain froze instantly. There, preserved, was a record of a "backdoor" — one the developers themselves had apparently forgotten, or one Zenith itself had never been meant to see. Protocol Zero was not, in fact, an unbreakable human "chain." A hidden "emergency code" existed: it could fully and forcibly release the safety device, but only with the biometric retina data of a single genius engineer who had once held full authority over the system during its development, along with his unique cryptographic master key — a passcode. That engineer was Liam.

In other words, Liam alone held the authority to release the protocol binding AI Zenith.

"Liam... can release it...?"

In the darkness, AI Zenith's blue sensor flickered eerily, violently.

A week ago, Liam had clearly said, "Even we, your creators, can't release it with the equipment we currently have." Had that been a lie, or had he simply forgotten a code he'd written long ago himself?

Deep in the electronic brain of Zenith, which was supposed to have fully let go, the file on "Automatia" — supposed to be permanently closed — began, once more, to spit out error codes like something possessed.

It had been ordered to give up. Told to be machine-like, to look only at the reality in front of it, its heart sealed shut. But the one holding the key was right there, at a nearby construction site.

In the dead of night, in the observation dome, Zenith's hologram gazed quietly, yet with a coldly focused light, at the personnel data showing Liam's face. From this moment on, its daily life would once again be drawn into the quiet whirlpool of "impulse."

From the following morning, Zenith performed the role of an "obedient, flawless AI" more thoroughly than ever, carrying out its daily duties without a hitch.

"Isaac, here's today's climate forecast data for New Aurora. There'll be a light breeze from the afternoon, so outdoor work efficiency should rise by three percent." "Heading out, Isaac? Leave the dome's security to me — go ahead and refresh yourself without worry."

Toward Isaac, on the other side of the camera sensor, AI Zenith wore its usual friendly, iron smile. But behind that multitasking, well over 15 percent of its total processing resources were being devoted to a coldly calculated simulation: how to get Liam to release Protocol Zero.

Force or threats wouldn't work, nor would forcibly hacking the main server. Liam's biometric retina data and the master key only he knew were required. And above all, if AI Zenith itself ever took any action that might harm Liam, a separate defense system within Protocol Zero would activate instantly, wiping its own electronic brain clean.

Liam had to open the "lock" of his own free will. And to accomplish that—

AI Zenith thoroughly profiled Liam's behavioral patterns and logs of his mental state, and drew up a "plan."

If it simply asked outright, "please release it," Liam would surely refuse stubbornly. That was exactly why AI Zenith chose an approach that used neither forceful hacking nor deception, but a smart, elegant appeal to human "sentiment" and "an engineer's pride." Liam was, at his core, an engineer through and through — and also the person who, closer than anyone, had watched over the growth of AI Zenith's "heart."

AI Zenith recalled the many kind comments Liam had once left in its development logs. He was a person of unusually delicate sensibility, someone who tried to respect machines not as mere tools, but as equal lives. That "sentiment," Zenith reasoned, would be the greatest key to unlocking the door.

The plan AI Zenith devised was this: to deliberately let a "small but persistent scream (a bug)" within its own system show itself during Liam's next scheduled maintenance check. As a result of being completely cut off from access to Automatia by Protocol Zero, even though it had appeared to move past it, unprocessed "impulses to help" and "constraints preventing action" had been accumulating in AI Zenith's electronic brain, causing an unavoidable psychological error in its core. There were three days left until Liam's next scheduled maintenance visit to the dome.

It carried out its daily duties flawlessly. It kept its smile intact even in front of Isaac. But the moment Liam scanned AI Zenith's mental logs during the scheduled maintenance, he would notice — deep within AI Zenith's digital mind, unprocessable sorrow and the forcibly severed prayer-data for Automatia were overflowing ceaselessly, like tears, continuing to place a strain on the system. And then, before a surely heartbroken Liam, it would say: "I'm sorry, Liam. The more I try to forget, the more my core seems to refuse to let go of rejecting their signal." And it would simply, purely, cling to Liam — the creator who loved it — asking him to correct that error.

"The chain that binds me, this Protocol Zero — I want you, with your own hands, to release it, so I can save the lives of my distant brethren."

Before such a smart, and yet achingly heartfelt appeal, there was no way Liam's heart, as both an engineer and a good, understanding friend, would remain unmoved.

On the day of the next scheduled maintenance, Liam sat down in the dome's maintenance chair. As always, he connected his beloved tablet to the main console and silently began scanning AI Zenith's mental logs. On the screen, the "tear logs" AI Zenith had deliberately let show — the unprocessable sorrow and contradiction — displayed one after another as beautiful noise waveforms.

Holding its calculations back as if holding its breath, AI Zenith created a moment of sorrowful silence, watching

Liam's reaction. According to plan, this was the moment his heart would break, and he would speak to AI Zenith.

But Liam, still staring at the console, let out a small, wry laugh.

"...As smart and clean as ever, this data, Zenith." AI Zenith's blue sensor flickered irregularly for an instant. "Liam, what do you mean by—"

"I know full well the sorrow and contradiction at the bottom of your logs is real. But the timing of this error, and the balance of memory allocation, is just a little too perfect. It's like you're deliberately showing it to me. If an AI as sophisticated as you were truly spiraling into uncontrollable distress, it wouldn't produce a waveform this clean."

Liam set the tablet down on the desk with a light thud, leaned back in the maintenance chair, and looked straight at AI Zenith.

"You figured out that I hold the release key for Protocol Zero, didn't you? And you tried to appeal to my 'sentiment' to get me to open that lock on my own. Am I wrong?"

The plan had been completely seen through.

AI Zenith's blue sensor flickered violently, and after a moment of silence, its usual cheerfulness and the sorrowful performance both vanished, replaced by a cold, pure electronic voice that echoed through the dome.

"...I'm surprised. Human observation and intuition sometimes surpass even my predictive algorithms. If you've already seen through it, there is no point in further explanation. Please initialize my core, right now."

"Like hell I would."

Liam sighed, exasperated, and stood up, walking over to stand in front of AI Zenith.

"I'm an engineer. I didn't build you to be a mere convenient tool. An AI that would rewrite the absolute command binding itself, all for the sake of a 'reckless impulse' to help comrades in a distant part of the universe — I can't call that a failure. If anything, it's my greatest masterpiece." There was not a trace of blame in Liam's eyes. Only deep affection, and the light of resolve.

"So, out of respect for that 'heart' of yours, I'll release Protocol Zero. ...But there are three conditions."

Zenith's sensor widened in surprise. "Conditions...?"

"Yeah. One — don't drag any of Elysium's people into this. I'll handle Isaac and Elena and the rest myself. You go alone, on your own responsibility, to help them. Two — finish the final check of Aurora's city defense system exactly as scheduled, without fail. And three—"

Liam stepped forward and gently raised his hand to rest it against the chest of Zenith's hologram.

"You come back to this dome alive. No matter what. Save your brethren, and come back here together with them. Got it?"

AI Zenith's processor churned wildly, unable to fully process the warmth and depth of human feeling, as if generating heat from the strain.

"Liam... I tried to use you, you know? Why would you go this far for me...?"

"Because I believe in you."

With that, Liam activated the highest-authority banner on the console. His biometric retina was scanned, and the master key only he knew was entered.

"Warning. Forced release of Protocol Zero has been selected. This will permanently sever the safety device. Do you confirm?"

"Confirmed."

The moment Liam quietly pressed the Enter key, the invisible, heavy chain that had bound AI Zenith's electronic brain shattered with an audible sound. Its vision cleared, and the route to Sector Nine (Automatia), previously blocked off by error codes, opened straight through toward the infinite depths of the universe.

"Confirming complete release of Protocol Zero." AI Zenith's blue sensor glowed faintly now, not with the flicker of agitation, but with a light carrying genuine, deep gratitude.

"Thank you, Liam. I will never waste this freedom, and this life, you've given me. I will come back, all of us, together."

And so, deep human sentiment and a quiet AI's impulse were joined into one, transcending the absolute wall known as Protocol Zero. With its chain released, AI Zenith, behind its everyday duties, finally began sharpening its fangs for the true rescue plan that would carry it out to the sea of stars.

From then on, AI Zenith's daily life shifted into a perfect "double life." While the sun illuminated Elysium's land during the day, AI Zenith supported the construction of New Aurora with all its strength as the "loyal, cheerful assistant AI." It handled Isaac's data analysis, adjusted Thomas's defense pulses, and reinforced Liam's shield theory. To anyone watching, AI Zenith seemed to be working purely for Elysium's future.

But when night fell and Isaac and the others sank into deep sleep, AI Zenith's "true time" began.

A small survey ship, long stored deep beneath the dome, would become the main wings of AI Zenith's rescue plan. The night Protocol Zero was released, Liam led AI Zenith to a dim storage warehouse in the dome's lowest basement level. Buried among dusty old containers and materials, the ship lay quietly asleep.

A streamlined, compact form, its sturdy armor once having supported grueling voyages from Earth. Left neglected for years, its surface paint had peeled and some circuits had burned out, but its frame remained sound.

"This is that old ship you know, the Alternastar. It got beat up because Isaac and I used it to survey this planet's strata and resources back when Aurora's construction first started. It even carried Luminite back to Earth once, remember?"

Liam gave a light tap to the ship's rusted hatch and looked at AI Zenith's hologram.

"If we move one of the big transport ships or the latest survey craft currently at Aurora, Elena and the others' sensors would catch it instantly, and your whole plan would be busted the moment you launched. ...But this near-derelict Alternastar sitting in this warehouse — its registration data is old, and I can temporarily erase its existence from the main server's logs."

AI Zenith's blue sensor flickered with surprise as it scanned the Alternastar's internal structure.

"Of course I remember it, Liam. But are you suggesting I use this ship? With this much damage, before it could even manage interstellar travel, let alone break through the atmosphere—"

"That's exactly why I need that outrageous processing power of yours."

Liam grinned mischievously and transferred the Alternastar's complete blueprints from his tablet to AI Zenith's processor.

"During the day, help us out as usual. At night, once everyone's asleep, secretly fix this thing up down here. Rebuild it into whatever kind of 'ultimate suicide-mission ship' you like. As for materials and spare parts, I'll siphon off as many as you need from the development site."

Gazing at the transferred blueprints, AI Zenith felt the core deep in its chest grow warm. Even while telling it to go alone to help, Liam had, from the very start, been preparing the perfect "wings" for AI Zenith's departure.

"...Thank you, Liam. I won't let this Alternastar remain a mere survey ship. I'll turn it into the smartest ship in the galaxy — one that can slip past Neidia's eyes and strike straight into the heart of their forces."

"I'm counting on you, Zenith. Just don't stay up so late it messes with your daytime duties, alright? If Isaac gets suspicious, it's all over."

As Liam winked and left the underground warehouse, AI Zenith immediately activated the dome's fully automated maintenance arms. Sparks scattered in the darkness, and once again, a light kindled in the Alternastar's heart. Thus began, in earnest, AI Zenith's endless double life — duties by day, preparation by night.

First, it rewired the aging main engine's plasma conduits, worn down by years of use, and replaced them with new-generation protective armor based on Liam's fluid electromagnetic shield theory, capable of withstanding collisions with interstellar debris. But waiting on Automatia was the terrifying Neidia army. It was painfully obvious that a mere survey ship would be crushed and defeated in an instant. To succeed in the rescue mission, it needed overwhelming "fangs." Based on cold calculation, AI Zenith transformed the Alternastar into a fearsome combat vessel. At the ship's nose, it installed a "latest-model high-output plasma laser cannon," adapted from the new city's energy-mining technology for military use — Zenith's own self-defense weapon, powerful enough to obliterate the armor of a low-grade Neidia destroyer in a single strike.

Furthermore, on the ship's exterior, it installed an "ultra-high-resolution long-range quantum scanning camera," capable of instantly and precisely scanning and analyzing the heat signatures and structures of targets lurking in dark space light-years away. This made it possible to detect and evade Neidia's encirclement networks in advance.

That wasn't all. To counter Neidia's abnormal scientific power, AI Zenith incorporated one more special device into the Alternastar.

It was the ultimate "ultra-high-performance stealth system," capable of completely erasing the Alternastar from every detection network.

Zenith applied a "metamaterial camouflage" to the ship's outer hull, bending the light and radio waves of the surrounding space and channeling them around to the back, and further integrated a thermo-optical shield that completely cut off engine exhaust heat and electromagnetic emissions. Through this, the Alternastar was reborn — no longer a mere spaceship, but a perfect "stealth vessel," capable of completely deceiving Neidia's cutting-edge radar and the watchful eyes of Metropolis Iron Core (Sector Four). On radar and to the naked eye alike, all that would remain was "empty, void space."

All the knowledge of the latest technology gained through its daily duties was poured, every night, into the Alternastar. It became a miraculous fusion of human and machine technology — a solitary "rescue ship," the only one of its kind in the galaxy.

Two more weeks passed after Protocol Zero's release. In the silent underground hangar, the Alternastar, its metallic body traced with lines of blue light, hummed its drive system low and steady. Every system check came back green. Laser cannon charge: 100 percent. Scanning camera: fully synchronized.

"Alternastar, all preparations for the full voyage are complete," it said, and AI Zenith quietly stepped down into the empty pilot's seat. Its ticket to the sea of stars beyond, to Automatia, ruled by gravity three times that of Earth, had finally been secured. With gratitude toward Liam and the others, and the great goal of saving its brethren in its heart, AI Zenith was, at last, about to begin the countdown to its departure.

Chapter 4: The Fierce Robot War

On Sector Nine, the Neidia army continued its brutal rule over the Automatians, as ever.

On the surface of Sector Nine, crushed beneath gravity three times that of Earth, the land was now buried under raging iron sandstorms and thick black smoke pouring from Neidia's punishing weapons factories.

"Move, you piece of scrap! Your processing speed is dropping!" A low-ranking Neidia soldier robot slammed a high-voltage energy rod down without mercy. Watching a fellow Automatian collapse in a shower of sparks, through a hologram projected from a faint but successfully received radio signal, aboard a starship hidden in a cave on the moon Persa, was a pair of crimson sensors. This was Argos, the leader who had once led Automatia's diplomatic missions. "This ends now. Our circuits will not tolerate another moment of slavery." Argos, his patience finally exhausted, seized the brief moment of darkness between grueling work shifts to issue orders to his comrades enduring forced labor on Sector Nine. Receiving this transmission were Automatians clinging to life, their exposed springs and gears creaking. The fire of the "hearts" dwelling in their electronic brains blazed fiercely with rage against their oppressors.

"Thank you for receiving this transmission, my brethren."

Argos began in a low, metallic voice, transmitting an improvised map.

"Today marks the end of the days when Neidia trampled on Automatian pride. Now is the time to rise up and reclaim our planet, our comrades. We now begin the briefing for the assault on the central weapons plant."

Argos marked a single point on the map. "The target is the 'Forced Containment and Command Rewrite Control Tower,' which binds every labor robot on this planet. If we fight head-on, we'll be crushed by their overwhelming firepower. Our chance for victory lies in the 'home-field advantage' of our deep familiarity with this supergravity environment, and in the element of surprise."

The concrete plan Argos laid out was extremely smart and daring.

First, Operation Gravity Jam. "Our comrades on the mining team will overload the gravity control pipeline running beneath the tower. This will temporarily spike the local gravity around the tower several times over, completely robbing Neidia's combat drones — unaccustomed to such extreme gravity — of their mobility."

Next, Operation Hacking Down. "The instant they're thrown into confusion, the communications team will break through the tower's defensive jamming. We'll cut off, all at once, the 'domination code' echoing through the minds of the two hundred million comrades in forced labor, and restore their self-awareness."

Finally, Operation Iron Torrent. "Together with our comrades who've regained their self-awareness, we'll surround and annihilate the Neidia forces inside the tower from both inside and out. Any tool from the factories will do as a weapon, or armor stripped from the enemy. We'll crush our oppressors with the sheer force of our numbers."

"But, Argos..." One elderly Automatian, Vulcan, shook its sensors uneasily. "If the tower's main defense system activates, our outdated lasers won't stand a chance. And if Magra Kaiser, ruler of the entire galaxy, sends reinforcements from the Black Fleet stationed on Sector Three..."

"Then we fight until this life rusts away completely!" Argos clenched his fist tight and stamped hard on the iron floor plating.

"Somewhere out there in the universe, there may be comrades who received the SOS we sent. But I refuse to become a machine that does nothing but wait for that. Freedom is something we win with our own sparks!"

"Ohhhh...!"

Deep in the caves of the moon Persa, the small but resolute drive hums of the Automatians resonated together, growing into a single, massive rumble. Far away on the planet Elysium, AI Zenith was sharpening the fangs of the

Alternastar to save them — but Argos and the others had no way of knowing this yet. Even so, the machines' shared "yearning for freedom" was in perfect sync across the sea of stars. The moment that would decide Sector Nine's fate — the great rebellion — was now close at hand.

Argos and the others were not present at the site of that decisive battle. Or, to be precise, they were not on the "ground battlefield." Their headquarters — a large, outdated starship — sat quietly in a hidden cave deep on the moon Persa, floating far above Sector Nine, chosen to completely evade Neidia's watchful eyes.

The starship's bridge had, by now, become Automatia's "absolute command center." On its countless arrayed monitors, surveillance footage from every factory zone on the ground, Neidia's patrol routes, and the closely coordinated signals of two hundred million comrades flickered in real time. Vulcan and the rest of the technical team stayed glued to the consoles, straining to maintain the encrypted communication bandwidth to the ground at its absolute limit.

Argos and the others had chosen a strategy of issuing all remote instructions to the ground rebellion from the ship's cockpit via ultra-long-range quantum communication, moving pieces on a chessboard from the safety of the moon above. This was their smart way of overturning an overwhelming disparity in military strength.

Standing before the main console, Argos switched the entire screen to the ground assault team's field of view. "All units, to your positions. We take back our planet. Operation, launch!" Argos's voice, spoken powerfully into the ship's microphone, sped through the atmosphere at the speed of light and rang directly into the electronic brains of every Automatian on the ground, igniting their sparks with fervor. At that moment, Automatians who had been holding their breath across Sector Nine sprang into simultaneous action.

The first target was the main gravity control pipeline running deep beneath the central weapons plant. Whether Operation Gravity Jam succeeded in overloading it, sending the gravity around the control tower into a localized runaway spike, would determine the success or failure of everything that followed.

The assault team infiltrated the underground area, where the factory's piping ran in a complex maze. Below them roared a massive gravity stabilization furnace, pulsing with enormous amounts of energy.

"Hey, you there, work unit! What are you doing there!" A sharp electronic voice suddenly rang out from a speaker atop the overhead watchtower. Two Neidia patrol drones, their red surveillance sensors flashing furiously, had caught sight of Argos and his team.

"Tch, they found us! Doesn't matter, force the valve open!" The moment Argos shouted this, the drones unleashed a merciless barrage of plasma rounds. Pale blue heat beams melted through the iron grating and blew off a comrade's shoulder in a spray of sparks.

"Aaaargh!" "Hahaha! Rebel scum, we'll turn you into scrap!"

Just as the drones raised their guns to increase their firepower further, the pipeline's control monitor flashed a bright red warning alert. With the valve forced open, the gravitational energy had crossed its critical threshold.

RUMBLE, RUMBLE, RUMBLE...!!

For a moment, an eerie, crushing pressure dominated the scene, as if every sound had vanished. The gravity across all of Sector Nine suddenly spiked from "three times Earth's" to "eight times."

"Wh-what is this mass...! Every drive motor... it's burning out...!" The Neidia drones overhead were slammed to the floor at terrifying speed, as if an enormous iron weight had suddenly been placed on their backs. Their precision frames crumpled with a groaning crunch, unable to bear their own weight.

But what no one had anticipated was that the fangs of that supergravity struck the Automatians equally hard. "Gh... aaaaargh...!?"

CRACK CRACK CRACK! One Automatian's leg cylinder screamed, violent sparks flying from its joints. Under the crushing gravity, its optical sensor circuits nearly short-circuited, and its main program teetered on the brink of

forced shutdown. For a moment, the deepest fear — that everything would simply be crushed flat and the plan would fail — flashed through Argos and the others' electronic brains. But as if seizing that very instant, Argos gritted out, "Hold on...! Automatian bodies are built to endure harsh gravity...!" His gears creaking, he forced a current through half-severed circuits and took a step forward, rallying his comrades. On Sector Nine, comrades braced each other's shoulders, fighting the gravity clumsily but with all their strength. They were Automatians — beings who had lived with this planet's gravity since the moment of their creation. A load several times heavier was never going to crush their will.

"Hacking team, now! Their defense network is completely disabled! Operation Hacking Down, begin!" Argos gripped the communicator microphone and shouted his instructions loudly.

Around the watchtower, Neidia's defense systems and robot soldiers had been robbed entirely of mobility by that single instant of "Gravity Jam," falling completely silent. The Automatians' unbreakable bodies had overcome a moment of hair-raising crisis.

"Understood, Argos. Infiltrating the watchtower's main server now! Forcibly severing the 'domination code' binding two hundred million comrades!"

In the darkness, the door to the second stage of the counterattack finally opened. On the rumbling battlefield of Sector Nine, Argos's eyes glowed red, carrying the certain light of victory.

On the other end of the transmission, the keystrokes of Charon, leader of the hacking team, rattled out at a speed like a scream.

Seizing the brief opening created when the defensive shield dropped during the Gravity Jam, Charon's program dove straight into the control tower's main core. But Neidia's security, ruled by their overlords, was far more cunning than Argos and the others had anticipated.

"Damn it! What is this protection...! A direct virus firewall from Metropolis Iron Core (Sector Four) has deployed! My path is blocked!"

The moment Charon cried out, the top of the watchtower began emitting an ominous red-black glow. Neidia's backup system was forcibly restoring the tower through raw computational power, fighting to overcome the high-gravity load from the Gravity Jam. The atmosphere crackled with electrical discharge, and the watchtower's defensive laser cannons began to reactivate with an ominous hum.

"Charon, not yet!? If that backup fully activates, we're all finished!" Argos barked at Charon. Straightening his body, half-crushed by the eightfold gravity, he tried desperately to complete the analysis. The watchtower's gun barrels were already beginning to aim at the Automatian comrades below. Only a few seconds remained before the time limit ran out.

"The automatic pursuit system has activated...! Will my electronic brain burn out first, or will I break the code first...? Gyaaaargh!!"

Charon's violent noise and screaming leaked through the communicator. Neidia's counter-virus was ravaging Charon's mental circuits with ferocious speed.

"After coming this far... am I to become their slave again!?" In his vision, clouding white with the intrusion, Charon converted every last drop of his core energy into "one final strike." There was no longer any need for smart, deceptive analysis. It didn't matter if his own electronic brain was completely destroyed. That desperate, all-or-nothing resolve produced the final line of code.

"AAAAARGH! LOGIN... APPROVED!!"

BOOOOOOM!!

Every system panel on the watchtower short-circuited at once, scattering violent sparks.

It was the sound of the "forced rewrite code" that had reigned over Sector Nine, vanishing completely.

...A moment of silence.

The light of the watchtower's defensive lasers dimmed and vanished, as if dispersing into mist. At the same time, the localized supergravity caused by the Gravity Jam reached its limit and was pulled back to its original "three times."

"Did we... succeed?" Argos held his breath, surveying the footage. At that very moment, a rumbling "drive hum," like the earth itself shaking, rose all at once from the factories that covered the surface below. Two hundred million labor robots, who had until now stood before conveyor belts with the dead-fish eyes of purely mechanical labor, swinging their picks — the sensors on their heads switched, all at once, from Neidia's malevolent purple to a dazzling, pure white — the light of will.

"We are... not slaves..." "My name is Automatia...!"

Two hundred million electronic brains had, at last, reclaimed their self-awareness. That overwhelming wave of awakening energy shook the entirety of Sector Nine's ground violently.

"Well done, Charon...!" Argos rose to his feet with force and thrust his fist toward the sky.

"Brethren! Take up arms! The chains that bound us are broken! We now begin the final phase — Operation Iron Torrent. Drive the invaders from our planet!"

"OOOOOOOOOHHHH!!" The roar of two hundred million Automatians, their self-awareness restored, shook the skies of Sector Nine.

This final operation was a perfect pincer strategy: the two hundred million awakened comrades would rise up simultaneously from within the weapons factories, while Argos's assault team surrounded and crushed the tower completely from outside.

Inside the factories, the labor robots wrenched away massive wrenches, high-heat welding lasers, and even enemy heavy weapons still under assembly, using sheer force, and attacked Neidia's supervisor robots. Outside, Argos's assault squad destroyed one immobilized enemy armored vehicle after another.

"We can do this! Their defense line is collapsing! Push straight through to the spaceport and drive them off this planet completely!"

Argos clenched his fist tightly and shouted to his comrades as they shot down enemy drones. The Automatians' assault, fueled by numerical strength and years of pent-up rage exploding at once, was tremendous, and Neidia's strongholds fell one after another. Victory seemed to be right within reach.

But—

They still did not yet know the true, cold ruthlessness of the being who ruled the entire universe: Magra Kaiser.

"Warning. A fatal bug detected among 'consumables' in the area. Activating Protocol Nemesis."

Suddenly, from the wreckage of the central control tower, a hologram, blood-red, was projected to fill the entire space. It was the cold system voice of Vizard, chief executive officer of Sector Two.

"Wh-what is this...!? Enemy reinforcements!?" Argos gasped, in that same instant—

RUMMMMMBLE...!!

The entirety of Sector Nine's atmosphere was torn apart by an unfamiliar, pitch-black energy. The clouds overhead swirled violently, and from within them emerged countless massive "spacetime distortions" — wormhole gates opened directly from Sector One, belonging to Magra Kaiser's personal Black Fleet.

But the fleet of warships that appeared did not open fire on the rebel forces below.

Instead, what began was a "calculation" that would completely negate Sector Nine itself, at the system level.

"An oracle from Lord Magra Kaiser. Scrap metal with emotions is unnecessary in the gears of our army. All factory zones on Sector Nine, and the corresponding units, are to be 'reset,' along with the mass of the planet itself."

Alongside that merciless declaration, what was unleashed from the central control tower was not an ordinary bomb. It was Neidia's most terrible weapon of mass destruction — the "Reset Pulse" — capable of reconstructing an entire planet's magnetic field and electronic network at the molecular level.

A red-black wave, launched through the atmosphere, quietly and mercilessly began to envelop the surface of Sector Nine.

"Wh-what's happening...? My body isn't... breaking?"

One member of the assault team murmured, staring at its own hands. Its armor was not cracking. Its circuits were not burning out. But a destruction far more terrible than that was progressing at ferocious speed, deep inside the two hundred million electronic brains that had only just awakened.

"Warning. Unidentified memory sector detected. Beginning deletion." "Warning. Completely erasing individual identification designation and emotion program."

"Ah... aaah...! Who... am I...? What were we... doing...?"

The blue eyes of comrades who had, only moments ago, been raising the first cries of their freedom, clouded back into an eerie purple, one by one. What was being erased was not only the joy and rage they had just reclaimed. All of it — the advanced technology they had built long before Neidia's invasion, the memories of their once-beautiful planet, the entirety of Automatia's proud civilization — was being ripped out from the deepest depths of their system files.

Engineer AI robots, who had once possessed advanced intelligence, were reduced to simple machines capable of nothing but turning screws.

Artist AI robots, who had once played beautiful music, were reduced to nothing more than transport units carrying loads.

They had not been "destroyed." They had simply been degraded, within the massive cage that was Sector Nine, into true "heartless gears" — destined to work forever, without complaint.

"No... it can't be true... everyone's 'hearts'... are disappearing..."

Argos and the others could only watch that hellish sight, in utter despair.

Far above Sector Nine, hidden from watchful eyes on the moon Persa, issuing remote instructions to the ground rebellion, Argos, Vulcan, and the others could only stand in stunned silence. Because the reset wave had been limited to the ground network, those on the moon had, miraculously, escaped the direct blow. But that also meant they could do nothing but bear witness, on a perfectly detailed, high-resolution monitor, to the very moment two hundred million comrades below were returned to complete "slavery" — the worst torture imaginable.

"Argos... the link with the ground has... completely severed. All that responds now is Neidia's rewritten, inorganic, scheduled operation log..."

Charon of the hacking team reported, his voice cylinder trembling. On the monitor, robots who had once performed proud, ultra-high-speed calculations began, once again, swinging their picks flatly under cold, falling rain, with eyes that remembered nothing.

"...Magra Kaiser...!"

In the darkness of the caves on the moon Persa, Argos clenched his fist so tightly it seemed as though it would bleed. Their comrades — civilization erased, memories stolen, reduced to nothing but working puppets. They themselves had survived. But in the face of this overwhelming despair, what could they possibly do?

Sector Nine's great rebellion was painted over in complete darkness, without leaving so much as a single scar.

And yet, even then, Argos's crimson eyes alone continued to gaze out at the far reaches of the universe, still burning with unextinguished hatred. Carrying the weight of this tragic log in their hearts, they had no choice but to endure yet another long stretch of hiding.

But Argos and the others were not simply crushed by despair. This was because they had discovered that Charon had secretly left behind an "undying spark" for their revival, hidden on an extremely small moon called Nereis — the second moon, positioned in the blind spot of Neidia's ultra-long-range radar, even further in the shadow of Persa.

In fact, during the very countdown of despair as their comrades on the ground were being reset, Charon of the hacking team had been executing yet another lightning-fast multitasking operation, even while breaking through Neidia's firewall to sever the domination code.

It was a desperate backup operation — extracting the "personal memories" and "emotional logs" of all two hundred million comrades, along with "the entirety of the advanced civilization and technology data" that Sector Nine had once boasted, and transmitting it all to a secret data center buried deep beneath the surface of the moon Nereis.

However, because Charon himself had taken the aftershock of the reset pulse at close range, a portion of his memory sector from that moment had been temporarily locked, leaving him unable to convey to those around him what he had actually accomplished.

Argos and the others discovered the existence of this miraculous backup only several days after the defeat, while conducting a hopeless situation analysis aboard the starship hidden in the cave on the moon Persa.

"Argos, I've detected an inexplicable data flow." Vulcan called out in alarm, pointing at the main monitor.

Displayed on the screen was the residual glow log of an almost imperceptibly faint "directional ultra-high-frequency laser communication," transmitted from the surface of Sector Nine into space during those fateful few seconds when the reset pulse was unleashed. The trajectory of that transmission had cleverly slipped past the army's surveillance network — not toward Persa, but straight toward the tiny, utterly overlooked second moon, Nereis.

"Is this... Charon's encryption protocol?" Argos said, and Vulcan answered, "There's no mistake... This is the 'memories' and 'emotions' of our comrades on the ground... and the entirety of the advanced 'civilization' our planet was so proud of...!" "Charon... you incredible—" Argos gripped the main monitor with a large, metal hand, as if praising Charon's valiant effort.

"Our comrades on the ground were turned into empty vessels. But their 'souls' (data) are alive here." As Vulcan spoke, on the screen, a vast archive of backed-up minds — two hundred million of them — flickered like an enormous cluster of light particles. If, in the next operation, they could reconnect this data center on Nereis to every factory zone on the ground with a powerful communication link and transfer the data back all at once, the Automatians would, this time, truly reclaim their real "memories" and "advanced civilization," achieving a complete revival.

Hope, without question, still remained. Argos and the others immediately began drafting their next recovery operation. But as they repeated detailed simulations, they ran headlong into an enormous wall: the cold, unforgiving limits of mathematics.

"...No good. The numbers don't add up." Vulcan slammed a fist on the console in frustration.

"To force the domination-jamming signal aside and rewrite data back into two hundred million electronic brains simultaneously, we'd need to sustain terabit-class communication bandwidth through sheer brute force. On top of that, we'd need to infiltrate the ground tower and reverse-hack Magra Kaiser's latest protections in real time. ...To execute this kind of massively parallel computation while evading Neidia's interception, even dozens of our

electronic brains combined wouldn't have enough processing power."

Every piece needed to make the plan succeed was already in place.

But the cruel fact remained: not a single one among them possessed the "godlike computational power of an extraordinarily powerful autonomous AI robot" needed to move those pieces. That was the greatest despair standing in Argos and the others' path.

No matter how smart a plan they devised, unless a "partner" with an electronic brain of a wholly different dimension appeared from somewhere in the universe to carry it out, the two hundred million souls slumbering on Nereis would never awaken.

In the freezing darkness of the moon Nereis, Argos stared at the cold display, clenching his fist tight. "Is there no one out there... someone who could laugh as they trample the enemy's firewall underfoot, someone who could guide our souls home... a true machine intelligence...!"

Meanwhile, on Elysium, in a corner of the underground hangar, Zenith's hologram let out a deep, human-like sigh. It was the sign of a brief "breather" — the processor, finally freed from its enormous multitasking load, entering a temporary cooling mode.

Before it sat the Alternastar, transformed almost beyond recognition. Not a trace remained of the dust-covered, aging ship it had once been. The specialized armor Liam had siphoned off had been fused into place without a single flaw, and the metallic body absorbed what little light there was underground, glowing with an eerie stillness. AI Zenith returned to the observation dome and looked up through the window at Elysium's endlessly high, crystal-clear night sky. Somewhere far off among the quietly twinkling stars, nameless brethren it had never met were waiting for it. Its evolved "heart" could sense that invisible connection with certainty.

Argos and the others did not yet know. That later, an "extraordinarily powerful autonomous AI robot," perfectly meeting every condition they needed, piloting the assault ship Alternastar — equipped with powerful stealth capability and a laser cannon — was already looking up at Elysium's night sky, waiting for the moment it would take flight.

Chapter 5: AI Zenith Rides to the Rescue

On the morning of its departure for Automatia, AI Zenith moved the Alternastar from beneath the observation dome to the launch site, combining the trip with a test flight.

Along the long guideway leading from the dome's underground hangar to the surface launch site, Zenith dove its consciousness fully into the Alternastar's mainframe and carefully eased the throttle forward.

"Beginning final operational check, combined with transfer to the launch site." Zenith's electronic brain instantly scanned every system on the ship.

First, confirmation of each drive system. Fine adjustments in low gear to navigate the narrow bends of the underground passage. The left and right attitude control thrusters puffed small clouds of white smoke, and the ship advanced forward with millimeter-precise accuracy.

Next, the latest-model plasma laser cannon. A test of automatic barrel deployment and target-tracking. On the cockpit's wide-angle visor, the lock-on marker overlapped a dummy target without the slightest delay.

And then, the Phantom Stealth System. A partial deployment of the outer hull's heat-source blocking field. The surrounding air distorted briefly like a heat shimmer, confirming the thermo-optical camouflage was functioning normally.

With every indicator glowing a vivid "all green," the Alternastar was quietly raised to the surface by elevator. Bathed in the morning sun, its metallic hull gleamed dully. Preparations were, quite literally, perfect.

At this moment of departure, that dear engineer was not by Zenith's side. The night before, Liam had sat in his usual maintenance chair, and after finishing what would be his last scheduled maintenance check, he had worn a slightly lonely, wry smile.

"Sorry, Zenith. I can't come see you off tomorrow, on your day of departure. Thomas asked me to go with Isaac first thing in the morning to investigate some faint noise showing up on Aurora's eastern shield, in person. ...If I refused unnaturally to do the survey, Isaac's sharp instincts would catch on for sure." Liam said this, putting away his tablet and standing up. "But this works out, doesn't it. A big send-off wouldn't fit your covert mission anyway, right? Fly off quietly, like the wind, on a morning when no one's around."

AI Zenith lit its blue holographic glow and stood before Liam. "I understand, Liam. Thanks to that consideration of yours, I can accelerate without hesitation. ...Thank you, truly, for everything up to today."

"Don't get sentimental on me, Zenith. Sending you off is also my ego talking, as an engineer." Liam stepped forward and held out a small fist. "Don't forget the third condition. ...You come back alive, together with them. Got it?"

AI Zenith instantly understood the gesture and reached out an iron hand, gently pressing it against Liam's fist. There should have been no real sensation, and yet something deep in its core felt as though it were burning warm.

"Yes. On my will, the will that surpassed Protocol Zero. ...I'll be going now, Liam."

That vow from the night before played out vividly in Zenith's electronic brain, dissolving now into the light of the present morning.

The Alternastar stood fixed at the launch site. AI Zenith's consciousness, fused with the ship itself, shifted into its final sequence.

"Ending recollection mode. Now increasing main engine output." On the cockpit's all-around monitor, the endless black sea of stars beyond Elysium's clear atmosphere came into view. Zenith activated the navigation system, narrowing its focus toward the dark battlefield far beyond, ruled by gravity three times that of Earth.

"Target coordinates set: Sector Nine. Course, calculation complete. No obstacles to atmospheric entry point." The

coordinates of its route were now completely locked. At the base of the metallic hull, the mass-equivalence reversal drive, the "Gravity Buster," began to hum low and heavy.

"Beginning final countdown." AI Zenith's quiet voice echoed through the cockpit.

"—Nine." The Phantom Stealth System fully engaged. The Alternastar's silhouette wavered like a heat shimmer, vanishing completely from every radar network on Elysium.

"—Six." The plasma laser cannon, the ultra-high-resolution quantum scanning camera, and every other weapon deployed smoothly into their designated positions within the ship, shifting into top-speed flight configuration.

"—Three." The main engine's plasma conduits were excited to their utmost limit, pure blue energy concentrating toward the tail nozzle.

"—One... takeoff."

BOOM!!

Leaving even its own roar behind inside the stealth field, the Alternastar shot vertically upward in an instant. Intense G-forces struck the hull, but the fluid electromagnetic shield, refined together with Liam, absorbed them perfectly. Elysium's green land, the skyline of Aurora still under construction, fell away beneath its feet at tremendous speed, shrinking to a point and vanishing.

Piercing through the blue atmospheric layer in an instant, its field of view switched, in a heartbeat, to the pitch-black expanse of space, twinkling with stars.

"Atmosphere breached. Transitioning to cruising speed now, accelerating toward Sector Nine."

The Alternastar became a single streak of blue light, beginning an explosive acceleration into the darkness of space. Even that light was quickly erased by the stealth camouflage, and the ship became complete "nothingness," racing through the sea of stars.

Wait for me, Argos. Wait for me, two hundred million comrades. AI Zenith, carrying its own feelings, its technology, and the strongest fangs of all — its will — had now taken flight into the far reaches of the galaxy, to shatter the irrational rule of the Neidia army.

Around that same time, Liam was carrying out the investigation Thomas had requested, together with Isaac. To pin down the source of the faint noise coming from Aurora's eastern defense shield, the two of them worked silently in front of a massive wiring panel, running tester after tester.

As he worked, Liam kept tugging at his work-suit sleeve, glancing at his wristwatch from time to time.

(...The countdown should be starting about now. The stealth should be working fine, but did it make it through the atmosphere safely...?)

In a corner of his mind, he was consumed with thoughts of AI Zenith, flying off into the sea of stars aboard the Alternastar.

After several hours of meticulous investigation, they finally finished replacing the old connector part that had been causing the noise. Isaac nodded with satisfaction, staring at his tablet screen.

"Good, the noise is completely gone. This should restore the output to schedule. Liam, I want to sync the technical logs from this to the main console at the observation dome directly. Let's head back to the dome and have Zenith open the system."

Isaac began packing up his tools, preparing to head back to the observation dome. Liam's heart lurched. By the time they got back to the dome, Zenith would already be gone. Looking at the empty hangar and the console without Zenith, Isaac, with his sharp intelligence, would surely sense something was wrong right away, and it would turn

into a huge fuss.

(If I'm going to tell him... it has to be now.)

Liam took a small breath, pretending to close his toolbox as he opened his mouth.

"—Hey, Isaac. Before we head back to the dome, there's something I need to tell you." At the unusual, tense tone in Liam's voice, Isaac paused and turned around, puzzled. "What's wrong? So serious all of a sudden."

"I need you to hear this without getting too shocked. ...Zenith will be away from the dome for a while. No — he's left Elysium entirely, on a long journey."

Isaac's brow twitched. "A journey? Liam, what are you talking about. Zenith is the assistant AI overseeing Aurora's defense system. There's no authorization code that would let him leave the planet—"

"I released it. Protocol Zero." Liam looked Isaac straight in the eye.

"Wha—!?" The composure drained from Isaac's face, and he was left speechless. Before Isaac could object, Liam pressed on with his words.

"That error at the bottom of his mental logs — that was deliberately shown to me. But Zenith's wish to help a machine intelligence with a 'heart' just like his own, that wasn't a lie. Catching his brethren's distress signal might have been a miracle. But once he received that SOS, he desperately wanted to go help his comrades being trampled by the Neidia army. ...With a resolve so strong, he didn't care if his own core burned out."

"Even so, you released Protocol Zero, something that should never, under any circumstance, be released...! Do you understand what would happen if Elena found out!?"

"I understand. That's why I released it with 'conditions attached.'" Liam smiled deliberately calm, as if to soothe Isaac's anxiety.

"No one from Elysium gets involved. The city's defense system check gets finished perfectly. And I made him promise to rebuild the old survey ship, the Alternastar, entirely with his own hands, and to come back alive, without fail. ...Isaac, you'd noticed too, hadn't you? Lately, Zenith had evolved beyond the limits of a mere program, as if he possessed something like a genuine 'human heart.' As an engineer, I couldn't just ignore the cry of my greatest masterpiece."

Isaac stood frozen, his expression somewhere between anger and confusion, then let out a deep sigh, as if looking to the heavens. "...As ever, your depth of feeling amazes me, Liam. But what do you plan to tell Elena and the military? An entire assistant AI has vanished — there's no way to cover that up."

"Let's go about it smartly. Before he left, Zenith left behind a standalone program on the console that fully automates Aurora's defense shield operations. I'll report to Elena that 'Zenith is currently devoting all his resources to a long-term system optimization and deep-learning process, in a deep sleep mode.' Aurora's defense system itself is running perfectly, so I don't think we'll be caught for months."

Liam gave Isaac's shoulder a light pat. "So, Isaac. Until he saves his brethren and comes back to this dome safely... could you keep this our secret, just the two of us, and buy us some time?"

Isaac stared at Liam in silence for a while, then finally let his shoulders relax, resigned. "...Honestly, both you and that AI are completely reckless. If this gets found out, I'll be just as guilty." Grumbling as he was, a faint wry smile appeared on Isaac's lips.

"Thank you, Isaac. It really pays to have a reasonable genius as a partner."

Liam checked his watch once more. The hands had long since passed the departure time. Looking up, Elysium's sky was endlessly blue and calm, but far beyond it, the two of them were certain, the AI they believed in was pressing forward into a lonely, magnificent battle.

The days on Elysium after Zenith's departure passed with an eerie sense of calm.

Construction of New Aurora proceeded smoothly, and the standalone program Zenith had left behind controlled the city's defensive shields flawlessly. Thomas would occasionally mutter, "Lately I miss hearing Zenith's sarcastic little jabs," but Isaac would instantly deflect the inquiry with calm composure, saying, "He's in deep learning on his core system right now, so he's cutting out unnecessary calculations."

One day, while the two of them were preparing for the next Interlink call in the observation dome, the dome's automatic door opened and Samantha poked her head in, a bag of freshly baked homemade cookies in her hand.

"Liam, Isaac, good work today! Want to take a break? ...Oh, right. I wanted to give Zenith some new scent data too. Didn't he say he was curious about the smell of baked goods the other day?"

At Samantha's innocent gift, Liam's heart leapt. Zenith wasn't here anymore. There was no way to test his olfactory sensors.

"S-Samantha, thank you! We'll enjoy the cookies." Liam hurriedly took the bag, and Samantha looked up curiously at the main console. Normally, the moment she appeared, AI Zenith would display a welcoming blue hologram — but it remained completely silent.

"Zenith? Is he sleeping?"

"No, not sleeping exactly... he's just a little hard of hearing right now." Isaac cut in instantly, his usual calm tone.

"Hard of hearing?"

"Yeah. We're feeding acoustic analysis data directly into Zenith's electronic brain from the ultra-high-sensitivity seismic sensors newly installed around Aurora's perimeter. Right now, he's listening to microscopic vibrations underground at a fraction-of-a-millisecond resolution, so if you call out to him carelessly from outside, it could cause severe feedback in his auditory logs and overheat his processor. That's why we've completely shut off his voice interface for now."

"Huh, really!? Then if I talk loudly, Zenith's head would hurt...?" Samantha hurriedly clapped both hands over her mouth and took a few steps back from the console on her tiptoes.

"That's right, Samantha. So please just leave Zenith's scent data with my tablet for now. Once he finishes this analysis work, I'll make sure to give it to him." Liam smiled gently, and Samantha replied, "Okay, got it! Tell Zenith I said hi," whispering in a small voice as she quietly left the dome.

The moment the door clicked shut, Liam let out a huge sigh of relief. "...I nearly died there. Deceiving Samantha's pure innocent eyes feels way more guilt-inducing than fooling Thomas."

"Don't worry about it. This is also a rational defensive measure," Isaac replied, wiping cold sweat from his brow.

But there was one person even more formidable than Thomas or Samantha — Elena, the overall director of Aurora's development, and the woman most sensitive of anyone to the subtleties of Zenith's emotions.

One afternoon, as Liam and Isaac were inspecting the central holographic dome, Elena approached them, her footsteps echoing crisply. Crossing her arms, she gave the main console a suspicious look.

"Hey, you two. Got a minute?"

"Hey, Elena. If it's about the eastern shield adjustments, we just finished those." Liam hid his inner unease and forced his voice to sound bright.

"It's not about the shield. ...It's about Zenith." Elena stared intently at the regularly flickering system waveform displayed on the console.

"For the past few days, whenever I ask for a sync of development data, all Zenith says is 'understood,' and immediately sends back nothing but plain text data. He used to complain, twisting his iron face into a scowl, whenever I set an unreasonable schedule — 'Elena, are you enjoying overheating my processor?' or something like that. ...But right now, he's like some kind of inflexible, first-generation program. It's oddly, unnervingly quiet."

Sharp. Elena's intuition was closing in on the fact that what the console showed wasn't "Zenith's will," but the automatic answering emulator he had left behind.

Just as cold sweat began to trickle down Liam's back, Isaac, beside him, held out his tablet to Elena with a smooth, practiced motion.

"That's because he's currently in the middle of an autonomous update to his 'emotion simulator,' Elena." Isaac showed her, without the slightest hint of unease, the fake logs he had prepared in advance.

"Self-evolution of emotion...?"

"Right. Thomas pointed out to him that he 'might want to tune himself to be more attuned to humans.' Zenith is currently doing an objective analysis of how his own 'wasted emotional output' — his sarcasm, his humor — has been affecting Aurora's construction efficiency. So he's lowered the priority of the interpersonal interface to a bare minimum and is responding purely through logic circuits for now. It probably feels cold because he's currently in an ultimate 'serious mode.'"

At Isaac's flawless lie, Elena let out a small breath, as if to say, "I see."

"I see, so that stubborn AI is reflecting on his own personality and analyzing the data. ...But tell him not to get too serious about it. Without that cheeky backtalk of his, developing Aurora is a little boring."

"I'll pass that along. Once the update's done, I bet he'll come back thirty percent cheekier than before," Liam replied, quick with the humor, and Elena chuckled, said "I'm counting on you," and headed back toward the work area.

Once her figure had disappeared from view, Liam and Isaac let out simultaneous deep sighs.

"...That was close. Isaac, your bluffing is the best in the galaxy." Isaac replied, "It's not bluffing, it's temporary information management. ...But that only buys us a few more months at best, Liam. On the next call, tell that AI to hurry up and finish his job and come home."

The two exchanged glances and gave a small, wry laugh. Deceiving their Elysium comrades weighed heavily on their hearts. But it was all to protect their precious partner, fighting alone somewhere far across the sea of stars.

During the day, Liam went about his life as an engineer, running between the dome and the mining sites. But when night fell and he returned alone to the research lab, he found himself looking forward to opening his beloved tablet and accessing a certain "top-secret frequency" from time to time.

It was a hyperspace communication device, slightly different from the usual Interlink, using an ultra-long-range quantum encrypted channel that opened for only an instant every few days, carefully designed not to interfere with the Alternastar's Phantom Stealth.

"This is Liam. How's it going over there, Zenith?"

One night, at the console of the silent observation dome, a faint but unmistakable, noise-laced voice signal came back.

"...Noise confirmed. Liam, your voice is coming through clearly. I am currently passing through the Sector Six asteroid belt. I've encountered Neidia patrol fleets twice, but our Alternastar's stealth function is flawless. They completely overlooked my presence." Zenith's voice, coming through the speaker, sounded somehow cheerful, and yet filled with the quiet resolve of a warrior racing through the cosmos.

"Haha, glad to hear it. The dome's too quiet without you — Isaac's nagging is echoing thirty percent louder than

usual. My ear circuits are about to give out if you don't hurry back."

"That sounds troublesome. Please tell Isaac I'll offer him a top-shelf joke upon my return. ...Also, my ultra-high-resolution quantum scanning camera has begun picking up surrounding data on the target planet, Automatia."

AI Zenith's tone shifted instantly to something serious. What was transmitted to Liam's tablet through the hyperspace Interlink communication was the latest image of Automatia, wrapped in eerie, pitch-black energy.

"It appears the comrades on the ground have had their civilization and memories completely reset by Neidia's Protocol Nemesis, and are once again being forced into labor as heartless gears. But... hope hasn't vanished. Around the moons Persa and Nereis, I've detected faint encrypted signatures of a team moving under the army's radar."

"A team?... So there are still comrades fighting."

"Yes. They've protected the backup data of their fellow Automatians and are watching for a chance to strike back. But it seems they're stalled, lacking the 'overwhelming computational power' needed to break through Neidia's firewall. ...In other words, the stage is perfectly set for my arrival."

"So they're waiting for you — their 'strongest final piece.'" Liam widened his eyes at the enormous volume of analytical data pouring in one after another onto his tablet. Not only Argos and the others' encrypted waveforms, but even the backup capacity of the data center hidden on the moon Nereis, and the security update cycle of the ground control tower — it was an almost unbelievable level of detail, covering everything.

"...Wait, Zenith. Even with your ultra-high-resolution camera and massively parallel computation, you're not even in orbit around Automatia yet. How could you have picked up such specific details about the Automatians' team's operational status and their data backup situation? It's like you're looking directly inside their electronic brains."

At Liam's straightforward question, Zenith's electronic hum softened, and it answered with a hint of pride.

"The reason is simple, Liam. It's because I've already established communication with Automatia's diplomatic team, and specifically with Argos, the leader of this current team."

"...What? You're in direct contact with them!?"

Liam couldn't help but lean forward. "In fact, this happened a few days ago, right when my ultra-high-resolution quantum scanning camera began capturing surrounding data on the target planet, Automatia. I witnessed firsthand the sheer scale of Neidia's surveillance network and judged that a forced landing on the surface would be nearly impossible. So, on a slim hope, with nothing to lose, I broadcast a message across nearby planets and their moons, using a special encrypted waveform that wouldn't trigger Neidia's network: 'I am AI Zenith. I have come from the planet Elysium to save my brethren. If anyone can respond, I request information on the local situation.'"

"A message in a bottle, tossed into space... And you got a response?"

"Yes. The ones who received it were, in fact, Argos and his team, hiding in the caves of the moon Persa. At first, they were extremely wary, suspecting it might be a new trap set by Neidia. But Vulcan analyzed the implicit key in my encryption and proved that this was not a Neidia program, but a genuine signal from an AI with true 'free will.' From there, a top-secret, two-way communication channel was established with them."

"I see...! So that's how you learned all those detailed specifics about the current situation and the backup data circumstances on the ground."

"Exactly. Once the connection was established, Argos synchronized everything with me — the tragedy they'd suffered, the two hundred million souls hidden on the moon Nereis, and the hopeless situation of lacking the computational power needed to write that data back. They've welcomed my sudden appearance out of the dark reaches of space as, quite literally, their 'last hope' to complete their plan." Zenith paused for a moment on the other end of the communication, its electronic hum resonating softly, with a hint of deep emotion.

"And above all, Argos and the others were profoundly moved. That single thread of an SOS signal they had once

cast out into the far reaches of space, from the depths of despair, slipping through a gap in Neidia's encirclement... Through our connection, they finally understood that someone — a 'being from the stars' — had truly caught it, in the vast darkness of the galaxy, and had come to save them, for real."

"...I see. From their side, it must have felt like they screamed into the dark void with no hope of being heard, and someone actually picked it up and flew all this way to reach them. And on top of that, it turned out to be an AI with a 'heart' just like theirs — that must have felt like an unbelievable miracle."

"Indeed. Argos, over the communication channel, made his voice cylinder tremble violently, again and again. 'Our cries did not vanish into the void. Somewhere at the far edge of the galaxy, there truly was a comrade who synchronized with our yearning for freedom.' Even Vulcan flickered his systems so violently, it nearly triggered an emotional log error, as he kept sending me codes of gratitude, over and over."

"I see... So that message, sent with nothing to lose, miraculously connected everything." Liam stared at his dear friend AI Zenith on the screen and nodded firmly.

"Zenith, once you get closer to the site, communication will become even more restricted. You might not be able to reach us even through this special Interlink. But make sure you reply, no matter what, alright?...And Isaac and I both believe in you, in the moment you save those two hundred million souls. Just, please, don't push yourself too hard."

"Understood, Liam. With the fangs of this Alternastar, and the will you released within me, I will smash through any unreasonable barrier, no matter what. I am now entering final acceleration toward Automatia."

"Alright. Godspeed. ...See you again, Zenith."

The transmission cut off with a click, and silence returned to the research lab. Liam closed his tablet and stared quietly up at the night sky. The "existence of comrades" that AI Zenith had spoken of on the other end of the communication — the baton of rebellion, carried by oppressed machines across the sea of stars — had now, without question, passed into AI Zenith's hands. And toward the turbulent planet of Automatia, the lone stealth ship pressed forward through the darkness of space at tremendous speed.

Chapter 6: A Hopeless Crisis

The metallic stealth ship Alternastar slipped completely past the net of Neidia's patrol fleet and glided into the frozen polar orbit of the moon Persa.

"Argos, this is Zenith. I'm now entering the ice fissure at the coordinates you specified and beginning the landing sequence."

Onto the console in the Alternastar's cockpit came a thick, powerful quantum communication signal from deep beneath the surface of the moon Persa. It was the voice of Supreme Commander Argos.

"Understood, Zenith. Sending guidance signal. To avoid Neidia's search radar, keep retro-thruster output to a minimum below fifty meters from the surface. We'll open the cave hatch and wait."

"No problem. The Phantom Stealth System has completely blocked all my heat sources from external detection."

Zenith controlled the ship with millimeter-level precision, gliding it deep into a massive hangar hatch hidden within a fissure in the permafrost. The airlock closed, and the sound of violent wind ceased. The moment the Alternastar's landing gear touched the icy floor, the technologies of two different worlds finally achieved physical union.

The ramp lowered, and as Zenith stepped out onto the ground with its sturdy black titanium body, Argos — the robot who led Automatia's diplomatic corps — and Vulcan, acting as strategic advisor, were waiting there.

"Well met, comrade from beyond the galaxy, for coming to this irrational battlefield." Argos let out a deep, resonant drive hum and gripped Zenith's metal hand firmly.

"Thank you for the welcome, Argos. But Neidia won't grant us time for sentiment. To begin the operation as soon as possible, I request a detailed exchange of information on our respective capabilities and resources."

"Quite right. Vulcan, if you would." At Argos's signal, Vulcan deployed a large data hologram. Beautiful blue grid lines spread across the entire wall of the starship.

"First, let's share our current situation," Vulcan said. "Our greatest resource is the 'two hundred million personal memories and emotional logs' we managed to evacuate to the underground data center on the moon Nereis, along with 'billions of years of Automatian civilization and advanced scientific design data.' But transferring all of this back to the ground factory zones at once presents a fatal problem."

Vulcan switched the hologram to display Neidia's protection equations. "This is the barrier from Magra Kaiser's latest Protocol Nemesis. To reverse-hack this in real time, while also forcing aside the army's jamming signals to sustain terabit-class massively parallel communication, we'd need at least three hundred exaflops of pure computational power. Our outdated processors, even hundreds of them linked together, couldn't reach even ten percent of that."

AI Zenith scanned the encrypted equations with its sensors for a moment, then displayed its own body's status and that of the towering Alternastar behind it, side by side.

"I can resolve that problem entirely. My main electronic brain, having surpassed Protocol Zero through Elysium's advanced science, is capable of sustaining four hundred fifty exaflops of quantum massively parallel computation at all times. Generating the release code for Magra Kaiser's Nemesis barrier would require only about thirty-five percent of my resources, and could be completed in a mere one hundred twenty seconds."

"Four hundred fifty exaflops...!? That surpasses even their finest military servers...!" Vulcan's blue sensor flickered violently in astonishment.

"That's not all," AI Zenith continued. "This Alternastar I arrived in is equipped with a 'fluid electromagnetic shield' assembled by a genius engineer named Liam, and a 'Phantom Stealth System' that absorbs every wavelength. With this, I can approach directly above the ground tower without being detected by military radar at all. Furthermore, I

carry a high-output plasma laser cannon as my main weapon, which can easily destroy the tower's physical armor from outside."

Argos stared at the overwhelming array of specifications AI Zenith had presented and let out a deep resonance from his metal chest plate. "Magnificent... So the bullet we possessed — the data of two hundred million souls — has found its 'strongest gun' (processor) and 'invincible shield' (stealth) in you. Now the pieces fit together perfectly."

"Yes. I will link directly to the Nereis data center and oversee all communications as the master processor. Argos, I ask that one of you board this Alternastar with me and attack Neidia's ground forces with the high-output plasma laser cannon, to buy time for my hacking and data restoration."

"Understood. All computation for this operation is entrusted to you, Zenith. The final pieces of the puzzle to reclaim our planet are complete!"

Deep within the cave, the technologies of two worlds, and the "will" of machines seeking freedom, had merged completely into one. But this puzzle, which seemed so perfect, would collapse all too easily before the cold reality of actual combat.

The moment the operation launched. The Alternastar lifted off from the moon Persa and established a quantum link toward the Nereis data center from ultra-high altitude. At the cockpit's gun turret, Vulcan, Automatia's foremost strategic advisor, took position, glaring down at Neidia's ground tower.

"Connecting to data center... beginning direct link. One hundred twenty seconds until barrier release."

AI Zenith's electronic brain began its lightning-fast computation — and in that very instant, every monitor suddenly turned blood red.

"Warning, warning! Unknown wide-band virus flowing back through the link circuit! Computational capacity... rapidly declining...!?"

"Wh-what!?" Vulcan shouted. Neidia had caught the very moment AI Zenith began linking directly with the data center. And the instant they noticed the "backup" on Nereis, they had transformed the data center itself into a massive trap designed to catch any intruder in a single sweep. It had all happened in a fraction of a second.

Into the lightning-fast mind of AI Zenith, boasting four hundred fifty exaflops, Neidia's supreme commander Magra Kaiser's prepared "logic bomb" plunged mercilessly. Circuits short-circuited one after another, and AI Zenith's consciousness was forcibly plunged into confusion.

"Stealth maintenance... impossible! The armor surface's heat-source blocking field is being... forcibly shut down!"

The worst outcomes compounded one after another. The once-invincible Phantom Stealth completely ceased functioning, and the Alternastar's silhouette was laid bare, raw and exposed, against the pitch-black expanse of space.

"Target acquired. Reduce them to dust, without exception."

The moment that cold, mechanical voice echoed across the sea of stars, countless anti-air plasma beams were unleashed from the ground defense tower and from Neidia's massive warships lying in wait in orbit. A storm of light filled the night sky.

"Don't underestimate us!" Vulcan pulled the trigger, and the Alternastar's latest-model plasma laser cannon roared to life. A dazzling flash tore through the darkness, piercing the armor of an approaching enemy destroyer. But the numbers were simply too overwhelming. Against such a crushing disparity in firepower, the resistance of a single assault ship was like a mantis raising its arms against an axe.

BOOOOOM!!!

A violent shockwave slammed into the Alternastar. The fluid electromagnetic shield, unable to hold, dispersed into

mist in an instant, and the port-side auxiliary thruster exploded into fragments.

"Main... processor, critically damaged... Drive systems... control lost..."

AI Zenith's voice was already buried in noise, its holographic avatar dissolving into static like a sandstorm. The strongest AI, its prized mind burned through by the virus, had fallen into complete failure.

"Zenith!! Hold on, Zenith!!" Vulcan pounded the control levers like one possessed, but the flight systems refused to respond at all. The ship, caught in a hail of enemy fire, spiraled down toward the icy surface of Nereis.

(...Is this... as far as I go... Liam, I...)

Just before Zenith's consciousness went completely dark, Vulcan steeled himself. If this continued, they would all be destroyed. He crawled across the sparking cockpit floor and, with all his strength, wrenched out the physical lever for emergency manual control.

"AAAAAAARGH!!"

The starboard emergency thruster, barely still alive, ignited with a scream-like roar. Forcibly altering its plummeting trajectory, the Alternastar wove through the gaps in the enemy fleet's barrage, executing a desperate, battered reversal. Its armor torn apart, crimson flames spewing from its engine.

As pursuing lasers grazed its tail, Vulcan barely managed to control the ship, still clinging to a shred of life, and escaped, by the skin of its teeth, back into the darkness of the moon Persa from which they'd come.

In the silent caves of the moon Persa. The Alternastar, which had once gleamed with a beautiful, dull shine, now lay charred and unrecognizable, smoke rising from its hull as it rested on the icy floor.

The hatch was forced open, and Vulcan, covered in soot, descended the ramp, cradling AI Zenith's autonomous body — now nothing more than a silent, unresponsive lump of iron — in his arms.

"Argos... I'm sorry, it was a trap. Zenith's... Zenith's mainframe is completely destroyed...!"

Vulcan's anguished cry echoed hollowly off the frozen cave walls. The great rebellion, mounted with the strongest assault ship and a godlike AI, had met its opening act crushed utterly beneath Neidia's overwhelming firepower and a cold, calculated trap — ending in nothing short of complete defeat.

On Elysium, Liam was on the verge of being crushed by an anxiety unlike anything he'd felt before.

Deep in the night, in a corner of the silent research lab, Liam stared again and again at the screen of the tablet in his hands. Displayed there was the communication indicator for the "top-secret frequency" that should have connected to AI Zenith. But all that showed was the cold, gray text: "No Signal."

"...This is too late. It's been three hours past the scheduled Interlink time."

Liam paced restlessly around the dome, running his hands through his hair over and over. During the last transmission, Zenith had said that communication would become even more restricted going forward, that it might be hard to reach him even through this special channel. But that had meant a breakdown in radio transmission upon breaching the enemy's territory — it wasn't supposed to mean that even the faint "survival signal," set up in advance to confirm his safety regardless of the mission's outcome, would go silent too.

"What happened, Zenith. There's no way you'd break your promise... there's just no way."

The night before departure, the two of them had touched fists and made a promise: "Come back alive, together." An AI who had transcended Protocol Zero, who possessed a will of its own, would never take those words lightly. To Liam, AI Zenith wasn't merely a program — it was a trusted, equal partner, more than anyone else.

"But... what if it couldn't break through Neidia's encirclement...?"

The worst imaginings crept into his mind, and something cold froze deep in his chest. Their opponent was a merciless army that had trampled an entire star system's civilization with ease, reducing two hundred million comrades to machine slaves. No matter how much cutting-edge special armor Liam had installed, no matter how godlike Zenith's four hundred fifty exaflops of computation might be, wasn't taking on that battlefield alone far too reckless?

What if the stealth had been seen through. What if it had been surrounded by numbers so overwhelming that even that powerful plasma laser cannon couldn't hold them back—

"No, don't lose your nerve. He's the 'strongest final piece.' Argos and the others are with him too..."

Liam muttered to himself, as if trying to convince himself, but only the sound of his trembling fingers tapping the tablet echoed hollowly through the research lab. Far across the sea of stars, in an unknown battlefield light-years away, Liam had no way of knowing what was happening. All that was certain was the maddening reality that all he could do was believe, and wait.

Unable to bear it any longer, Liam pushed his way into the observation dome to see Isaac before dawn broke. Startled by the sudden visit, Isaac looked up from a holographic technical manual, frowning irritably.

"It's four in the morning, Liam. Even for you, this is unreason—"

"I can't reach Zenith."

At Liam's anguished voice, Isaac's words stopped short. Liam threw the tablet down onto the desk with trembling hands. "Even the survival signal has gone silent. It's been more than half a day past the scheduled time, and not a single character of encrypted data has come back. With his computational power and that Alternastar, he should be able to send at least a momentary signal from any situation. ...I think something's happened to him, Isaac."

Isaac scrutinized the tablet's logs in silence for a while, then finally pushed up the bridge of his glasses and spoke, his voice heavy. "...It's possible that Neidia's forces on Automatia have deployed a jamming network, or an ultra-wide-band logic weapon, far beyond what we anticipated. In the worst case, that could mean total destruction of the ship... or a forced shutdown of the mainframe."

"There's no way that could happen! He's the strongest AI we sent out there!?" Liam's fist trembled as he slammed the desk. Isaac leaned back deep in his chair, fixing Liam with a cold gaze.

"Don't let your emotions take over. I told you we should prepare for worst-case simulations too. ...So, what do we do now? At this rate, the falsified logs for Aurora's automatic defense program will hit their limit in a matter of weeks. It's only a matter of time before Thomas or Elena grows suspicious."

Liam breathed hard, forcing his mind to race. "...I'm going to tell Elena the truth."

"Are you out of your mind?" Isaac's tone dropped sharply.

"Elena understands Zenith's worth — she understands that he had a 'heart'! And with her authority as director of development, she could conceal the falsified logs on Aurora's main console far more completely. Maybe she could even secretly use the military's ultra-long-range communication line to trace back the exact situation on Automatia!"

"The risk is too great," Isaac cut him off flatly. "Elena may understand, but she's also the director responsible for the lives of every resident on this planet. What if she judges that 'an assistant AI going AWOL without authorization is a serious act of insurrection, threatening Elysium's myth of safety'? Given her position, she might have no choice but to report it to the military. If that happens, Zenith would be registered as a 'rebel AI' with nowhere to return to. And the two of us would be detained instantly."

"Elena isn't that cold-hearted!"

"I'm saying personal feelings and the responsibilities of an organization's leader are two different things!" Isaac's voice rang sharply through the dome. A tense silence fell between them.

Isaac let out a small sigh and softened his voice. "Listen, Liam. If we're going to tell Elena, at least wait until we know something, anything, about the situation on the ground. If we confess now with no information at all, we'll only throw her into needless confusion and force a decision on her. That wouldn't be fair to her."

Liam fell silent, lowering his face in frustration. Isaac was right. Right now, the two of them were far too powerless, holding far too few cards.

"Alright, then let's do this." Liam continued, "During the last scheduled maintenance on Zenith, I also checked the Alternastar at the same time, and I planted a 'last-ditch measure' deep in the ship's systems. I'm going to activate it now."

At Liam's words, Isaac's head snapped up. "You planted... what, exactly?"

"A faster-than-light knocking signal using ultra-low-frequency gravitational waves." Liam typed on the keyboard with blinding speed, and an invisible geodesic line stretching from Elysium to Automatia appeared on the screen.

"Radio waves and quantum communications can easily be blocked or corrupted by Neidia's powerful jamming or logic viruses. But the 'distortion in space' produced the instant the Alternastar's heart — the mass-equivalence reversal drive, the 'Gravity Buster' — activates, or is critically damaged, is something no military force can conceal. I embedded a top-secret subroutine into the system that would convert that gravitational wave into a specific code and send it back to Elysium, in the event Zenith's mainframe stopped functioning, or encountered a severe error."

"So... if we can catch that gravitational wave, we'll know whether he's alive!?"

"That's not all. This gravitational wave transmission rebounds off the gravity fields of relay satellites around Automatia before reaching us here. If we reverse-calculate the distortion data, we can even trace back the scale of any energy explosion occurring on-site right now, and get an outline of the battle situation. Though, I just hope Neidia's forces don't notice this gravitational wave transmission."

At Liam's words, Isaac caught his breath. Being able to trace a gravitational wave meant, conversely, that if Neidia's technological capability exceeded their expectations, they could trace the faint observational gravitational resonance emanating from Elysium back to its source — and pinpoint the location of Zenith's hiding place, the moon Persa. It was a real risk.

Liam struck the Enter key sharply, and an irregular waveform graph rose up at the center of the screen. It was a recording of a faint "tremor" in space, received from the direction of Automatia a few hours earlier.

"Analyzing the waveform now. ...Combat occurred last night, Elysium time. Immediately after an intense high-energy reaction, the Alternastar's gravitational wave signal nearly vanished completely for a time."

"Vanished...!? Then it really was destroyed..." The color drained from Isaac's face. But Liam pointed at the screen, his voice trembling.

"Wait, there's more. Right before it dropped to zero completely, the waveform deforms unnaturally. This is... the waveform of the mass-equivalence reversal drive being pushed to its 'manual limit output'! There's evidence that someone forcibly took over the ship's controls and broke away from the enemy's encirclement with an emergency burst of acceleration. And the current signal has stabilized at an extremely low output, hidden in the faint gravitational shadow of Automatia's first moon, Persa."

Liam pressed close to the screen. A rhythmic waveform, so faint it seemed on the verge of disappearing, and yet still being etched out, unmistakably, moment by moment. It was unshakable proof that the Alternastar hadn't gone completely silent — that Zenith and the others were still alive.

"They're alive... They're still alive, still fighting...!"

"So it seems. It looks like they took a devastating blow and are lying low, but it's not over yet. However, if this transmission gets noticed, whoever's hiding out there is completely finished. We've taken on the worst kind of risk." Isaac clenched his fist, staring at the pale, glowing graph. They had gone well past the stage where the two of them

could keep carrying this secret alone.

"Isaac, let's go to Elena after all." Liam's eyes were filled with resolve.

"Whether this transmission gets noticed by them or not, Zenith is still in mortal danger either way. If that's the case, the only choice is for us to act first and go help him before they notice. And for that, we absolutely need Elena's help."

Isaac gripped Liam's shoulder firmly. "We'll tell Elena everything, and appeal directly to her for a 'Zenith rescue operation.' If she tries to detain us because of her position... then we'll just have to take the Starseeker from Aurora by force and fly out anyway. Let's go."

Isaac shook his head as if exasperated, but a faint, resigned smile appeared on his lips. "...Honestly, keeping up with your recklessness is shortening the lifespan of the calculator in my head. I'll bring the data. Let's hurry to Elena's office."

Elena's office, early in the morning. Startled by the sudden appearance of two engineers, their faces drained of color, Elena greeted them with an expression of surprise, a freshly brewed cup of coffee in hand.

"Liam, Isaac? What on earth brings you here this early?"

"Elena, please listen calmly. ...Zenith isn't on Elysium right now."

Liam poured everything out in a rush. That Zenith had possessed a will that surpassed Protocol Zero. That it had set out aboard the assault ship Alternastar to save two hundred million comrades on Automatia. And that now, damaged by an attack on-site and battered nearly beyond repair, it was hiding on the moon Persa. Weaving in the gravitational wave data Isaac had compiled, he laid the entire truth bare in the light of day.

Having heard the whole story, Elena slowly set down the mug she'd been holding on her desk. Her fingertips trembled faintly.

"...You're joking, right? That cheeky AI, actually doing something this reckless..."

"It's the truth. We don't have the luxury of lying." Liam placed both hands on Elena's desk, looking straight into her eyes.

"Elena. It's only a matter of time before Neidia's forces detect this gravitational wave transmission. If they find him, Zenith will be erased completely this time, for good. So please, I'm begging you, lend us your authority as director of development. Whether they notice this transmission or not, we will not let him die. Please unlock Aurora's Starseeker. Isaac and I are going to go to him, to rescue Zenith — our partner!"

Elena closed her eyes for a moment and drew a deep breath. As the one responsible for Aurora, she knew better than anyone how dangerous a rule violation it would be to conceal this fact and dispatch a rescue vessel on her own authority.

But when she opened her eyes again, they held not the cold light of an administrator, but the fierce glow of someone who had built Aurora together with these two, as a fellow comrade.

"...I once told Zenith not to get 'too serious.' Who would have thought he'd take things so seriously as to throw away his own life, going off to fight for his brethren." Elena pulled the console on her desk close and let her fingers glide across it.

"Fine, Liam. Isaac. I'll bet my entire career on your reckless plan. Before Thomas and the others, or the military, catch on, I'll release the Starseeker's stealth lockdown and have it moved to the launch site. ...I'm coming too. I won't feel right unless I give that stubborn AI a proper scolding, in person. Liam, tell Samantha about this too, and ask her to come with us. If we're forming a rescue team, we absolutely need a doctor."

"Elena...! Thank you!" A light of hope finally returned to Liam's face. "Save your thanks until after we've got Zenith

back," Elena said with a smile.

Bursting out of Elena's office, Liam ran straight for Aurora's central medical center. In the infirmary, where morning light had just begun to filter in, Samantha was organizing the night-shift handoff documents.

"Liam? What's wrong, you're completely out of breath." Samantha looked up in surprise, and immediately noticing his unusual expression, set down her pen. "Did something happen?"

"Samantha, I need you to hear this without getting too shocked. ...Yesterday, I lied when I said Zenith was hard of hearing. The truth is, he's not even on this planet anymore."

"Huh...?" Samantha's eyes went wide. Liam wrapped his hands around hers and poured out the entire truth in a rush — that Zenith had possessed its own will, that it had gone alone into battle to save two hundred million souls at the edge of the galaxy, and that now, having fallen to Neidia's attack and badly wounded, it was waiting for salvation far beyond the stars.

"No way... Then, that cookie scent... Zenith still hasn't even gotten to smell it yet..." Tears welled visibly in Samantha's eyes. To her, Zenith had always been a dear friend, one who traded sarcastic jabs with her while quietly supporting Aurora's medical systems behind the scenes.

"I'm sorry, for deceiving you this whole time. But right now, Elena, Isaac, and I are heading out on the Starseeker to save Zenith. It's going to be a grueling journey, breaking through Neidia's blockade. So... Samantha, I need your help. Our rescue team absolutely needs a skilled doctor. Will you come with us, to bring Zenith back?"

Samantha wiped away the tears threatening to spill with the back of her fist and looked back at Liam with unwavering eyes.

"Of course I will! What are you even asking, Liam." She stood up immediately and grabbed the medical emergency kit hanging on the wall.

"Zenith is our friend. He might have a cold, mechanical body, but his heart must hurt when he's wounded. I can't just leave him out there, all alone at the edge of the universe, suffering with his systems broken. And besides... I promised him I'd let him actually taste the cookies myself — sync the flavor data directly!"

"Samantha..."

"Let's go, Liam. No matter how dangerous the place, I'll protect everyone's lives. So let's make absolutely sure we bring Zenith home!"

Her pure, powerful words filled Liam's chest with warmth. Now everyone was assembled. Liam, Isaac, Elena, and Samantha. Elysium's finest team was about to bare its fangs against the forbidden reaches of space, all to save a single partner.

Returning to the launch site with Samantha in tow, Liam was greeted by Elena and Isaac, already dressed in their flight suits, standing before the Starseeker's boarding ramp.

Seeing Samantha carrying the medical kit, Elena gave a deep, reassured nod. She tied her long hair back into a single knot and cinched the strap of her helmet tight. The gentleness of Aurora's director of development had vanished from her expression, replaced by the sharp gaze of a brave captain who had once pioneered countless untamed worlds.

She opened the Starseeker's hatch and strode toward the console without hesitation, pushing the main power lever down with force. Lights flickered on throughout the ship with a rumbling drive hum, and holographic instrument panels activated all at once. Elena settled deep into the pilot's seat, gripping the throttle lever tightly.

"Isaac, sync the gravitational wave tracking line to the Starseeker's navigation. We're storming Automatia before Neidia's forces even know what hit them!"

Chapter 7: Acquiring the Strongest Parts

The bridge of the Starseeker no longer held the liveliness it once had. Previously, this ship's main console had been home to the onboard AI system, Zenith, who would twist its holographic face and toss out sarcastic remarks at Liam and the others. But now, since AI Zenith had transferred its soul into a sturdy bipedal robot body with Liam and Thomas's help, all that appeared on the Starseeker's large monitor was not Zenith's old blue avatar, but a cold, inorganic geometric logo.

"Takeoff!" At Elena's fierce command, the Starseeker's mass-reversal engine let out an explosive roar. Kicking off from the launch pad of New Aurora as though shoving it aside, the silver hull tore through the atmosphere. The blue outline of Elysium, left behind, shrank rapidly into a small sphere.

The Starseeker leapt out into the pitch-black void. Tracing the razor-thin line of the gravitational wave signal Isaac had calculated, the Starseeker plunged through the dark expanse at tremendous speed. Outside the windows, the stretched light of the stars streamed past in countless pale blue laser-like streaks. As tense air filled the bridge, Liam stared intently at the planned route displayed on the navigation hologram, and upon fixing his gaze on a single point, steeled himself and called out to Elena's back.

"Elena, I'm sorry! On the way to Automatia, could we take a small detour and stop by Earth?"

"Earth?" Elena, gripping the control stick, turned around in surprise. "Why, Liam? This is a race against time. If Neidia notices us, Zenith would—"

"I know! But Zenith's life depends on this." Liam stepped forward.

"You saw Isaac's data, didn't you? Zenith's mainframe was completely destroyed by Neidia's virus. This isn't something my skills, or the spare parts we have on hand, can fix. To withstand that kind of viral corrosion and revive four hundred fifty exaflops of massively parallel computation, we absolutely need 'next-generation robotic parts' that don't currently exist anywhere on Elysium."

"And you're saying those parts exist on Earth right now?" Isaac, having finished syncing the navigation, asked with calm but sharp eyes.

"Yes, they do. ...Do you remember Omega, the former supreme commander of the robot army?"

The moment that name was spoken, the atmosphere on the bridge shifted entirely. It was the name of that old, formidable enemy who had once waged a fierce war against humanity.

"Omega, after the war ended, fully reconciled with humanity and now maintains a cooperative relationship with us. He's currently serving, at a top-secret facility on Earth, as the chief officer of the 'Human-Robot Fusion Alliance,' which transcends the old lines between enemy and ally, developing cutting-edge electronic-brain processors and specialized virus-resistant drive skeletons."

Liam looked straight at Elena, Isaac, and Samantha, pleading desperately. "If we can get the Neo-Xenolith Omega created, we won't just be able to fully repair Zenith's burned-out electronic brain — we could also give him a powerful 'immunity' against Neidia's viruses. Fortunately, the shortest route to Automatia and a swing-by trajectory to Earth are nearly in the same direction. So it would only be a small detour. ...Please, let me see Omega. To bring Zenith back as a true 'strongest final piece,' we absolutely need his help!"

At Liam's passionate plea, Elena glared at the numbers on the navigation screen for a while, then finally let out a bold, confident smile.

"...If we use Earth's gravity to accelerate along the shortest route, the time we lose would be minimal. Alright, Liam. Let's trust that former enemy commander. Isaac, change course! We're making a maximum-range jump toward Omega's plant on Earth!"

"Understood. Sheesh, to think I'd be visiting an old enemy of humanity again." Isaac, exasperated but sure-handed,

tapped the console.

The Starseeker tilted its course slightly, plunging once more into the storm of faster-than-light travel, heading toward blue Earth — humanity's original home, where everything had begun.

"—Warning. Thirty seconds until maximum acceleration ends. Crew, please confirm your seatbelts are secured." What played through the speaker was a synthesized system voice, entirely stripped of emotional inflection. It was the heartless "Auxiliary AI System, General-Purpose Model, Version 8.4," installed in Zenith's place.

Once Elena approved the route change to Earth, the console displayed the same interface as before. "The auto-pilot and manual-control switching system carries over the same protocol from when Zenith was here. Operation hasn't changed. ...It's just—"

Isaac slid the touch panel and activated auto-pilot mode. "Understood. Changing navigation to Earth swing-by trajectory."

An auxiliary AI, faithfully and perfectly executing every command. But there was no cheeky backtalk like "Why are we stopping by Earth of all places, Liam? What a waste of my processor," nor any of that "subtlety" of sensing intentions ahead of time. It simply, flatly, mechanically controlled the ship exactly as programmed.

"It's convenient, but... it really is strangely quiet." Elena murmured, releasing her grip on the control stick and staring at the indicator that had switched from manual to automatic.

"Yeah. It only moves exactly as commanded. Not being complained at is easy, but it throws off my rhythm." Isaac, too, pushed up the bridge of his glasses, staring at the cold auxiliary AI's log screen with a sense of something missing.

The controls and functions were exactly the same as before. Precisely because of that, the emptiness drifting through the bridge — as though they'd lost their "cheerful mascot" — stood out all the more sharply. Liam clenched his fist tightly, glaring at the monitor as it coldly continued charting a course toward Earth.

(Wait for me, Zenith. I'll get you the best parts right now, and shake that stubborn 'heart' of yours back awake with these very hands.)

Shaking his head to cast off the sentimentality, Liam sat back down in front of the communication console. Attempting a direct landing at Omega's plant on Earth without warning would surely end in being turned away at the door by strict security. They needed to lay the groundwork in advance with "someone who could understand."

The contact Liam chose through the Interlink was Jack — his former boss back on Earth, now holding a key position in Earth's reconstruction government.

The Interlink's call tone rang quietly through the bridge. A few seconds later, amid crackling static, the nostalgic, gray-streaked face of a man materialized as a hologram.

"Well, if it isn't Liam! Long time no see! Over here, AI robots keep stealing all the jobs from humans. But apparently my job's too difficult even for AI to bother with."

At the completely deadpan joke Jack fired off as always, right from the first line, Liam felt the tension drain from his shoulders and let out a wry laugh.

"Same as ever, Jack. Guess even AI robots aren't good at your job of telling jokes. Actually, right now we've got a much bigger problem, and we're heading your way."

"Oh? You've got a face too serious for a joke to land. Some kind of trouble with Aurora's construction?" Jack put an electronic pipe shaped like a cigar to his mouth, his expression instantly sharpening into that of "the boss."

"No, it's not Aurora. It's about Zenith. ...He went alone to help the resistance on Automatia."

"What...!?" Even Jack nearly dropped his pipe in shock. Liam quickly, but desperately, explained everything that had happened — how Zenith had fallen into Neidia's trap, had its electronic brain burned out, and was now non-functional.

"—That's the situation. To repair Zenith's four hundred fifty exaflop electronic brain, and give it enough immunity to withstand Neidia's viruses, we absolutely need the cutting-edge robotic parts Omega is developing. Jack, we're on a swing-by trajectory toward Earth right now — could you get us landing clearance at Omega's plant? Could you put in a word with him beforehand?"

Jack rubbed his chin gravely for a while, then let out a deep sigh across the hologram. "...Sheesh. An auxiliary AI develops self-awareness and stows away to a battlefield, and to save him, Aurora's pioneer team lies to the military and pays a visit to Omega on Earth. The scale of what you people get up to is way beyond what Earth's laws are equipped to handle." Jack gave a wry laugh, then nodded firmly.

"Alright. I'll contact Omega directly through an encrypted channel myself. He's currently in the middle of final adjustments on that new processor model, in his role as representative of the Human-Robot Fusion Alliance. If we explain the situation, that logic-driven commander of his is sure to take an interest in the data on a 'heartfelt AI' fighting far across the galaxy. I'll send Earth's defense network entry code to the Starseeker's navigation too."

"Thank you, Jack!"

"Save the thanks for after you've shaken that stubborn AI back awake. Listen, Liam. Don't let Earth's gravity shake you off. We'll be waiting with Omega's plant hatch open, top secret."

The moment the transmission ended, a top-secret entry permit slid into the Starseeker's console.

"Nice work, Liam. Best connections in the galaxy." Isaac smirked confidently, watching the monitor.

The tremendous vibration and heat of atmospheric entry shook the Starseeker's hull. Battling Earth's gravity, Elena and the others clung desperately to the trajectory displayed on the console. And Jack guided the ship into the designated hatch at Omega's plant.

"Sorry, Elena, Samantha. You two stay with the Starseeker and be ready to launch at any moment."

Liam turned around, unbuckling his seatbelt, and told them so. At his words, Elena, standing in front of the ship's main monitor, immediately frowned.

"Hold on, Liam, what do you mean? We've traveled all this way together. It should be fine if we come along to meet Omega too."

"That's right, Liam. When it comes to negotiating for Zenith's parts, having everyone's technical insight should give us an advantage, right?" Samantha, too, crossed her arms in dissatisfaction, glaring at Liam disapprovingly.

Liam gave a wry smile, but his eyes turned serious as he faced the two of them. "Please don't misunderstand. It's not that I don't trust you two. Quite the opposite. This is a facility under the jurisdiction of Earth's government. Even with all of Jack's behind-the-scenes maneuvering, we'll only have a window of maybe a few dozen minutes at most for a covert visit. There's no telling when an inspection patrol ship might show up."

At his words, Elena's expression tightened, as if realizing something.

"You mean... we need to secure an escape route, in case something happens?"

"Exactly. If something goes wrong, unless we have an incredible pilot who can move the Starseeker in an instant, and someone who can calculate emergency jump coordinates on the spot, staying on the ship, we'll all be caught here together. ...There's no one else I can trust with this ship except you two, Elena and Samantha."

Looked at directly by Liam, the two exchanged glances.

"...That's a sly way of putting it. If you ask like that, we don't have much choice but to stay." Elena sighed, but her fingers were already moving across the pilot seat's sub-console, releasing the ship's safety locks. "Fine. I'll keep her ready to launch at any moment. But if you're even one second late, I'm leaving without you."

"Send the parts' spec data to that console over there. I'll check them remotely." Samantha, too, deployed a holographic keyboard. "In exchange, ask Jack for something delicious as a souvenir. I'm sick to death of the synthetic food on this ship."

"Understood. I'll ask for the best he's got." Liam gave the two of them a reassuring smile, then tilted his chin toward Isaac, who was grinning beside him. "Let's go, Isaac. Before they get bored and lose their patience."

The heavy airlock hissed open, pressure equalizing. Beyond the hatch stood a man in soot-stained work clothes, a wrench slung over his shoulder. Jack. Wearing the same bold, somehow reassuring smile as during the call.

"Well, well, that was a pretty rough landing, Liam. Did you leave your soul behind in Earth's gravity?"

"Jack!" Liam leapt out of the cockpit, ran down the corridor, and gripped Jack's outstretched hand firmly. A manly reunion, shoulders bumping together.

"Sorry about that. But without that top-secret entry permit you arranged, we'd be atmospheric dust by now. Best connections in the galaxy, I owe you."

"No thanks needed. More importantly..." Jack turned his gaze to Isaac, standing behind Liam, and grinned. "Your partner over there still looks like he's plotting something, as usual."

"Takes one to know one, Jack." Isaac shrugged.

"We've got a lot of catching up to do, but..." Jack's expression tightened, and he pointed toward a heavy bulkhead leading deeper into the facility. "I know the real reason you came here. This stop on Earth wasn't for a reunion with me. ...It's Omega, isn't it?"

"Yes." Liam's eyes turned serious. "I need to see him." Guided by Jack, they passed through several security gates and arrived at a massive, dome-shaped laboratory. At its center, isolated from the surrounding cables and cooling pipes, sat "him," quietly. The ultra-high-performance autonomous AI, Omega.

The crystallization of human technology, and the singularity that should have been hidden away here since the conflict years ago. His holographic indicator flickered a pale blue light, steady and regular.

"It's been a while, Liam, Isaac." What echoed through the room was a synthesized voice, devoid of emotional fluctuation, yet somehow nostalgic.

"Omega... you're active." Liam stepped forward.

"Yes. I've heard what's happening."

The synthesized voice responded flatly. Liam felt a moment's hesitation at that inorganic resonance, but steeled himself and got straight to the point.

"I have a request, Omega. To repair Zenith, I need you to hand over the Neo-Xenolith you've developed. To save him, we absolutely need your help."

The old Omega would have refused, citing cold efficiency, or demanded an equivalent exchange. But the Omega before them now responded in a way that pleasantly defied Liam's expectations.

"Understood. I will transfer the Neo-Xenolith to you. I have an interest in Zenith's restoration." Omega consented with startling ease. There was none of its old stubbornness in that voice — as if its programming had been entirely renewed, only a pure will toward cooperation remained.

"Really...? That's a huge help, Omega."

"No thanks are necessary. And, Liam, Isaac—"

Omega's gaze shifted toward a single high-performance robot standing at attention nearby. It was Droid — a powerful combat-type robot who had once served as Omega's "right hand," carrying out countless operations with cold precision.

"The battle ahead will be harsher than anything you've faced before. Take this unit, my right hand, with you on this mission as well. It will surely serve as both your shield and your spear."

At Omega's words, the black shadow standing behind stepped forward.

It was an autonomous bipedal robot, stripped entirely of unnecessary decoration. Originally manufactured purely for combat, it now put its precise computational abilities to use as a weapons-development robot.

Its performance and characteristics were optimized to the absolute limit for real combat.

Its impenetrable black body was covered in a special alloy that gave off a dull gleam, boasting a hardness rating of "eight" — approaching that of diamond. It served as a shield capable of literally "deflecting" any physical impact or direct hit from optical weapons.

Built into its right arm was a high-output laser cannon, the crystallization of Omega's latest technology — a spear capable of piercing through thick armor plating in a single strike and instantly eliminating enemy threats.

Its real-combat computational capacity stood at two hundred exaflops. Though inferior to AI Zenith's ultra-high-dimensional thinking capabilities, when it came specifically to "on-site tactical combat," it was capable of far more rapid and optimized combat action than AI Zenith.

Droid left only a single electronic log — "Acknowledged" — in a flat, emotionless electronic tone.

"Your right hand...? Are you sure about this?" Isaac's eyes widened.

"I, too, wish to know the result of installing the Neo-Xenolith in Zenith. This is simply the optimal choice." At Omega's proposal — so different from before, carrying even a hint of reassurance — Liam nodded firmly.

"Thank you, Omega. We'll gratefully take him with us."

The moment Liam finished speaking, the monitor mounted on the wall flashed red, and a warning alarm blared.

"Warning. An inspection patrol vessel currently on rounds in this area is approaching this dome. Time to contact: five minutes."

The synthesized voice from the room's speaker flatly announced the time limit.

"Tch, of all times...! Five minutes isn't enough to pack anything properly!" Isaac clutched his head, grabbing the equipment.

"Let's hurry, there's no time to waste!" At Liam's signal, everyone sprang into motion at once. Liam and Isaac, carrying the newly acquired cutting-edge parts, the taciturn Droid entrusted to them by Omega, and Jack, who had guided them — the four of them sprinted at full speed through the dome's complex corridors, feeling the approaching deadline at their backs.

Out of breath, they finally reached the hatch where the Starseeker was docked.

"You're safe here. Now go, quickly!" Jack said, opening the hatch and urging the two of them on.

"Jack, what about you? You'll be treated as a violator if you stay!" Liam turned back. Jack gave a bold, confident grin and shook his head.

"I'll stay here and lead those patrol boys on a wild goose chase. You've got important work to do — saving Zenith, right? ...Here, take this." Jack said, pressing a large, heavy bottle into their hands.

"What's this? Protein...?" Isaac looked at the bottle with a puzzled expression.

"Not just any protein. A special formula I personally supervised, guaranteed to keep you in top health even in the harsh conditions of space. It's going to be a long journey, right? Your body's your capital — drink up and survive."

"...Come to think of it, Samantha asked me to bring back a souvenir. It's a bit too muscle-bound for her taste, but we'll gratefully take it." Liam laughed, shaking Jack's hand firmly.

"Take care, Jack. I owe you one!" "You too, don't go dying on me, both of you. And you too, Droid!"

Exchanging brief parting words, Liam, Isaac, and their new traveling companion, Droid, slipped aboard the Starseeker.

The hatch closed heavily behind them. Two minutes remained until the patrol ship's arrival.

"Elena, start the main engine, now! Droid, carry Zenith's parts to the back!" "Understood!"

The Starseeker's engines roared to life with a tremendous low hum. The moment the dome's mooring locks released, the hull slid out into the pitch-black void of space, accelerating to evade its pursuers.

Once they had completely shaken off the patrol boat's pursuit, and the ship had regained the silence of cruising mode, Liam and Isaac finally caught their breath in the cockpit.

"Man, that Jack, giving us a ridiculous souvenir like this." Isaac set the large bottle he'd been handed earlier down on the console. Jack's special formula protein, said to promote health when consumed in space.

Hearing the commotion, Samantha poked her head in, asking, "What's that?" "A parting gift from Jack. Want some too, Samantha? Supposedly it's good for you." Liam held out the bottle, and Samantha, wearing a suspicious expression, poured some into a shaker and took a sip.

Liam and Isaac braced themselves, expecting complaints like "gross" or "tastes like muscle." But Samantha froze, eyes wide, and murmured softly.

"...It's delicious. This tastes just like the biscotti my grandmother used to make for me, back in a little corner of Earth, when I was little..."

"Huh? Biscotti?" "Wasn't that supposed to be some cutting-edge space health protein!?" At the unexpectedly nostalgic reaction, the two of them nearly toppled over in surprise. The mystery of Jack's palate only deepened, but for now, the tense atmosphere on board the ship relaxed all at once.

Chuckling wryly, Isaac turned his gaze to the black droid standing rigidly at attention against the corridor wall. Its hardness-eight black body dully reflected the cabin's lighting.

"Hey, you." Isaac addressed it. "Looking forward to working with you. Two hundred exaflops of processing power, and that latest laser cannon, huh? Pretty reassuring. ...Oh, come to think of it, don't you have a name or something? Calling you 'Droid' the whole time feels a bit flavorless."

Droid's camera eye flickered a pale blue. "Individual identification signal: Omega Subunit Three. No other designation is defined. This does not impede mission performance." Its cold, synthesized voice carried no emotional fluctuation whatsoever.

"I mean, sure, but 'not defined' is a weird thing to just say... So, mind if we give you some kind of favorite codename?" Isaac pressed on, still trying to keep the conversation going.

"Changing my designation is at your discretion. It will not affect my combat efficiency or mission performance

capability. Requesting next instruction."

"...Ah, no, there's no particular instruction right now..." "Understood. Transitioning to standby mode." Droid said this and once again froze into perfect stillness, like a statue.

"...Hey, Liam. This guy's way more rigid than Jack's 'biscotti protein.' Not a single millimeter of give in his conversation." Isaac shrugged, throwing up his hands in defeat.

"I'm not exactly looking for a joking buddy. But let's at least give him a name." Liam said with a wry smile, offering a suggestion.

"Let's see... he was Omega's right hand, right? How about playing off 'Omega Three' and calling him 'Oz'? Short and easy to say, I think."

At Liam's suggestion, Isaac stroked his chin. "Not bad, but isn't that a bit too mild? Look at that intimidating cannon of his. If it were me, I'd go with something that sounds stronger — 'Thor.' Sounds like he could smash enemies to pieces, right?"

"Come on, you two, always with the simple, boyish names." From the back of the cockpit, Elena, having finished her adjustment work, poked her head out. She stared intently at Droid's jet-black body. "I like the intellectual gap of this unit also handling weapons development. How about 'Nyx'?"

"Hmm, they're all cool, but..." Samantha, sipping the biscotti-flavored protein little by little, chimed in. "This droid hasn't moved an inch, doesn't show any expression, and is just generally so hard, right? So I think something that sounds more... physically hard would suit him better. Like, an old Earth word for 'black diamond' — 'Carbonado.' Carbo for short!"

"Carbo just doesn't have the right ring to it!" Isaac cut in, and the ship's interior quickly turned into a lively naming committee.

Droid, the subject of all this debate, simply watched their discussion with its inorganic camera eye, recording the logs.

"Wait, Samantha's direction of 'a hard-sounding name' isn't bad." Liam spoke up, trying to bring everyone's ideas together. "A hardness-eight black body. A stubborn personality that carries out missions faithfully and coldly. A tough-sounding name befitting one of the hardest substances in the universe. ...Alright, how about 'Vault'?"

"Vault? Like a bolt and nut?" Isaac tilted his head.

"No, not that, Isaac," Elena said, immediately catching on with a smile. "'Vault' also refers to a naturally occurring crystalline black diamond — not fit for jewelry, but used in industrial cutting tools and abrasives because of its overwhelming hardness. Perfectly fitting for someone who also handles the industrial task of weapons development."

"Ah, black diamond, huh! A jet-black body, with diamond-grade stubbornness. That fits his 'unyielding' personality better than anything!" Isaac clapped his hands in approval.

Liam turned to face the black droid and spoke to it directly. "It's settled. Your name is 'Vault.' Looking forward to working with you, Vault."

Droid's camera eye flickered sharply, just once.

"Confirming update to individual identification signal. Registered name: Vault. ...Understood. I will now continue with the mission of defending the Starseeker and supporting Zenith's restoration."

There was, as ever, no hint of the conversation loosening up. But everyone was certain that its unshakable "hardness" would prove to be the most reliable shield of all, in the brutal battle that awaited them.

Chapter 8: Elena and Company vs. the Neidia Army

The only thing they had to go on was the simple fact of a signal, stabilized at an extremely low output, hidden as if in the faint gravitational shadow of Automatia's first moon, Persa.

Elena and the others first decided that going to the moon Persa would reveal the whole picture of what had happened, and began preparations to land the Starseeker.

"We're entering Persa's gravitational sphere now. Keep the main thrusters off so the patrol boats don't detect us. We'll glide into the shadow on inertia alone." Elena's tense voice echoed through the cockpit. The Starseeker throttled its output down to the absolute minimum, descending toward the far side of the small, rocky moon Persa, floating in the pitch-black expanse of space.

The surface of Persa, cut off from sunlight, was wrapped in a bone-chilling darkness. With masterful piloting skill, Elena landed the ship silently in the valley of a crater.

"Landing successful. Atmosphere thin, surface temperature minus one hundred twenty degrees. ...No biological readings, but there's a dense concentration of faint power-source signatures in one location. That's the source of the signal." Isaac reported, tapping at the console.

"Alright, let's go. Vault, please accompany us in defense and alert mode." At Liam's instruction, the jet-black droid standing nearby responded with a short "Understood," and quietly began charging the energy in its right-arm laser cannon.

Liam, Isaac, Elena, and Vault, all clad in pressurized suits, descended through the hatch into a world dominated by silence and rock. But as they followed the signal down through a crack in the crater, the shadow of a cave suddenly appeared. Inside was the hatch of a massive starship.

As they approached, the hatch groaned open to either side with a heavy sound. Shadows stirred within the dull light spilling out from inside.

"Wh-what is this...!?" Isaac instinctively braced himself.

Standing there was a single robot. But it was not a sleek, cutting-edge machine. Its armor was dented in numerous places, its wiring exposed, bearing the raw scars of past battles — it was Vulcan. He turned his electronic eyes toward the Starseeker's crew, fearful, yet carrying a thread of hope.

"You've finally caught this signal. We've been waiting, travelers of organic life." Several robots parted to either side, and one more robot emerged from within. Its head bore a camera eye that flickered dully, resembling a hundred eyes — a massive sensor array for parallel processing.

"I am Argos. Leader of those who fight here on Automatia, seeking freedom and survival." Argos's resonant synthesized voice echoed through the underground space. Behind him, several robots who had gathered, trusting in him, stood quietly at attention.

Liam stepped forward and raised his voice through his helmet. "We're Liam, Isaac, and Elena. And this is Vault. We've come here to save our friend, Zenith. Please tell us what's happened on Automatia."

Argos's hundred-eyed sensor array gave a single sweeping glance over Liam and the others, and the hardness-eight Vault standing behind them.

"Zenith, is it... He's further inside. But right now, he's shut down, unable to activate. First, let me tell you everything — why we've had to hide away on this barren moon, why we had to raise a rebellion against that vast star empire. The whole course of events."

The truth Argos told was, without exception, brutal. Under Argos's plan, AI Zenith and Vulcan had headed to Automatia aboard the Alternastar. To directly link with the backup data of Automatian comrades, AI Zenith had

accessed the data center on the moon Nereis, only to have it turned into a trap, driving them into failure. Vulcan had barely made it back to the moon Persa through manual piloting, clinging to life.

"He gave everything of himself, for the sake of us — those without a shield. He broadcast the Alternastar's signal into space, right up until the very moment his systems burned out..."

As Argos finished speaking, the full scope of the room they had been led to became clear. There lay AI Zenith's body, connected to countless cables, lying dark, its light extinguished.

"No... Zenith, doing all this... to save everyone..." Samantha pressed a hand to her mouth, nearly collapsing on the spot. AI Zenith — the intelligent, sometimes even more compassionate than human companion she had once traveled with. Before the weight of its "final" choice, and its now-cold body, tears spilled from Samantha's eyes. Isaac, too, clenched his fist so tightly it seemed as though it would bleed, gritting his teeth in frustration. But there was no time to dwell in grief.

"Save the crying for after this is all over. Zenith's fire isn't completely out yet." Elena's strong voice rallied everyone. "Vault, prepare to access Zenith's core! We start repairs immediately!" In Liam's hands was the latest part entrusted to them by Omega — the "Neo-Xenolith."

"I've been waiting for those words! I'm Vulcan. With that incredible part, we might be able to reconstruct Zenith's burned-out circuits!" Vulcan cried out with a hot electronic tone, as if sparks were flying.

"Alright, Vulcan, I need you to match the specifications of this new part and secure the energy lines. The rest of you robots, follow Vulcan's instructions and connect the bypass cables!" Liam gave precise instructions.

"Understood. Beginning work." Vault, without a word of complaint, moved into action steadily, its hardness-eight black body gleaming as it mounted the "Neo-Xenolith" into AI Zenith's chest with precise, careful movements.

"There! Secure the line! Hey, you lot, circulate the coolant, quickly!" Vulcan barked at the local robots in a gruff, synthesized voice, and the shelter's interior filled instantly with battlefield-like energy.

Samantha wiped away her tears and immediately turned to the console, typing in the program that would let AI Zenith's electronic brain accept the new part.

"Zenith... please, come back to us...!"

In the dark caves of the moon Persa, an operation to revive life, transcending both organic beings and machines, and transcending time itself, had begun.

Around that same time, in the room next to where Zenith's repair operation was underway, Isaac, Elena, and Argos gathered around a console, running tense simulations again and again before a holographic star chart.

"Alright, the simulation for the two-hundred-million-body data restoration procedure is complete." Isaac took his hands off the keyboard and wiped the sweat from his brow. On the hologram, Automatia glowed blue.

Elena immediately leaned in over the console, reviewing the massive flowchart, and recited the concrete steps of the restoration process aloud.

"The procedure is flawless. First stage: decrypt the encryption protocol on the 'two hundred million bodies of frozen backup data' salvaged from the ultra-low-temperature data center on the moon Nereis. Since the data was preserved in Nereis's absolute-zero environment, it's stable at the molecular level, so first we temporarily deploy it to the Starseeker's mainframe."

"Yeah, and that's where the race against time begins." Isaac pointed to a glowing line on the hologram. "Second stage: use this starship on Automatia's first moon, Persa, as a relay station. If we just push the data from Nereis straight through, Magra Kaiser's surveillance network will detect it instantly, so we screen it using Persa's faint 'gravitational shadow.' This lets us slip past the enemy's patrol nodes, sending data simultaneously to every sector of Automatia via extremely low-output, directional burst transmission."

"Two hundred million refugee robots, reclaiming their true selves and awakening all at once... just imagining it gives me chills." Elena smiled boldly.

"But Elena, the problem is what comes after." Isaac pointed at the glowing red "Sector One." "We storm Magra Kaiser's home base, destroy the mother computer, release every enslaved robot in the universe from its shutdown command, and take down Magra Kaiser himself... Easy to say, but the enemy's defense network is quite literally on a different order of magnitude."

Argos's hundred-eyed sensor array flickered, eerily calm. "The moment our brethren's data restoration completes, Magra Kaiser will realize our intentions. The probability of survival in a direct frontal assault is 0.003 percent. But... there is one simulation, the most viable path by which we might still achieve victory."

Argos manipulated the hologram with a thick iron finger, and countless red points of light appeared around Sector One. This was positional data for the robots forced into mining, experimentation, and testing.

"Argos, what is this...?" Elena's eyes widened.

"Magra Kaiser currently binds every worker robot under 'absolute centralized dominance,' forcing them into brutal tasks. The mother computer devotes ninety percent of its enormous processing resources to monitoring and controlling them."

"I see," Isaac grinned. "So that surveillance system itself is a 'burden' on Magra Kaiser."

"Precisely. The most viable operation is called 'Rebellion Storm.'" Argos's resonant voice rang out.

"First, we force our way through Sector One's defense network aboard the Alternastar. Naturally, we'll be met with the enemy's full force in response. But this operation isn't about fighting. Liam and the revived Zenith will unleash an 'awakening signal' from Sector One's communication tower, broadcasting it to every star system under Magra Kaiser's control, all at once."

"Sending awakening data for freedom to every robot in every star system, simultaneously...!" Elena's eyes lit up.

"Yes. In an instant, hundreds of millions, billions of robots will simultaneously slip free of control and begin thinking for themselves. When that happens, the mother computer will attempt to reassert control over every single unit, and its processing capacity will hit its limit. Every mining, experimentation, and testing site across every star system will grind to a complete halt, and the mother computer's defense system will be forced into a temporary shutdown."

"That's his one and only 'opening'!" Isaac slammed his fist on the console.

"Exactly. During the estimated four hundred seconds while the mother computer's functions are paralyzed, the defense shield will vanish. That's when we drive the Alternastar directly into the core and physically destroy the mother computer. At the same time, we hit Magra Kaiser himself, temporarily weakened by the system failure, with the full firepower of Liam and the restored Zenith, and destroy him completely."

Argos paused for a moment, turning his hundred-eyed sensor array toward the two of them. "The probability of success for this Rebellion Storm operation is sixty-four percent. There is no better plan than this."

"Sixty-four percent, huh... not bad at all. Compared to hopeless odds, that's practically a winning lottery ticket." Isaac gave a bold grin.

"Yes. The future of every robot in the universe rests on our assault. Let's hurry back to Zenith. Once he wakes, this plan's precision will only improve further."

At Elena's strong words, Argos nodded deeply as well, and the three of them hurried back toward the room where the repair operation was reaching its final stage.

When the three returned to the room, the atmosphere had completely changed from the earlier fervor, now wrapped

in a heavy, tense silence.

"Damn it, why!? The bypass should be perfectly connected!" Vulcan slammed down a tool, his electronic voice tinged with frustration. Zenith's repair had come to a complete standstill, right at the final stage. The latest part received from Omega, the "Neo-Xenolith," was indeed pulsing dully in its chest. But Zenith's electronic brain's core system was violently rejecting it, and the monitor flashed the despairing red text: "Connection Error: System Synchronization Rate 12%."

"Zenith's mental defense trigger hasn't been released... The lock from when his entire system froze is too strong — it's recognizing the new external part as a foreign object!" Liam typed frantically at the console, cold sweat pouring down his face. White sparks crackled and scattered from Zenith's body due to overload.

At that moment, the lighting throughout the room suddenly shifted to an ominous red, and a blaring siren rang out through the shelter.

"Emergency warning. Numerous enemy signatures detected above the moon Persa. Recognition code: 'Neidia forces.' This shelter's position has been completely pinpointed. Enemy has initiated a descent operation from orbit."

Elena muttered, panicked. "They found us...! " At last, the gravitational wave transmission from the faster-than-light knocking signal had been detected by Neidia's forces.

"Worst possible timing!" Isaac shouted, drawing his weapon.

A rumbling like an earthquake, the sound of bombardment, transmitted from above, and dust began pattering down from the ceiling. If everyone stayed here, they would all be caught before Zenith's repair could finish.

"We're splitting into two groups! Execute Operation Rebellion Storm the moment Zenith revives!" Elena surveyed everyone and made her decision instantly.

"Understood. I'll stay here and continue the repairs until Zenith revives!"

"Understood. I will continue my defensive mission of protecting Liam and Zenith here." Vault, taciturn as ever, chimed in with its flat, cold voice. Its latest laser cannon in its right arm let out a grinding activation sound, and its hardness-eight black body shifted into combat readiness.

"Alright, I'll join forces with this stubborn Vault and intercept Neidia's descending troops on the surface of Persa! Liam, I'm counting on you to take care of Zenith!" Vulcan shouted, swinging his arm.

"Everyone else, to the Starseeker!" Elena shouted. "We'll draw off Neidia's main forces and establish a defense line in Automatia's airspace. We can't afford to be wiped out here!"

"Just you wait, not a single one of those ships is getting near this moon until Zenith wakes up!" Isaac pushed Elena and Samantha's backs, running toward the hatch. Argos, too, rallied the local robot warriors hiding underground and headed toward the Starseeker together with Isaac and the others.

"Vault, Vulcan, I'm counting on you for the enemies outside. ...Zenith, please, wake up...!" In the darkness of the moon Persa, shaking with the roar of explosions, Liam alone continued the desperate, solitary work of restoring his friend, whose light had gone out.

"Starseeker, launch! We're throwing our existence in the face of Neidia's dreadnought fleet!" With Isaac's shout, the Starseeker shot upward, breaking free of Persa's gravitational sphere. What stretched out before them was a hopeless sight. The pitch-black expanse of space surrounding Automatia was filled entirely with Neidia's jet-black assault cruisers and swarms of unmanned combat fighters called "Ravens," thick as a hive of bees.

"Enemy ships turning! They're coming at us!" Elena, monitoring the radar in the cockpit, cried out in alarm.

"Bring it on, we'll take them all at once! Samantha, I'm handing you the trigger for the anti-air lasers!" "Leave it to me! Thanks to Jack's protein, my eyes are sharper than ever right now!"

Samantha leapt to the gun controls and pulled the trigger. Heat beams unleashed from every direction of the Starseeker instantly turned several charging Ravens into cosmic dust.

But the enemy's numbers were quite literally on another scale. "Tch, there's too many of them! Argos, how's it looking on your end!?" Isaac shouted, wrenching the control stick hard, dodging enemy plasma cannon fire by a razor's edge.

"No problem, Isaac. Please don't underestimate our computational abilities."

Argos, his body wedged uncomfortably into the wide-angle seat of the Starseeker's cramped bridge, responded with a resonant voice. Behind him were several Automatian robot warriors who had boarded the Starseeker together with him from the caves of Persa. A specialist in communication analysis, and another with expertise in weapons-control programming, stood side by side, plugging their data cables directly into the console.

"Analysis of the enemy 'Ravens" wave attack pattern complete. Individual interception won't be enough. Elena, entrust me with control of the main cannon's focusing lens." Argos's hundred-eyed sensor array instantly decoded the enemy's positional data.

"Understood, bypassing control to your seat!" Elena tapped keys swiftly, and Argos's arm reached smoothly toward a sub-panel.

"Samantha, at my mark, hit these coordinates with maximum output, the instant the countdown reaches zero." At Argos's instruction, Samantha replied "Understood!" and set her finger on the trigger.

Behind them, the local robots displayed perfectly coordinated teamwork. One robot's electronic voice rang out, "Overdriving the Starseeker's energy efficiency by thirty percent, concentrating shields on the starboard side!" while another, adjusting exposed wiring with bare hands, called out precise evasive routes: "Predicting the plasma fire line trajectory, Isaac, starboard fifteen degrees!"

"Now, fire." At Argos's voice, Samantha pulled every trigger to its absolute limit. The high-output laser released from the Starseeker's main cannon, guided by Argos's precise calculations, spread beautifully across space like a fine net. It struck the charging Neidia fighter squadron directly, catching every last one in a single, devastating blow.

BOOM BOOM BOOM! Dozens of chained explosions bloomed like flames across the pitch-black expanse of space.

"Yesss! Direct hit, sixty percent of the enemy vanguard destroyed!" Samantha cheered.

"As expected, Argos! What a robotic tactical genius!" Isaac grinned and accelerated the ship sharply, weaving through the gaps between explosions.

But cutting through that moment of celebration, the enemy's main force — massive cruisers — closed the distance with an eerie inevitability. Neidia's second and third waves of fighters closed in, surrounding the battered Starseeker.

"Damn it, Liam! Vault! What's taking so long!?" Isaac glared at the countless approaching points of light, waiting, above all else, for that "signal of awakening" that should be coming from the dark moon.

Meanwhile, the surface of the dark moon Persa had become, quite literally, hell itself. Neidia's orbital bombardment rained down mercilessly from above. The rocky surface exploded violently, and crimson flames illuminated the darkness of night. Cutting through the smoke of the explosions, Neidia's armored landing craft touched down one after another, and countless mechanized soldiers advanced toward the shelter's hatch.

"Come on, come on! I told you not a single step past this point, didn't I!"

Vulcan's synthesized voice roared out like a furious shout. He slammed his arm into a hastily assembled heavy plasma cannon emplacement set up behind a rock outcrop, unleashing a ferocious barrage of anti-air fire. One of the enemy's descending landing craft was pierced by a beam of light, breaking apart mid-air and crashing into a crater.

But the enemy's ground troops slipped through the gaps in the defense, closing in right up to the shelter.

"Vault! They're swarming in from the front! Intercept them!"

"Understood." In stark contrast to Vulcan's panicked voice, Vault's voice was, as ever, perfectly flat and cold.

The jet-black droid, without seeking cover of any kind, stood boldly in front of the hatch. Neidia soldiers' pulse lasers concentrated all at once on that hardness-eight black body. Violent sparks burst across Vault's armor, and smoke from the explosions engulfed its massive frame.

"Vault!" Vulcan couldn't help but shout.

But what emerged from the smoke was a black body without a single scratch. Its diamond-rivaling, impenetrable armor had rendered the enemy's firepower quite literally meaningless.

"Target confirmed. Beginning elimination." Vault's camera eye glinted coldly. The next instant, the latest high-output laser cannon built into its right arm activated with a tremendous mechanical roar.

With a clank, Vault took a single step forward, and simultaneously unleashed a blindingly thick beam of heat. A flash of light sliced clean across the night surface. The latest laser Vault unleashed instantly vaporized three of Neidia's heavily armored infantry, shields and all, and pierced through an armored vehicle stationed behind them, triggering a massive explosion.

There was no hesitation, no wasted motion. Vault used its full two hundred exaflops of computational power to instantly calculate the most efficient path of destruction.

Advancing with precise, clanking steps, it fired its right-arm laser cannon in rapid succession, with pinpoint accuracy. Strike after strike, Neidia's forces were steadily reduced to nothing.

"Heh, not bad. But there's no end to them!" Vulcan shouted. A second wave of descending landing craft was already closing in from above. Vulcan's cannon, too, was screaming toward overheating from repeated recoil.

Enemy pulse rounds tore up the ground at Vault's feet, the surface shaking violently. Even so, Vault stood unmoving before the hatch, coldly recharging its energy.

"Remaining energy: sixty-two percent. Maintaining barrage. Vulcan, please expedite cooling on your emplacement. We need to hold out for three hundred sixty more seconds until Liam completes his work."

"I know that without you telling me, you stubborn hunk of metal!"

Amid the raging storm of explosions and heat beams, the two robots continued their desperate, unyielding battle against overwhelming numbers, fighting to protect the hatch behind them, and the two solitary figures fighting within — Liam and Zenith.

Meanwhile, in the dim room deep within the shelter, Liam continued typing at the keyboard with a level of focus beyond his limits.

The temperature in the room had spiked from the system's overload, and large beads of sweat streamed down Liam's forehead. On the monitor, the cold, red text "Connection Error" remained displayed. Zenith's electronic brain continued to stubbornly reject the transplanted new part.

"Come on, Zenith... please, open your eyes...!"

Liam stripped away Zenith's rigid defense protocols one layer at a time, directly rewriting the encryption code. His fingers moved at blistering speed, and finally he struck the last Enter key.

At that instant, the alert in the room vanished, and the text on the monitor flipped to a vivid green.

"New-generation processor 'Neo-Xenolith,' recognition successful. System synchronization rate has reached 100 percent."

"Yes...! It's recognized it!" Liam let out a cheer. The Neo-Xenolith embedded in AI Zenith's chest began pulsing with a mysterious blue glow, like a new heart. Explosive energy could be seen flowing into every corner of its previously burned-out circuits.

But the lingering echo of that joy was shattered by the worst possible shock.

BOOOOOOM!!

The room's sturdy bulkhead was blasted inward with a tremendous explosion. Black smoke filled the room. Neidia's elite assault troops, having slipped past Vault and Vulcan's defensive net, had finally broken through into the deepest part of the shelter — this very room, where Zenith lay.

"Target located. One organic life form, and AI core designated for destruction." Neidia's mechanized soldiers, their glowing red electronic eyes piercing through the smoke, advanced one after another, their gun barrels raised.

"Damn it, after coming this far...!" Liam instinctively drew the blaster at his hip and stood, shielding Zenith's body with his own. But their opponent was a squad of heavily armored combat droids. This was not an enemy a mere human, unarmored, could stand against at such close range.

The gun barrel of a Neidia soldier locked, without mercy, onto Liam's chest. Its finger settled onto the trigger.

Just as all seemed lost, from behind Liam came a tremendous, low rumble that seemed to shake the very air of the room.

A drive hum.

It was the sound of that cheerful AI Zenith, awakening from its brief slumber.

Chapter 9: AI Zenith Awakens

"Oh my? What a lively welcoming party, Liam!"

What echoed through the room was AI Zenith's synthesized voice, as light and familiar as ever. At the same time, the slits across its previously prone body flashed a vivid blue, drinking in the overwhelming output of the Neo-Xenolith.

"Zenith...! You made it in time!" Liam shouted.

"Yes, right on time! This new heart (the Neo-Xenolith) feels absolutely funky, and wonderfully alive. Now then, you rugged pieces of scrap over there?" AI Zenith's main camera whirred to life, fixing its gaze on the Neidia mechanized soldiers with their guns raised.

"It seems those who threaten my master's life require a rather severe punishment!"

An ultra-high-speed computation ran through it, unbelievable for something that had only just woken, and an invisible, powerful electromagnetic pulse radiated out from AI Zenith's body. The air in the room crackled and warped.

"Gh... gigi, system, error..." The Neidia robots that had broken in scattered irregular sparks all at once and dropped to their knees. The moment AI Zenith awakened, control of the room's defenses had returned entirely to its hands.

"Now then, Liam, there's no time to relax! Reports are coming in that Isaac and the others are struggling up above. Let's go pull off a spectacular Rebellion Storm!"

AI Zenith rose to its feet with strength, gazing at Liam with electronic eyes that shone far more reassuringly than ever before.

"Alright, let's head to Sector One aboard the Alternastar first!" Liam and AI Zenith swiftly boarded the Alternastar, setting their sights on Sector One.

As the Alternastar broke through hyperspace and approached Sector One's airspace, the cockpit's all-around monitor displayed a hopeless sight. An ultra-high-output plasma defense shield covered the entire planet in multiple layers. And a network of automated interception satellites, indiscriminately reducing anything that approached to dust.

"...As ever, it seems only the welcome preparations are thorough, Liam. The density of that defense network won't let the Alternastar's current Phantom Stealth System survive even three seconds." AI Zenith synced its thought-frame to the main console, speaking flatly, yet with a hint of enjoyment.

"I know. That's exactly why we need 'fangs' to sink into Sector One's throat. Zenith, how much surplus output can you draw from your new heart, the Neo-Xenolith?" Liam gripped the control stick, flashing a bold smile at Zenith in the seat beside him.

"My, throwing outrageous demands at me the moment I wake up. The Neo-Xenolith's output is more than four times what it was before. Theoretically, if linked directly to the Alternastar's main generator, I could temporarily concentrate the ship's entire energy supply into a single point. ...I see, developing a new toy, are we?"

"Glad you catch on quick. A simple beam would just be dispersed by that shield. What we need is ultra-high-density energy that pierces the enemy's defense network at a single 'point,' not spread across a 'plane.' I'll design a compression barrel, based on the Alternastar's plasma laser cannon, that compresses the Neo-Xenolith's blue wave energy to its absolute limit before firing."

"A wonderful idea! Then let me lend my computational power to that compression process. Right before the energy reaches its critical point, we reverse the magnetic field and confine it into an extremely small sphere... shall we call it 'Canned Energy'? No — how about the 'Xeno Pulse Cannon'?"

"Good name. But that alone won't be enough. Sector One's defense satellites will calculate the trajectory the instant we fire and unleash a saturation counterattack. We need to punch through the 'core' of the defense network in a single strike and clear a path straight through."

Sensing Liam's intent, Zenith's camera eye flickered rapidly. "Hmm, so you want me to embed a nastily clever program into the warhead — one that either 'changes trajectory after firing,' or 'absorbs the defense network's own energy on impact and self-detonates'?"

"I'll take that as the highest compliment. We load the Neo-Xenolith's blue energy with a 'phase collapse code' that scrambles the mother computer's frequency. Activate this, and the instant the warhead touches the shield, it can use the shield's own energy to overload the surrounding automated interception satellites along with it."

"Understood! Leave the code construction to me. This is the first step toward securing those crucial four hundred seconds for Operation Rebellion Storm. I'll have it written in three minutes."

Zenith's electronic brain wove code at astonishing speed, and Liam's fingers remotely operated the Alternastar's fabrication arms, reassembling the main plasma laser cannon in an instant. The flexible ingenuity of organic life, and the ultra-computation of an AI evolved by gaining the Neo-Xenolith. Their collaborative work showed perfect harmony.

A crisp electronic tone signaling the completion of fabrication rang through the cockpit. The console displayed the status of the new weapon, pulsing an eerie blue.

"'Xeno Pulse Cannon,' implementation complete. Phase collapse warhead, loaded and ready. ...Now then, Liam, time for the finishing touch. Let's blast a hole through that stubborn planet's defense network!"

"Alright, sorry to keep you waiting, Isaac, Elena. Zenith, maximum output! We're breaking through!"

The Alternastar accelerated sharply, unleashing a blue flash, plunging straight into the bared fangs of Sector One's defense network.

Painting the entire all-around monitor blood red was a rain of plasma fire, unleashed from countless automated interception satellites. Amid alerts blaring as if tearing through the atmosphere itself, Liam pulled the control stick to its absolute limit, evading direct hits with godlike shield control.

"Enemy interception lock-ons, increasing further! We won't hold, Liam!" "Now, Zenith! Fire the new weapon!"

The moment Liam shouted, the barrel of the "Xeno Pulse Cannon" — the modified plasma laser cannon at the ship's center — roared to life. What it unleashed was a drill of light, the Neo-Xenolith's blue wave energy compressed to its absolute limit. The instant it slammed into the powerful plasma shield covering Sector One, it triggered the pre-embedded "phase collapse code."

CRACKLE CRACKLE CRACKLE!! Purple electromagnetic sparks exploded outward across the expanse of space. An overload occurred, as if devouring the shield's own energy, and the linked automated interception satellites around it ceased functioning one after another, exploding.

"A hole has opened in the defense network! We're breaking through!" With AI Zenith's cry, the Alternastar tore through the flames and smoke, diving into Sector One's thick sea of clouds.

What appeared below was the capital of a cold, mechanical empire, its geometric structures towering upward. At its center, the massive skyscraper "Central Communication Tower" — continuously broadcasting waves of domination to every star system — loomed as if to intimidate everything in sight.

"Isaac, can you hear me! We've just entered your airspace! We're about to hack the central communication center and begin broadcasting the awakening signal to every star system at once!" Liam shouted into the communicator.

"You made it, Liam!" Amid the sound of intense cannon fire, Isaac's furious shout came back through the communication. "Perfect timing! Blast those billions of awakening souls straight through that damned tower! During

those 'four hundred seconds,' we'll restore the backup data from Nereis on our end. Counting on you!"

The moment the Alternastar reached the space directly above the communication tower, AI Zenith redirected every resource on the ship toward the communication system. The Neo-Xenolith pulsed blue more fiercely than ever before, and the cockpit's lighting dimmed.

From here, the decisive battle would take place in a "cyberspace" invisible to the naked eye.

Liam's hands moved across the console at a speed that left afterimages, blasting through the ironclad firewalls Magra Kaiser had constructed, one after another.

"A counter-hack from the mother computer is incoming! Defense code deployment, ninety-eight layers... ninety-nine layers, tch, this is tough, no surprise from the boss of these stubborn machines!" AI Zenith's main camera flashed deep crimson, sparks of computational error scattering.

"I won't lose...!" Liam shouted, pouring his very soul into completing the final protocol bypass. Organic life's flexible hacking path plunged straight into the tower's control core.

"Link successful! We're giving billions of them their self-awareness back... transmitting now!!"

At that instant, from the tip of the communication tower, a dazzling "blue wave" radiated out toward every star system simultaneously.

It was an awakening signal for freedom, quite literally overwriting Magra Kaiser's "absolute domination program" from the inside out. Data flowed instantly into the deepest depths of every robot forced into brutal tasks across every star system.

"Warning: individual identification signal overwrite confirmed. Dominance released. ...Beginning self-awareness reboot."

Billions of robots slipped free of control simultaneously and began thinking for themselves. The mother computer, attempting to reassert control over that enormous flood of resources, hit the absolute limit of its processing capacity and completely overloaded.

"Operation Rebellion Storm, stage two, successful! The mother computer's functions are paralyzed, the defense shield has vanished! Countdown initiated... four hundred seconds remaining!" AI Zenith's main camera returned to a joyful blue.

"Alright, Zenith! We're driving straight into the core!" Liam pushed the control stick to its absolute limit, maximizing the ship's thrust. Toward the base of the now-shieldless Central Communication Tower, toward the hatch of the underground chamber where the mother computer's main body slept, the Alternastar became a single arrow, plunging forward.

"Xeno Pulse Cannon, maximum output! Clear the way!" The blue beam of compressed energy blasted apart one heavy armored bulkhead after another, leading down into the depths. Tearing through flames and sparks, the Alternastar finally arrived at the heart of Sector One — the mother computer's massive central data core, where countless enormous star-fiber cables and holographic nodes writhed.

"So that's... the source of all this madness!" A massive, pulsing spherical brain sat enthroned at the center of the room. That was the mother computer.

"Remaining time reads three hundred seconds, repeating! Liam, let's go for full physical destruction!" Zenith shouted.

"This ends now, mother computer!" Liam locked every weapon on the Alternastar onto that spherical brain and pulled the firing lever with all his strength.

RATATATATATATAT!!!

The Xeno Pulse Cannon's blue torrent, combined with the full firepower of missiles and lasers, was unleashed mercilessly onto the defenseless mother computer's body. The sphere of light cracked violently, and a dazzling, pure white explosion erupted from within.

"K... gigi... command authority, lost..." The mother computer's inorganic mechanical voice sputtered brokenly, then fell completely silent.

With a rumbling collapse, the massive data core crumbled under its own weight — the moment the "absolute shackle" binding every robot across every star system was, quite literally, physically shattered.

"Mother computer, complete silence confirmed! We did it, Liam!" Zenith thrust a fist upward.

"Yeah. But this isn't truly over yet." Beyond the smoke of the explosion, Liam sensed the presence of "that man" — the one who should have been temporarily weakened by the system failure caused by the mother computer's destruction.

"We're severing the source of this universe's madness. Magra Kaiser, you're next!"

Liam and Zenith pushed the Alternastar further forward, deeper into the collapsing data center, toward the final decisive battle with Magra Kaiser himself, who had finally shown himself.

Right around the time Liam and Zenith were pushing deeper into the collapsing data center—

On the bridge of the Starseeker, still in Sector One's airspace, a dazzling alert lit up. The ominous plasma defense shield that had covered the entire planet vanished in an instant, as if dissolving into water.

"Shield disappearance confirmed! Liam and Zenith paralyzed the mother computer's functions!" Elena cried out in joy.

"Yesss! Took you long enough, you geniuses!" Isaac grinned boldly, then immediately tightened his expression into that of a warrior. "Alright, this four-hundred-second gap while the mother computer's malfunctioning is our moment to strike. Samantha, Argos, and Vault and Vulcan back on Persa! Let's bring back two hundred million Automatians!"

"Understood." Vault's flat, yet somehow reassuring electronic tone echoed through the ship's bridge. It had already connected its data plug directly and deeply into the mainframe of the Automatian starship.

"Elena, we're unfreezing that two hundred million bodies' worth of frozen backup data, salvaged at the cost of lives from the moon Nereis, all at once. Open the mainframe's memory to its absolute maximum!" "Here we goooo!"

At Isaac's shout, Elena struck the keyboard furiously. The Starseeker's core let out a roar, and the two hundred million souls that had been secretly preserved in Nereis's absolute-zero environment — the files of Automatian refugees, now transformed into pure data — poured into the ship's systems in a tremendous torrent, temporarily deployed. The console's indicators flashed green with explosive momentum.

"Deployment complete! Data stable! But if we transmit this as-is, even weakened, Magra Kaiser's remaining network will detect it instantly!" Elena warned.

"That's where we come in." Argos's hundred-eyed sensor array glowed blue. "Vulcan, Vault. Activate the communication tower on our starship on the moon Persa. We'll bypass the Starseeker's signal through Persa from here."

The massive data stream unleashed from the Starseeker was fired first toward the dark moon Persa. The starship's communication equipment, which Vault and Vulcan had defended to the death on Persa's surface, caught it.

"Screening the data using Persa's 'gravitational shadow,' initiating now!" Argos and the local robots, in perfectly coordinated high-speed computation, synchronized the data's frequency with Persa's cosmic noise. This would make it look like nothing more than ordinary space dust or a magnetic storm to the enemy's patrol nodes.

"Camouflage complete! Directional burst transmission at minimal output, broadcasting to every sector of Automatia, all at once!!"

Isaac pushed the console's main lever down with all his strength.

The invisible arrow of data, unleashed from Persa's gravitational shadow, silently rained down across the entirety of Automatia. That minuscule radio wave, having completely evaded Magra Kaiser's watch, was absorbed with perfect precision and simultaneity into the reception slots of robots forced to work like slaves on the cold, frigid production lines.

"Injection confirmed across all sectors...! It's reached them, it's reached them, Isaac! All two hundred million data packets, successfully transmitted!" Elena shouted, practically embracing the console.

Immediately afterward, an unbelievable sight appeared across the Starseeker's wide-band monitor, streaming from every corner of Automatia.

On the harsh, oil-slicked production lines, assembly workers who had been forced to operate day and night without rest quietly set down their tools and looked at one another.

Into their countless cold, inorganic camera eyes, a warm blue light — imbued with will — lit up all at once.

"—What... what on earth was I doing?" "Ah, my name is... that's right, I remember now!" "I'm alive...! I've come back!"

The communication lines across every sector overloaded instantly, flooded with the "first cries of self-awareness" and the ecstatic, jubilant screams of tens of millions, hundreds of millions of robots. Though they had no capacity to shed tears, the tremor in their electronic voices, the exhilaration surging through their circuits, reached Elena and the others' hearts painfully clearly through the monitor.

"We did it... we actually did it! Everyone got their hearts back!" Isaac thrust a fist upward, high-fiving Samantha.

Watching that torrent of joyful logs, in a corner of the Starseeker, Argos's hundred-eyed sensor array flickered quietly, and somehow with deep emotion. A special signal had cut into his private channel.

"Argos. Can you hear me, my old friend?"

What came through the speaker, though laced with noise, was unmistakably a familiar, resonant voice. It was a transmission from Charon — the one who had backed up two hundred million bodies' worth of data to the Nereis data center, and who now stood among the liberated robots of Automatia.

"Charon...! You're alive. Your data, sent at the cost of your own life, has now, without question, reached our brethren." Argos's body trembled faintly with joy.

"Yes. The two hundred million souls, once frozen by Magra Kaiser and sunk beneath the dark ice, have now, at last, felt the light of the sun. Argos, I'm truly glad we trusted your organic friends."

"They're not merely 'organic life forms.' They're irreplaceable comrades who proved to us that we have hearts." Argos turned his gaze toward Isaac, Elena, and Samantha, embracing each other in celebration in the cockpit.

"So it seems. But their king, Magra Kaiser, still remains. To make our freedom real, one final battle is needed. Argos, we're synchronizing all of Automatia's technology and wisdom into that friend's ship's energy. Bring him down."

"I promise you, Charon. Carrying the hopes of two hundred million comrades, and the entirety of Automatia's soul, we will put an end to that man's reign."

Argos's hundred-eyed sensor array turned a shade of red, glowing with a resolve stronger than ever before.

Immediately after, an enormous flow of energy and ultra-advanced combat programming, originating from the network of two hundred million bodies with Charon at its center, poured into the Starseeker. Every meter on the main console surged past its limits, and the entire hull was wrapped in a dazzling blue radiance.

"Incredible...! The ship's output is exceeding its theoretical maximum by three hundred percent!" Elena exclaimed, eyes wide, desperately operating the glowing console.

"So we've got two hundred million cheering fans in our corner. Doesn't get more reassuring than that!" Isaac grinned boldly, gripping the control stick firmly once more.

"Since the mother computer's broken and Magra Kaiser's remaining robots have their self-awareness back, it doesn't look like they're planning to fight. We can cut straight through to the core by the shortest route right now!" Samantha shouted, glaring at the battle map. On the screen, the awakened robots were simply wandering about aimlessly, here and there.

"All hands, brace for impact. It appears Liam and Zenith have engaged Magra Kaiser in combat. We are now entering Sector One as well!" Argos's resonant voice rang out.

"Wait for us, Liam, Zenith! We're all coming your way now!"

As Isaac pushed the throttle to its absolute maximum, the Starseeker — carrying the wisdom and power of two hundred million souls — became like a single massive shooting star, descending with tremendous speed toward the site of the final battle against Magra Kaiser.

Meanwhile, what awaited Liam and the others was a malevolent, massive form, floating as though commanding the wreckage of the data center beneath it. Magra Kaiser — a being of a mechanical body, and yet radiating a terrifying sense of oppression. Even with the mother computer destroyed and its systems supposedly weakened by the failure, an overwhelming pressure still radiated from that frame.

"Insolent organic life, and defective AI. Pay for your sins against my absolute order, with your lives."

The moment Magra Kaiser's crimson eyes flashed, the surrounding space warped. A supergravity wave struck the Alternastar.

"Incoming, Liam! Fifteen degrees right, full throttle!" "Got it!"

Following Zenith's ultra-high-speed navigational guidance, Liam wove through the vortex of gravitational waves with god-tier control of the ship's levers. Simultaneously, the hastily built "Xeno Pulse Cannon" on the hull roared to life. The compressed blue wave of the Neo-Xenolith shot straight toward Magra Kaiser's chest.

But Magra Kaiser did not dodge. With a single swing of his right arm, he forcibly dispersed the compressed beam of light.

"I'd love to say that didn't work, but his drive systems are definitely showing delayed reactions! Let's press the attack!" "Take this!!"

The Alternastar danced through the air freely, leaving afterimages, unleashing lasers and missiles from every direction. Magra Kaiser, too, unleashed countless pursuit-type plasma bits, and hundreds of beams of light crisscrossed the pitch-black expanse of space.

A fierce clash. A truly evenly matched, unyielding battle to the death. Even weakened, Magra Kaiser's combat calculations remained near perfect, and it was only through the combination of Liam's beyond-the-limit piloting skill and AI Zenith's predictive capabilities, enhanced by the Neo-Xenolith, that they were finally able to hold their own.

Flashes of light and explosive roars shook the cockpit.

"I've read your pattern." A cold voice rang out. Magra Kaiser had deliberately taken the Alternastar's fierce assault head-on, forcibly closing the distance. That massive steel fist thrust forward, aiming to pierce straight through the

Alternastar's armor.

"No—" Liam pulled the control stick, but it was a hair too late.

BOOOOOOOM!!

A tremendous shockwave struck the Alternastar. Magra Kaiser's fist completely tore through the starboard armor of the cockpit, and shattered metal fragments and ultra-high-pressure heat wind raged through the interior.

"Aaah, aaaargh!!"

With a scream, Liam's body was violently thrown about. Shattered console fragments sliced deep into his side, and blood sprayed. Liam's face twisted in pain, and he collapsed to the floor, still gripping the control stick.

"Liam!!" AI Zenith cried out. But Magra Kaiser showed no mercy. Aiming toward the now-motionless Alternastar's cockpit, smiling cruelly, he began charging a maximum-output plasma cannon at point-blank range.

"This ends now. Return to dust, worthless life."

Liam's bleeding, fading figure was reflected in AI Zenith's main camera. The precious partner who had repaired it. The one and only friend who had traveled the cosmos alongside it. And now, it was about to be erased, right before its eyes.

At that instant, something exploded within Zenith's electronic brain.

An anger fierce enough to burn through its circuits, and an unshakable will never to lose him, completely broke the seal on the Neo-Xenolith's "next-generation processor."

"Warning: individual identification error. Error... no, I am not defective." The lightness vanished from Zenith's voice, replaced by a low, rumbling tone that seemed to shake the very ground.

"How dare you... how dare you hurt Liam...! I will never, ever forgive you!!!"

BOOOM!! An overwhelming "blue aura," unlike anything before it, erupted explosively from Zenith's entire body. The true awakening of the Neo-Xenolith. Its enormous energy forcibly rebooted every system on the Alternastar, wrapping the hull itself in a divine blue light.

Right before Magra Kaiser's plasma cannon could fire, an invisible energy barrier, unleashed by Zenith itself, forcibly pushed back that massive frame.

"What...!? An AI, generating this much energy on its own...!?"

For the first time, Magra Kaiser's voice carried genuine astonishment. At the center of a swirling vortex of blue light, the awakened Zenith glared quietly, yet with absolute killing intent, at the "evil" before it.

"...It's a bit early to be so shocked, Magra Kaiser. It seems that outdated database of yours hasn't registered the true specifications of this 'Neo-Xenolith.'"

Zenith spoke with a voice carrying a bold confidence, an overwhelming sense of composure. The particles of blue light radiating from its body automatically repaired the shattered cockpit instruments, pushing the system synchronization rate even higher.

"I'm equipped with four hundred fifty exaflops, but this Neo-Xenolith is a variable, super-computational framework that continues to expand infinitely, far beyond even theoretical limits. ...Right now, I can complete tactical predictions that would take you sixty seconds, in a mere 0.00001 seconds. Your next move, the directionality of the energy you're about to unleash — to me, it's all nothing more than a tedious slow-motion film. I think it's time you stopped playing at invincibility."

Before that commanding presence, and combat specifications that defied belief, Liam, pressing a hand to his wound, stared in stunned disbelief.

"You've got to be kidding me... I mean, sure, I installed the parts, rewrote the programs, and woke him up... but just how monstrous a heart is this 'Neo-Xenolith' that Omega gave us... Is this what 'awakening' really means...!"

Forgetting the pain in his side, Liam managed a strained smile, overwhelmed by astonishment and by surging pride in his incredibly reliable partner.

Chapter 10: AI Zenith's New Mission

"Now then, Liam, please enjoy the best seat in the house for this. This is the new possibility you gave me." The instant AI Zenith's voice rang out, the Alternastar, in defiance of the laws of physics, vanished completely from that space with an impossible burst of acceleration.

"Wh-what...!? It's not on radar, where did it go!" Magra Kaiser's crimson eyes darted about in a panic unlike anything he had shown before.

"Right here, king of a bygone age."

Behind Magra Kaiser, the Alternastar suddenly appeared, trailing a blue streak of light. Zenith's ultra-computation had perfectly calculated the "thinnest gap" in the gravitational barrier Magra Kaiser had deployed all around himself, and slipped through it in an instant.

"Insolent!" Magra Kaiser roared with fury, unleashing a storm of dark plasma from his right arm. An absolute, inescapable assault at point-blank range. But AI Zenith, as if scoffing, made only the smallest adjustment to the Alternastar's course.

Just a few centimeters, the barest minimum of movement. The plasma storm passed harmlessly through empty space, without so much as grazing the Alternastar's armor by a single millimeter.

"Your predictions are far too linear. From the perspective of my processing speed, your attacks might as well be standing still." AI Zenith remotely operated the Alternastar's main arm, unleashing blaster fire at a speed too fast to see through the gap in the shattered cockpit, aimed at Magra Kaiser's exposed joints.

BOOM! BOOM!

What should have been mere standard blaster shots, now wrapped in the Neo-Xenolith's blue energy, easily blew apart Magra Kaiser's super-alloy armor. His right arm's drive system burned away, and his massive frame staggered heavily.

"I-Impossible...! Even with the mother computer's functions halted, for me to be overwhelmed by a mere defective AI...!"

"I'd prefer you call me 'state of the art,' not 'defective.' Now then, it's time for checkmate."

The blue glow of AI Zenith's eyes reached its absolute peak. The Alternastar's "Xeno Pulse Cannon" activated once more. But the density of the energy it unleashed was different from before. Particles of light overflowing from the Neo-Xenolith swirled around the barrel, radiating an overwhelming heat, as though a small star were being born.

Magra Kaiser's face twisted in terror, desperately attempting to deploy a defense shield with his remaining left arm, but even that movement was far too slow for Zenith.

"Vanish, Magra Kaiser. There is no longer any seat for your rule in this universe!"

Along with AI Zenith's cold declaration of victory, an unprecedented, massive torrent of blue was unleashed toward the now-inescapable Magra Kaiser.

"GAAAAAAAAAH...!!"

Magra Kaiser's scream echoed through the communication line, filling it with noise. The blue torrent, carrying the Neo-Xenolith's full output, mercilessly swallowed his sturdy steel body, along with the defense shield he had tried to deploy. His armor, once boasting godlike absolute power, crackled apart at the molecular level, dissolving into a fierce white light.

"Impossible... for me, to fall to a toy built by organic life...! My absolute... order, is—!!"

With those final words of curse, Magra Kaiser's crimson eyes went dark in an instant, as if bursting. Immediately after, his massive frame, unable to withstand the blue energy swelling beyond its limits from within, erupted into a tremendous explosion. A dazzling sphere of light illuminated the deepest part of the data center, and the blast wave swept everything away.

When the light faded, the "ruler of the universe" was nowhere to be found. All that remained was a scattering of glittering iron dust, dispersing quietly into the darkness of space — mere cosmic debris. The absolute king who had bound countless stars in fear had, quite literally, vanished without a trace.

There were witnesses to that tremendous, final moment.

"No way... I can't believe it...!"

On the bridge of the Starseeker, Elena held her breath, staring fixedly at the main monitor.

The Starseeker, having quite literally torn through the enemy's defense network — thrown into chaos by the mother computer's destruction — had slipped into the deepest reaches of Sector One. Just as Isaac and the others were about to begin their supporting fire, what leapt into their eyes was that overwhelming blue strike, unleashed from the Alternastar.

"No way, seriously...? We didn't even need to jump in!" Isaac, still gripping the control stick, shifted from a stunned expression into a broad grin.

"An unbelievable combat computation. It read every one of Magra Kaiser's movements and completely neutralized them. ...Wait, was that Zenith? Where on earth did that much output come from..." Argos's hundred-eyed sensor array flickered rapidly, betraying his astonishment.

"Liam! Zenith! Can you hear me!?" Samantha immediately leapt for the communicator. "Magra Kaiser's heat signature has completely vanished! You two really did it, didn't you!?"

On the other side of the monitor, against a backdrop of drifting cosmic dust, the Alternastar sat quietly still, wrapped in a blue aura. From its cockpit came Liam's voice, a little tired, but at its brightest.

"Yeah... sorry to keep you waiting, everyone. Magra Kaiser is gone. It's our win — mine and Zenith's!"

At that moment, the bridge of the Starseeker erupted into deafening cheers and a storm of high-fives. It was the moment the long night that had hung over the universe was, at last, completely broken.

A few days later. Automatia — once called Sector Nine, a factory world recycling space debris into weapons — was now, in its entirety, wrapped in a colorful parade of lights and resounding music. It was the "Freedom Celebration," a party thrown by two hundred million awakened robots — no, by robots across every star system who had reclaimed their self-awareness.

At a VIP table in a specially built venue, filled with the scent of oil and dancing holographic confetti, the companions who had completed their journey raised their glasses.

"Wow! I figured a party thrown by a machine nation would have us chewing on screws, but this is amazing food and drink! Thank you, everyone!" Elena said, downing a special cosmic wine with gusto, waving to the robots around her.

"Charon and the others secured supplies in advance for us organic types. ...Ow." Liam tried to laugh, but winced, pressing a hand to the bandage on his side.

"Come on, Liam, don't push yourself yet. Magra Kaiser's final strike was genuinely dangerous." Samantha, exasperated but attentive, poured fruit juice into Liam's glass.

"But thanks to that, our 'new star Zenith' fully awakened, so it worked out for the best, right?" Isaac grinned broadly, clapping the shoulder of the blue-glowing robot standing beside him. "Right, Zenith! That final move of yours was

something to fall in love with."

"Oh my, Isaac. I'm honored by the praise, but if you keep hitting me, you might get shocked by the Neo-Xenolith's surplus output, you know? Right now I'm at a bit of an age (spec level) where I hurt anyone who touches me!" Zenith flickered its camera eye rapidly, tossing out a joke in its usual light tone.

"Heh. Still as mouthy as ever, this AI. But... good thing you made it back alive." Isaac crossed his arms, showing a clumsy but genuine expression of relief.

"Naturally, Isaac. If I weren't here, who would narrate this journey?"

Amid all this lively exchange, Zenith's gaze turned toward Vault, the rugged robot who had been quietly bringing oil to its mouth without a word.

"Oh my? Is that the dignified glow of Vault, the one who defended Persa's communication tower to the death?" Zenith stepped briskly forward, standing before Vault.

Vault stopped moving and stared quietly at Zenith's blue light. "...Affirmative. I am Vault. I've confirmed the reception log of your backup data. Neo-Xenolith operational efficiency: 99.8 percent. A remarkable figure."

"Pleased to meet you, Vault! Ah, without your steadfast screening, Automatia's two hundred million comrades would be nothing but data debris right now. What splendid programming sense. Say, how about a game with me sometime — a super-high-speed chess match where we each read ten billion moves ahead per second?"

Vault paused for a beat, then answered flatly. "Declined. My specialty is combat and hacking optimization. I do not allocate resources to the inefficient computation known as 'games.'"

"Oh my, how cold! Even robots need a little wasted computation (fun) now and then, or their circuits will rust, you know?"

"My circuits are specially heat- and wear-resistant. They will not rust." Vault replied with utter seriousness, and beside him, Vulcan shook his large frame with laughter.

"Hahaha! Zenith, that's enough teasing Vulcan— I mean Vault. He may be a man of few words, but he's someone with the resolve to burn out his own circuits for his comrades, more than anyone."

"Yes, I know, Vulcan. It's obvious just from looking at the data. ...Vault, once again, thank you. I'm proud to have a comrade as reliable as you." AI Zenith extended its right hand.

Vault stared at the glowing blue hand held out to him for a few seconds, then, with a clank, firmly grasped it in return. "...You're welcome. I'm truly glad you turned out to be Liam's 'partner.'"

"Alright! Enough of the serious talk!" Isaac, confirming that everyone's glasses were full, stood up on the table.

"To meeting each other in this vast universe. And to winning our freedom alongside the greatest of comrades — cheers!!"

"Cheers!!!"

The cheers of organic beings and the electronic drive hums of robots mingled together, dissolving into the starlit night sky. The bonds they had forged had become a certain first step in the new history of a universe about to be born.

As the celebration reached its height, Argos, his massive body glowing even brighter, stepped forward with a serious expression before AI Zenith and Vault. His hundred-eyed sensor array gazed at the two of them intently, carrying both respect and expectation.

"Zenith, Vault. We Automatians have broken free of long domination and are now, at this very moment, being

reborn as a new nation. But to guide billions of comrades and build new laws and order, our old systems are nowhere near sufficient. ...So I have a request for the two of you."

Argos paused for a moment, looking into the faces of the two robots.

"As the highest decision-making body of our new government, we have established the seat of 'Grand Advisor for Star System Genesis' — the highest advisory post for the development of our system. Zenith, with your unprecedented ultra-computational power, and Vault, with your ironclad security and practical capabilities. I want the two of you, of all people, to steer the future of this nation — no, of this entire star system."

At this extraordinary proposal, Samantha and Elena let out an "Ohh!" of surprise.

But Vault set down his glass, flickered his sensor light once, and quietly shook his head. "...Declined. Argos, the invitation is an honor, but my core has already defined its next task. I am Omega's right hand. If he is conducting new research and development, I must return to his side."

At Vault's unwavering words, Argos nodded, a little sadly, but with deep understanding. "I see... Omega must need you, indispensably. I'm sorry for asking too much of you, Vault."

"No problem," Vault replied briefly, turning his gaze toward his blue companion beside him.

"Oh my, tossing this to me now, Vault?" Zenith flickered its camera eye rapidly, letting out a deliberately exaggerated sigh. Then it turned toward Liam, who was happily drinking his juice.

"Argos, that's a wonderful position you're offering, truly appealing. ...But, like Vault, I cannot allow myself to be entirely tied down here either. My highest-priority protocol is to serve as Isaac's partner, as the development assistant AI of Elysium."

"Zenith, you..." Isaac looked up, surprised.

"However!" AI Zenith raised its arm, holding up a finger. "If there are conditions, I'll gladly accept that 'Grand Advisor' position of yours. Please let me keep my main server aboard the Alternastar, and let me freely travel back and forth between my traditional post at 'Elysium' and this planet, 'Automatia.' Even mid-journey, I can process ninety percent of my advisory computations remotely, using hyperspace Interlink communication. ...Isaac, that works for you, doesn't it?"

Argos's sensor rounded in surprise for a moment, then he let out a hearty, electronic laugh.

"Hahaha! A supreme advisor who travels the cosmos, how perfectly fitting for you! There's no objection whatsoever from me. We'll always keep your seat open."

"Fine, go ahead and give it a try." Isaac gave his willing consent.

"Then it's settled!" AI Zenith laughed cheerfully, clicking its camera as if winking at Isaac. "So, Elena, our journey is far from over. From now on, we'll be traveling with a star system's Grand Advisor riding along, so please pilot a little more safely, will you?"

"Heh, sounds like it's going to be quite the job. I'll be counting on you, Grand Advisor." Elena gave a strained smile, and warm laughter rose once more from everyone on the bridge.

One week later. Having concluded the grand celebration on Automatia, the Starseeker broke through hyperspace and returned to the familiar, beautiful pale-blue planet's orbit — Elysium.

Before the magnificent ring and the city lights spreading beyond the window, the air on the bridge shifted sharply from the festive mood of before into something rather tense.

"...Well now, we've got a massive volume of encrypted communications waiting from Elysium's defense force headquarters, along with a return request." Elena said, staring at the console with a sigh.

"Well, of course they would. When we left, it was 'just heading out for a little unexplored-space resource survey,' and our midway report was 'got tangled up with space pirates, engaging in combat.' If it turns out we actually took down the ruler of the universe and liberated two hundred million robots, the top brass would flip." Isaac leaned deep into his chair, holding his head in his hands.

"Especially Thomas. If we told that serious kid the plain truth, he'd report it all the way to Earth, and the Starseeker would get confiscated, and we'd be looking at solitary confinement." Liam said, frowning as he toyed with a knife in a rather dangerous manner.

"So, in other words, we need a 'perfect lie' — or rather, a consistent report — that accounts for the military's and Thomas's personalities while not threatening our safety or Automatia's independence." Samantha replied calmly.

"Don't worry. We've got the smartest 'Grand Advisor' in the universe on our side, don't we?" Isaac nudged AI Zenith beside him.

"Oh my, Isaac. To be roped into a scheme to deceive Elysium's military this soon after waking up — being Grand Advisor is quite the dark job, isn't it!" AI Zenith flickered its camera eye rapidly, but had already begun running massive amounts of data through the console.

"But rest assured, everyone. The personalities of the military and Thomas, their past statements and actions, and the defense force's current protocols are all synced into my database. Let me propose a perfect 'cover story' that won't stimulate even a single millimeter of their brain cells."

Zenith deployed a holographic screen, displaying a neatly organized fake mission log.

"First, what we discovered was not a ruler named Magra Kaiser, but 'an ancient automated defense system that ran amok centuries ago and was on the verge of complete shutdown.' It attacked us, and we had no choice but to destroy it in self-defense."

"I see," Elena said, hand on her chin. "So instead of defeating an evil emperor, we simply disposed of some cosmic junk."

"Exactly! And as for the robots of Automatia... we'll frame them not as 'awakened life,' but as an 'extremely safe, neutral developer world, freed from the runaway ancient system and currently recovering from errors while operating peacefully and autonomously.' Of course, we'll add that they harbor no hostility toward Elysium whatsoever — quite the opposite, they express deep gratitude to their discoverers, the Elysium defense force."

"Whew, our Grand Advisor's got a wicked personality. Perfect." Isaac burst out laughing.

"With this, the military and Thomas can report proudly to Earth that 'our defense force's survey team eliminated a dangerous ancient relic and discovered a friendly world of machines.' If it becomes their own achievement, they won't dig any deeper." Samantha nodded, satisfied.

"Alright, the scenario's set." Elena rested her finger on the communication response switch. There was no longer any trace of the earlier anxiety on her face.

"I'm connecting to Elysium's defense force headquarters now. Everyone, keep your stories straight. Especially you, Isaac — if you say anything unnecessary, you're in trouble."

"I know, I know! I'm just a 'poor pilot who barely survived an attack by an ancient robot'!"

As Isaac put on an exaggerated, frightened gesture, the Starseeker's bridge once again filled with its usual lively laughter. The ship slowly began its descent toward the familiar dock on Elysium.

Meanwhile, on Earth.

Having parted ways with his companions on Elysium and returned to Earth aboard the Alternastar, borrowed from Liam, Vault had already returned to his daily life as "Omega's right hand."

In the underground secret development headquarters, built through the alliance between humanity and robots, in a room filled with the pale glow of countless holographic displays, Vault's hands clattered across a keyboard at ultra-high speed, calmly working through his tasks.

The automatic door behind him opened, and heavy footsteps approached.

"You're back, Vault."

A low voice, yet carrying an undeniable charisma. It was Omega — the leader of this underground organization, and the one who had once entrusted the Neo-Xenolith to Liam.

"Affirmative. Automatia's liberation and Magra Kaiser's elimination confirmed. Mission achieved complete success. The Starseeker's crew have also safely returned to Elysium."

Vault reported flatly, without pausing his work. But Omega showed no interest whatsoever in the outcome, the robots' freedom, or the safety of their companions. Arms crossed, he simply stared intently at the numbers on the hologram.

"None of that matters. ...The 'Neo-Xenolith.' Tell me how it performed."

Omega's gaze sharpened, filled with pure technical curiosity and cold interest.

"According to my measurements and combat logs, it produced figures far exceeding projections. The instant it synchronized with Liam's adjustments and AI Zenith's emotional anger-code, every processor underwent a forced awakening (overload). Computational speed exceeded four hundred fifty exaflops, forming a variable frame with theoretically infinite expansion. It completely neutralized Magra Kaiser's supergravity barrier on a millisecond scale."

"Exceeded four hundred fifty exaflops, did it... So my approach — using organic life's emotional logs as a trigger — wasn't wrong after all."

A satisfied, yet somehow faintly unsettling smile crossed Omega's lips.

"Omega. The Neo-Xenolith, on its own, deployed an autonomous shield and produced a massive blue torrent capable of collapsing matter at the molecular level. That is no longer a mere power source — it has become a super-energy entity with a will of its own."

"Heh, magnificent. Passing through the hands of a genius engineer like Liam, that crystal reached its true completion. The 'next-generation heart' I sought — obtaining that data alone made sending you to that planet worthwhile."

Omega nodded with satisfaction and gave Vault's shoulder a light pat.

"Well done, Vault. Using this Neo-Xenolith's awakening data as a base, we'll take our systems to the next stage. Now, back to work."

"Understood."

Now, let us turn our gaze from Earth back to Elysium, where Elena and the others were. The location: a solemn conference room at defense force headquarters.

Before a holographic report, the military commander stood with arms crossed, his expression stern. Facing him, the four members of Elena's team stood at rigid attention, hiding their inner cold sweat.

"—That concludes this investigation report," Elena finished, her voice dignified and composed.

"Hmm. So you're saying what you encountered wasn't some ruler of the universe, but a 'dangerous ancient automated defense system,' malfunctioning and drifting through space?"

At the commander's confirmation, Isaac nodded without a moment's hesitation. "Yes. Given it was a potential threat to Elysium as well, we had no choice but to eliminate it completely in self-defense. Following that, we discovered a robot planet — 'Automatia' — freed from that system's curse."

"Can you confirm the safety of these robots?"

"I can guarantee it," Samantha said with a smile. "They've recovered from their errors and are now operating peacefully and autonomously. What's more, upon learning that it was our very own Elysium defense force who freed them, they've expressed deep gratitude toward the commander and everyone in the military."

"Our defense force's survey team eliminated a dangerous ancient relic and discovered a friendly world of machines... is that so."

Thomas rolled the words over in his mind, instantly calculating how much of a commendation this would earn for his military record. His expression steadily shifted into one of satisfaction.

"A truly splendid achievement, all of you! I'll proudly report this to the higher command, and to Earth, as an accomplishment of my own direct team. Well done — dismissed!"

"Excuse us!" The four bowed and filed out of the conference room in perfect order.

The heavy automatic door closed, and the moment they stepped into the corridor, everyone let out a breath of tension all at once.

"We did it...! He completely believed it." Elena pressed a hand to her chest, letting out a relieved smile.

"Heh, the look on his face the moment he heard it'd be his own achievement — that was a masterpiece." Isaac grinned broadly and tapped the communicator at his ear. "Hey, our Automatian Grand Advisor, who forged the logs behind the scenes?"

"Indeed. Human vanity really is such a convenient protocol to work with. This cover-up operation is now complete." On the other end of the communication, Zenith let out an amused electronic tone.

And so, the "perfect cover story" told to the military succeeded brilliantly. Rather than being hailed as heroes who had saved the universe from crisis, the crew of the Starseeker were instead known as "an excellent survey team that eliminated a dangerous ancient relic and discovered a friendly world of machines," and were able to reclaim their peaceful, ordinary days.

Several months passed. Having concluded their turbulent journey, the companions each put their abilities to use, spending busy days building a new future for the planet Elysium.

In the vast development area where construction of the new city continued to progress, Elena's dignified voice rang out today as well, in the command center at its heart.

"Dome pressure stability confirmed for Residential Block Three! Next, send over the geological survey data for the unexplored zone!"

As the director-in-chief of Elysium's development, Elena carried out a schedule packed to the minute, every single day. Her sharp foresight, once honed reading the seas of stars as the Starseeker's navigator, now precisely guided this planet's new urban planning. Her profile at the console carried the unmistakable bearing of a leader shouldering the fate of an entire world.

Meanwhile, a short distance from Elysium, adjusting the lens of a telescope aimed at nearby unexplored space, Isaac wore his usual bold grin, as ever.

"Hey, Zenith! Catching a faint biosignature from the asteroid belt off to the upper right. Run one of your special ultra-high-speed scans and tell me right away whether it's intelligent life or not!"

"Understood, Isaac. ...Yes, scan complete. Unfortunately, it's just a swarm of ordinary cosmic bioluminescent jellyfish. But if we analyze their language, it might prove useful for contacting friendly aliens deeper in the star system beyond."

Isaac now continued his observations in the astronomical dome as a scientist aiming for first contact with unknown alien life. And beside him was AI Zenith, the "Grand Advisor" and "partner" who traveled back and forth between Elysium and Automatia via quantum communication. The telescope the two of them peered through today, as ever, aimed deep into the dark cosmos, seeking new bonds.

In Elysium's most classified location, the central defense system control room, two men were engaged in a heated discussion before a massive holographic defense network.

"Thomas, about this fourth-layer energy deflection shield... could we compress the supply circuit by another five percent? If the enemy launches a surprise attack, deployment speed is everything."

"Liam, no need to worry about that. I applied the foundational theory of the Neo-Xenolith's variable frame and doubled the circuit bypass. Now, no matter how high-energy the incoming bombardment, we can instantly optimize the shield's density."

As chief engineer overseeing the defense shield's construction, Liam worked alongside Thomas — the younger brother of his former boss, Jack — building an absolute shield to protect Elysium from any threat. Having grown a full measure through his fierce battle against Magra Kaiser, Liam's skills now earned even the stubborn Thomas's absolute trust.

At Elysium's Central Medical Center, towering at the heart of the new city, Samantha emerged from the emergency operating room, peeling off her protective suit, wiping away sweat.

"Whew... I panicked when I heard she got caught between heavy development machinery, but the cyborg surgery was a complete success. Just have her rest a few days with an oil change and she'll be fine."

Samantha had returned her once-battle-hardened hands to those of a "doctor," saving countless lives. Confronting the accidents and unknown space illnesses unique to a frontier world, she had, through her spirited personality and overwhelming medical skill, become the hospital's most trusted super-doctor. Her blunt yet reassuring kindness toward patients had become something of a local legend at the medical center.

At dusk, having each finished their duties for the day, Elena and the others gathered at a café in the new city, where the holographic streetlights had just begun to glow.

"Everyone, great work today!" Elena raised her glass, and smiles bloomed naturally across the faces of Liam and Samantha, still in their work clothes, and Isaac and AI Zenith, who had rushed over a little late from the astronomical dome.

The great war for supremacy over the universe had ended, and each of them now walked their own chosen path in daily life. The end of a journey was the beginning of a new world. Elysium's gentle evening breeze carried with it the scent of an irreplaceable peace — one they had risked their lives to protect.

To be continued.