

Chapter 1: Overture >> Attack on the Turkana District Space Elevator – Gr. Base

Part 1

Mom, dad, how are you?

It's your son, Quenser Barbotage.

I have been working hard out here. I came here as a battlefield student to study Objects, but they keep giving me work to do. And there's always more no matter how much I do, so is there any way to escape this?

Please look after your health.

I would also appreciate it if you used your heads a little more when sending me gifts. Vacuum-packed roast beef? A ready-made white stew that's supposed to taste just as good as a restaurant if you add hot water? Why stuff a box full of delicious safe country preserved food when the military has a cargo inspection gate it needs to pass, you stupid parents?

"Die, die, die, die!! Oh, shit! We're gonna be overwhelmed by that guerilla charge!"

"We're supposed to be celebrating a happy New Year, so what the hell are we doing all the way out in Africa!?"

The two idiots with sand coating their hair could not be blamed for yelling.

The shitty world was once again treating the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes to a violent potato washing. How violent, you ask? A local guerilla group was crossing a minefield by poking at the ground with sticks and, when someone carelessly blew up a mine, the rest of the group continued pushing onwards from behind. They apparently thought they would be safe if they were a long stick's length away when it went off, but that was not enough to escape the landmine's effective range. The rest was just pure desperation.

The machinegun fire could not keep up.

It was like a long horizontal wave of people pushing in from the horizon.

Student Quenser Barbotage and Noble Heivia Winchell withdrew to the back of their encampment while holding a heavy machinegun and a large radio.

"Let's contact the Princess. We can't win this without that kind of largescale support!"

"She's so focused on that huge thing she can't see us down on the ground. Or are you saying you're gonna take care of that thing for her, skinny boy!?"

The two boys had not hidden behind a large boulder or a thick concrete wall. They were behind a tank that was kept low by staying in a large hole they had dug into the dried and cracked ground.

They were less than 2m away, but they received an encrypted transmission from the digital generation girl within.

"I know I should have asked this ages ago, but how stupid are you, Heivia!? Digging a hole to hide this cutie is meaningless if you lead the enemy right to her! And this sheltered girl is worth several million euros, I might add!!"

"Shut up, Myonri!! Give that fancy villainess a good slap on the ass!! Blow them away with those explosive rounds already, you idiot!!"

Africa was a vast continent, but it could generally be divided into 6 categories.

The dry desert, or the wet greenery.

The worthless barren land, or the valuable arable land.

The undisturbed nature, or the urbanized cities.

The Turkana District was located on the equator in eastern Africa and it was best known for its enormous lakes. It was supposed to be a nature park large enough to contain the entire Island Nation with nothing but verdant forests, grassy plains, and all sorts of life as far as the eye could see, but things had changed recently.

It was so bad you wanted to avoid breathing too deeply without a mask.

Scorched sand and dry, cracked land were the only things visible out to the horizon in every direction.

"Are you kidding me? Humanity is gonna wipe itself out from destroying the environment before our wars can do us in."

"Then how about we make these tanks electric? Cough, it reeks of diesel back here!"

Then Myonri fired an explosive round.

It was like horizontally launching a firework made of metal and gunpowder.

With a loud boom, the 45ton tank slid a bit backwards. The new shells they had received in the latest version-up for the weaponry had way too much gunpowder inside, so Quenser and Heivia were nearly crushed by the steel continuous track while leaning against the thick armor.

The shell flew along a flattened arc that looked nearly straight.

The encampment the potatoes had abandoned still had ammo cases and soap-like rations left behind. Just as the guerillas' charge slowed somewhat by their interest in that, the shell flew in. Its coating and 2000 metal balls were propelled in all directions by the explosive force in the center of the enemy group.

A very red and very liquid explosion splattered everywhere.

Quenser and Heivia did not even have it in them to complain about the ringing in their ears from the blast.

"Ew..."

"You're the ones that requested support, so don't act shocked by this," said Myonri. "You're not a pacifist back in a safe country watching talk shows with a snack in hand."

"Underestimate an unsatisfied housewife and you will soon fall victim to one, Myonri."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You need to be careful. It's the defenseless types like you that those experienced housewives will prey on first. And they don't care about gender either."

"Commander, please check the tank's biological weapon alert. Everyone outside seems to be living in a fantasy world!"

Myonri was learning how to make better comebacks. Major Frolaytia Capistrano's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion could help a shy and nervous girl open up, but it might chip away at her prudence and refinement in the process.

At any rate, modern tanks could complete the automatic reload and smart targeting process in no time, so several more anti-personnel explosive rounds were launched to efficiently tear through the guerilla ranks.

The potatoes hiding behind the steel vehicle with nothing better to do began to cheerfully sing with their eyes shining bright.

“Guerillas, guerillas, kill the guerillas, kill them all now!”

“One, two, three, two, two, three, four, kaboom, kaboom!!”

“Oh, god. What’s wrong with you two now? Is the gunfire rattling your heads so bad you forgot what morality is?”

The battle had become a slaughter similar to sweeping the eraser across the blackboard to eliminate all the chalk writing. But for some reason, this did nothing to stop the advance of the guerillas. The flesh-and-blood humans continued charging right at the purely industrial tank.

The two idiots finally returned to their senses.

“Why do they want to protect that big-ass thing so much!?” asked Heivia.

“It all comes down to money. Humans are the one animal willing to die for money, after all. I mean, the simple monetary value of that thing is dozens of times that of an oil field. And unlike petroleum, you don’t have to worry about this drying up. Africa has plenty of valuable resources – gold, diamonds, petroleum, rare earths – but they’ll all run out eventually. So anyone would be desperate to protect a permanent fortune that will never run out.”

“And that’s the space elevator, huh?”

Heivia groaned and leaned out from behind the tank to look far into the distance.

An ultra-tall structure stood around 2000m tall and looked as thin as a needle.

And several wires extended far, far above that like part of a string instrument.

That giant structure towered into the sky from beyond the horizon and its impossibly tall silhouette did not have a visible top because it eventually faded into the blue sky above. That was because it was so tall that the thick layer of air between blocked the light. That was the same reason high altitude spy planes could not be seen with the naked eye.

Objects were known as colossal weapons, but this thing dwarfed even them.

It was said the Tower of Babel was a symbol of humanity’s arrogance and that seemed appropriate after seeing this horrifically large structure.

That was the Space Elevator Mother Lady.

"We can see it so clearly, but we're still 70km away, right? Not even the Island Nation's Mt. Fuji can hold a candle to this. It's insane."

"And instead of the laser type that fires powerful beams into the cargo tanks' asses, this is the wire type that was thought to be impossible. They said an SF director cried tears of joy after hearing about it."

Since the 37th's soldiers were here, their Object, the Baby Magnum, was as well. But there was an obvious reason why the Princess was hanging around behind the battleline instead of crushing the guerillas and driving up to Mother Lady.

A blinding lightning-like beam of light passed by them far above their heads.

But that was not the Object firing on the space elevator.

Quite the opposite.

"Goddamn that thing!!" shouted Heivia.

"It can do whatever the hell it wants with that ridiculous amount of power," said Quenser.

"I thought we cut off its power source? It doesn't have any power cables left intact."

"There are several theories about that. It might have a web of power cables running underground and it might have a nuclear reactor hidden somewhere."

"We're talking about the world's largest artificial structure here. They've essentially erected themselves an enormous silicone you-know-what out here. Y'know, starts with a 'd' and ends in 'ildo'."

"Way to show off your ignorance there, buddy. When it's powered by a battery inside, it's named after the vibrating it does."

"You idiot!! Modern toys either use a USB cable or are wirelessly charged using microwaves. Now who's showing off their ignorance!?"

"You dare question my knowledge on this subject!? How about I tell you about the latest tech that perverted safe country professors are researching in their labs? In a truly shocking turn of events, a mysterious new massager that has its own balls made from iPS cell sheets nearly impregnated the

very curious housewife who volunteered to test it out!!”

“Ew, that’s just gross! What part of that is supposed to be sexy!?”

“What if I told you the perverted professor in question was single 20-year-old STEM blonde genius girl who skipped past several years of her schooling, looks amazing in glasses and high heels, and is way more into women than men?”

“Okay, you win this round. That changes everything.”

“Ah ha ha. She has an IQ of over 200, but when she got scared, she went pale and tried dumping cola down there.”

“I already said you win this round! Now you’re just showing off!!”

“What is wrong with you two!?” cut in Myonri. “Carbonated drinks don’t actually do a thing to help with that, so stop bragging about believing false information! Our entire battalion can hear your radio transmissions, you know!? Frolaytia, will you please do something to stop this ungodly stupid and disgusting conversation!?”

“Oh, now here’s a surprise. Myonri actually knew what we were talking about. And she even knows her fact from fiction on the subject.”

“Why’s that a surprise, Quenser? Anyone would get pent up stuck in a cramped tank like that. And she’s a gadget girl, so you just know she’s particular about what toys she uses.”

“Now that you mention it. I bet she’s spent some quality time with a massage chair or some VR goggles.”

“Do I need to shoot you?” warned Myonri.

The space elevator’s foundational structure extended like a spear up from the ground base. In fishing terms, that would be the rod instead of the line, but for some reason, it had an enormous laser beam cannon attached at the top.

And its power was on par with an Object.

That was why the Princess could not approach so easily. Dealing with the guerillas standing in the way would be easy enough, but if she was stopped for even a moment, Mother Lady’s laser beam would blast right through her. Quenser and the others wanted to get their Object to the elevator if at all possible. At close range, it apparently fired anti-tank coilguns down from its walls, so the infantry would be forced into a very bloody charge if they could not get the Princess to break through with

her thick armor.

“What do we do? This entire mission is going to fail if we don’t hurry up.”

“Planning your moves in advance, Heivia? Since when were you so thoughtful?”

So the plan was for Quenser, Heivia, and the rest of the potatoes to clear out the surface and confirm things were safe before the Baby Magnum could charge in as quickly as possible and the Princess could use her graceful hands to tear down the base of the elevator.

The elevator was fixed in place and the Object could move.

It was obvious which one had an advantage there, yet the Princess was still unable to attack.

Quenser and the others should have been vaporized with nowhere to hide from that humongous long-range laser beam cannon, but for whatever reason, the space elevator never directly targeted the ground. Maybe it had to do with the angle of fire or the targeting system, but they could not truly rest easy without knowing the actual reason for it. When their lives were on the line, “for whatever reason” was not good enough.

“So how’d they build that thing anyway?” asked Heivia half in disgust. “It takes months to build a department store, so couldn’t we have come in here and stopped things mid-construction without having to mess with all this now?”

“They didn’t build it up from the ground. First, they secretly built the space station and then they let most of the rest drop down like a waterfall.”

“Like a waterfall?”

“The ground base looks like a huge spear sticking up into the sky, but more than 99.9% of its 100,000km length is actually carbon nanotube wires. So think of it like letting a fishing line drop down. Although the earth’s centrifugal force is apparently tugging on it.”

Conflicts were also fought in space using unmanned spacecraft and killer satellites, but there were still fewer watchful eyes up there than down on the surface. The world was a cramped place, but there was still enough room for large units to be launched into orbit as supposed radio telescopes or power generation satellites only to secretly join together into a giant robot. And nothing was as rude as attacking in the middle of a transformation sequence.

Of course, this project was much too big for the local guerillas to have done on their own.

Someone else was behind it.

“The Capitalist Corporations really do control space, don’t they?”

Specifically, the Federation of Elevator Industries.

That was a powerful space development agency started with joint funding from 7th Core, the seven major companies that controlled the home country of the Capitalist Corporations.

Online news had reported on the beginning of construction on the elevator a while back, but not much was known what had happened with it since.

“They’ve got so much tech they had time to choose between a mass driver or an elevator. They eventually did go with the elevator, though.”

“Thanks to the support of online stores, that is.” Quenser breathed an exasperated sigh. “Because an elevator that can cheaply launch large quantities of whatever into space will revolutionize distribution. Even high-altitude spy planes can’t fly any faster than Mach 6 or 7 since they have to move through the air, but in the vacuum of space, they can try to reach Mach 15 or even 20. And if they only have to drop the package ‘down’ in zero-g, they don’t even have to use up any fuel for a rocket or engine. Once the online payment goes through, a parachute-equipped container will use your location information to reach you with a margin of error of only 100cm. That gives them the ultimate delivery network that can reach anywhere on the planet and even the lunar villas in 60 minutes or less.”

“What’s the point of that? If you want to use the elevator to deliver a pizza, you’d have to take it to this desert first. And that’s true for anywhere in the world.”

“They’ve been giving it a ‘test run’ for about a year since the elevator was completed.”

It was the elevator that had turned the area into a parched desert.

That was not a change that happened overnight.

“There haven’t been any real problems with it and nothing during the test period counts as an industrial achievement. No matter how much they earn, they aren’t making any profit off of it. So no matter how many tons of deliveries they make around the world, it won’t show up in the sea of records. Or it shouldn’t have. But they got greedy. The unseen earnings grew too large and it stood out in the records.”

“Ugh.”

“The idea of ‘global coverage’ may have been too much of a draw for the 7th Core parent companies. Y’know how the ads for same day delivery always have fine print excluding certain regions or islands? They wanted to eliminate those exceptions no matter what it took. And if they’re dropping

the deliveries from above, the cost of a delivery to the peak of Everest or the middle of Antarctica is no more expensive than anything else. They could even deliver to a cruise ship in international waters or to territories belonging to other world powers. The world would end flooded with even more empty delivery boxes than now, though."

"So they wanted to fill in all the gaps, like how the number of convenience stores in a big city just keeps growing?"

"They are the Capitalist Corporations, after all. And this is funded by 7th Core that runs their home country."

So the space elevator itself was incredibly convenient, but the biggest bottleneck was finding a place to construct it. First of all, it had to be near the equator. The carbon nanotubes used for the wires connecting the heavens with the earth were strong, but being made of carbon meant they were weak against high-voltage currents and they would easily break if thick thunderclouds moved through. So placing the elevator in the path of a hurricane would be a problem.

Since the wires had to stretch all the way up into space, they would constantly be exposed to the 2000+-degree thermosphere. That meant the material had to have some resistance to heat, but not even that was enough to endure the instantaneous temperature of 30,000 degrees caused by lightning. And the static electricity built up within a cloud's moisture by friction could be enough to cause that.

That meant the first big question was where to locate the elevator.

The Capitalist Corporations' Federation of Elevator Industries had apparently chosen to throw money around to win over the locals instead of slaughtering the residents of that blank zone that existed outside the four world powers. Hence why the guerillas were acting as their pawns. They were working to help, but they were not actual soldiers, so they were not counted amount the official war dead when they died. That was a valuable loophole, so the Capitalist Corporations was free to send them on reckless suicide missions like this.

The locals had given up their land for money, believing it would earn them even more money, and now they were fighting for money and dying before seeing a single dime.

"So all of this was worked into the plan? Man, I almost feel sorry for the poor bastards."

"It's not like the Legitimacy Kingdom is much better. We claim to be here to protect the precious natural resources, but we're only interested in preserving the bugs and flowers here because they might just be useful for developing new drugs." Quenser sighed while wiping off his sandy face. "I'm talking about you fancy nobles here, by the way. None of this matters at all to us commoners with common DNA. Your special genetic structures make you susceptible to fancy VIP genetic diseases, so you want to have as many possible drug ingredients as you can get just in case one of them comes in handy."

Looking at the population alone, the commoners were an overwhelming majority, but it was the minority of royals and nobles packed full of rare DNA that decided what they would fight their wars over. That was just how the Legitimacy Kingdom did things.

“Isn’t anyone out there fighting to bring peace to the world?”

“If you don’t like it, then go do it yourself, Heivia.”

The space elevator was a colossal structure.

Just like mountain ranges and valleys altered the wind currents to produce unique forms of weather, that elevator sliced through the air currents like a giant blade, causing the wind to split out into a Y-shape. That had apparently distorted the natural winds of the region. And people suspected meteorological weapons were deployed in response to any irregular weather changes since the elevator could not have any thunderclouds passing through. Simply put, the area around the elevator was always sunny. Unnaturally so.

But anyway...

“Has the tank changed the battle’s momentum? Hey, Myonri! We’re gonna resume marching, but every round you fired detonated, right? I don’t want to be blown away by our own unexploded ordnance!!”

“How should I know? I only operated the gun as ordered. If you have any complaints with the product, direct them to the safe country defense contractor’s customer service desk.”

“I’d only get redirected around the globe twice over by automatic recordings if I tried that.”

Of course, the tank did not have unlimited ammo. Their unit did have dedicated supply vehicles that would transport new shells to them, but even with that, trying to suppress a large infantry force with only a tank’s explosive rounds was not a good plan. Sadly, the shells cost far more than unofficial soldiers did. If they did not want Major Frolaytia Capistrano to spank them with her lit kiseru after she read through the expense report later on, Quenser, Heivia, and the rest of the potatoes needed to put in a more budget-friendly effort here.

“Dammit, we’re left with two options here: avoid punishment at all costs or learn to accept the punishment as a reward,” complained Heivia.

“The problem is that Frolaytia always wears her uniform,” said Quenser. “If she would just change into black leather bondage gear, I’d let her whip me all day long.”

They wanted to change the battle’s momentum.

Now that the tank had stopped the advancing guerillas, it would be best if the infantry could resume marching while spraying machinegun fire.

“Keep in mind where the explosive rounds hit,” said Myonri. “There will be craters there and those will function as makeshift trenches. It would be best to make your attack while rushing from point to point.”

“Roger that, Myonri. That’s better than nothing on this flat desert.”

“Yeah, but if they chuck a grenade into one of those crater trenches, you can say goodbye to everyone inside it.”

The potatoes’ heavy machineguns gave a roar even louder than construction equipment demolishing a concrete building. Those were meant to be operated by a team of four, but when the soldiers emerged from behind the tank and moved across the cracked ground, they were carrying the assembled units with them in something like part of the cavalry battle game at an Island Nation sports festival.

When one of them was shooting it, the others would be running. Then they would swap positions. Of course, they would spurt blood and collapse if one of the enemy’s filthy and scratched-up bullets hit them.

There was no perfect tactic or safe ground here.

A special loophole was out of the question.

“Man, I wish I had a 5th or 6th generation powered suit right now. Tech really is the cheat code of the modern age. I wanna be the overpowered guy who doesn’t have to put any blood, sweat, or tears into winning.”

“If you want to run around in the nasty training wear someone else was using and never washed, be my guest. Keep in mind that thing covers you from head to toe. Now, I won’t kinkshame you, but don’t expect me to understand it.”

“The last person wearing it might have been an athlete schoolgirl whose sweat glitters like diamonds or a housewife who takes yoga lessons every weekday afternoon!!”

“Have you seen the people stuck working on the 37th’s front line!? It’s nothing but filthy potatoes. In what fantasy world are you finding anyone good looking out here!?”

“I heard that, Heivia,” cut in Myonri.

The 37th generally had the upper hand with only the occasional pushback from the guerillas who had become puppets of the Federation of Elevator Industries. When that happened, Myonri would fire explosive rounds from the tank to support them. The tank attempted to use as little ammo as possible by only firing on the problem areas, but seeing their own side's shells flying by overhead was still a nerve-wracking experience. The 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion was a truly wonderful workplace, but you could never enjoy the thrill rides at an amusement park afterwards.

Quenser shouted wide-eyed in protest, but not for any humanitarian reasons.

"Hey, don't rely on the tank too much! Those shells are expensive! We might win the battle, but we'll end up buried in debt!!"

"You can worry about money once we've won."

They had more than just the one heavy machinegun unit. While the other infantry were spraying bullets to push back the human wave, Quenser and Heivia's group carried the 20kg mass of metal toward the next crater. There, they began spraying their own bullets to cover for the others.

"I won't be able to eat grilled meat for a while. There's more human gore lying around than empty cartridges."

"Hey, that's a lot of nutrients and moisture, so maybe it'll bring green back to the desert. Oh, don't get too near the corpses, Heivia."

"What, you think they might be playing dead? None of them are in one piece anymore!"

"They aren't, but some of their equipment is still intact. If the detonators or fuses are still live, the slightest bump could set them off. And I mean the ammo, the grenades, and...are those things the size of rugby balls rocket warheads? Y'know, the ones that cost 80 euros a pop but can blow up a tank that costs millions?"

Heivia decided to keep his distance from the chunks of meat full of unexploded ordnance.

"But that's only when they score a surprise hit from the side, right? Myonri's tank is way back there and shoved down in a hole we dug. They don't have to worry about an attack from the side. Those cheap rockets and recoilless rifles don't have homing functionality, so it's not like they can curve around to hit the tank in the side from here."

That was when they heard a quiet sound.

It sounded like the buzzing of a bug's wings.

No, it was more like the motor of an electric razor.

Puzzled, the two idiots poked their heads out of the crater.

They saw a black spot in the blue sky.

No, it was a 70cm crane fly made from a lightweight aluminum frame. Or you could call it a multicopter drone supported by multiple rotors.

But instead of a delivery package, it was carrying something the size of a rugby ball.

That something was an anti-tank rocket pointed straight toward the ground.

“Really!?”

Heivia quickly turned around and prepared to shout into his radio, but he was too slow.

The rocket ignited and stabbed straight down like a lightning strike.

Right into the roof – the primary weak point – of the tank providing such powerful support from behind.

Part 2

Things had changed for the worse.

“The guerillas have better equipment than expected. The space elevator must have supplied it for them. Everyone, focus on making smart attacks using your electronic equipment!!”

Silver-haired and busty Major Frolaytia Capistrano’s words would have been useful had they not come so late. The two idiots really wished they could put a collar and chain on her and take her for a walk along the front line.

The actual attack was more or less just a toy made by combining a flying drone with an anti-tank rocket that some dead soldier had been holding onto. It was a lot like reusing a rocket as a landmine after losing the launcher for it – not the kind of recycling you wanted to see. But Quenser’s group had heard nothing about the sandy guerillas using multicopter drones. Drones were a niche hobby at the home electronics level, but these wireless units looked very powerful. They were fast and made almost no noise.

The student grabbed his radio.

"Wait, you dumbass!! What happened to Myonri!?"

"That jack-of-all-trades managed to escape in time. We have confirmed her survival, so worry about yourself. You can't expect any support from her tank anymore."

"Oh, I see. So we're stuck out here, huh? I swear you bring us nothing but trouble!!"

"Quenser, stop taking out your frustrations on a lovely lady like me. And don't think I've forgotten the sexual harassment of that highly-inappropriate conversation from before."

"Oh, god! You heard that!?"

"You were warned: the military records everything you say."

They would be able to last a while firing the heavy machineguns from the craters, but if the enemy could blow up a tank, they could do the same to a cluster of infantry. Once one of those drone bombs arrived overhead, the rocket would be launched straight down and the blast would fill the crater the potatoes were using to hide.

"The drones are top priority," said Heivia. "Quenser, you've got nothing else to do, so use your binocs to keep an eye on the filthy sky! Don't overlook even one! We need to shoot them down before they get here or we're dead!!"

"Focus too much on the drones and the guerillas will reach us on the ground!!"

"Radar alert," said a voice on the radio. "Several unnatural readings are approaching the battlefield. They are almost certainly support materials being dropped from the Mother Lady space elevator. We estimate their size to be about that of a large tour bus!! Their contents are unknown, so they could contain anything from powered suits to tanks!!"

"What the hell are we supposed to focus on first!!!!?" shouted Heivia while bristling.

Despite his question, their top priority was the cargo tanks dropping from the sky. If the guerillas obtained a 120mm cannon with a gas turbine engine while the 37th's tanks were crushed, the guerillas could make a comeback. Wars were not determined by morality or emotions. It was all about quantity and cutting-edge equipment. And no one wanted to end up on the losing end where they were devoured by a monster that had the upper hand on both counts.

"Online stores are doing same-day delivery of weapons now."

"Doesn't this mean they're in geostationary orbit? They responded awfully quickly after the request down here was made. Are they launching cargo tanks with a simple coilgun or something instead of

just letting them drop? In the vacuum of space, that might give them more speed than if they did the same on the surface.”

Or it was possible they had other space stations positioned in lower orbits than the main one. Like the various foods positioned down the length of a skewer sitting on a grill. That would provide plenty of defense around the elevator.

Regardless, complaining was not going to change anything.

Those unwanted gift boxes were dropping onto the battlefield and it would be a huge pain if the enemy managed to collect them.

“Myonri, I don’t care if it can’t move. How many tanks aren’t on fire yet?”

“You’re still forcing me to work after all that?”

“If you didn’t want to work, you should’ve played dead, smartypants. Now quit lying around and get to work. Since you’re amplifying your signal with a tank’s equipment, you must have already reached a surviving one, right? Anyway, you’re upwind of us, so gather smoke from that intact tank and then release it all! Hurry!!”

Far behind them, a pink smokescreen spread out like cotton candy while a tailwind pushed it toward Quenser’s group. With nothing to obstruct it, the smoke continued on and enveloped the guerillas as well. It had a toxic-looking chemical coloration, but since it was not tear gas, it would not actually stop the enemy. However, the enemy would panic until they realized that.

Also, the supplies for the guerillas were descending from high in the sky, but no matter how accurately Mother Lady dropped them, the guerillas on the ground would have trouble moving into position with the giant pink cotton candy cloud obscuring their vision.

Tech was the cheat code of the modern age, but it provided the same benefit to everyone.

Outside of the Pilot Elites who operated Objects, no special bloodline or talent was needed to operate it.

If the 37th picked up the Capitalist Corporations cargo tanks first, they could destroy them or even use the contents for themselves.

“Cough, ugh.”

“It’s a harmless health product – it even has skin-friendly collagen inside. So don’t let the placebo effect do you in, Heivia. C’mon, let’s get going. Remove the spring from the machinegun and ditch

the rest.”

From here, it was all about speed.

After removing a key component from the 20kg machinegun so it would no longer function, the potatoes abandoned the heavy machinery and rushed from the edge of the crater. The smokescreen not only blocked ordinary vision, it also absorbed or reflected EM, IR, and other forms of mechanical scans. They ran through the swollen pink cumulonimbus cloud and, whenever they found a guerilla within 2m of them, Heivia would cover their mouth and slit their throat with his knife.

“Man, we’re actually doing real war stuff for once.”

“I am, maybe! You’re doing jack shit, Quenser!!”

“And what am I supposed to do with my bombs? Make a bunch of noise that draws the guerillas to us, defeating the entire purpose of the smokescreen?”

Even the largest group could be divided into nothing but individuals if their vision and means of communication were cut off. With EM blocked, everyone would be sending out panicked radio signals, so no one would question it if someone was not answering. This was not enough to wipe out a large army of course, but you could take out individuals and sneak into the enemy lines as long as the panic lasted.

Their goal was the predicted landing point for one cargo tank.

If they did not reach and destroy it before the local guerillas arrived there, the battle’s momentum could be reversed. Being killed by the very people they had been so easily defeating before would make this the worst New Years ever. They were not interested in an unpredictable rollercoaster or a surprise twist on the last two pages. Not when they were the ones who would suffer for it.

“Am I imagining it, or are there a lot fewer people around here?”

“We’re near Point D4. After dropping that thing, they have to slow it down with a parachute at the end. If the wind blows just wrong, anyone in the area could be crushed by that thing’s huge ass, so everyone’s watching from a distance until it lands.”

That meant the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes were sweatily chasing after that big mama’s butt when not even the guerillas were interested. Happy New Year – have a new fetish. Their only choice was to assume this was one of those immortal mamas who looked just like a schoolgirl no matter how old she got.

“Heivia, prepare your shoulder-fired missile. If the guerillas reach it first, blow away the people surrounding it.”

"I'll do it, but they're dropping multiple cargo tanks and I can't cover all of them."

That was when they heard a loud boom.

It came from a good distance away.

Quenser and Heivia stared blankly for a while.

They heard a comrade speaking over an ultrasound transmission designed to travel through the smoke that blocked radar waves and IR.

"C2 here. Our cargo tank blew up from the inside! It killed Raver since he got there first!! There's a password written on the back of his organ donor card. Someone use that to fulfill his final wish by secretly erasing his hard drive and cloud storage!!"

"Did those sons of bitches send down decoys along with the real ones!?"

Anyone trying to obstruct them would have to take out all the cargo tanks, but the recipients would be told which ones were real and could focus on those. It was a primitive but effective method.

And hadn't Heivia said earlier that there were not many people around here?

That would suggest...

"This one's a decoy too. Fall back, Heivia! Hurry!!"

Just as Quenser shouted and gestured his warning, the thick pink smoke was torn through by something dropping nearby. It was a hunk of metal that had been carelessly separated from its parachute in midair.

Before Heivia could even widen his eyes, a container that looked like a cross between an oblong box and a water bottle exploded from within due to the impact of the fall.

Part 3

Lieutenant Milinda Brantini was a member of the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion.

She was commonly referred to as the Princess.

She was the Pilot Elite who operated the Baby Magnum, a multirole First Generation Object with 7

main cannons and an upside-down Y-shaped propulsion device, so you could say that every one of the battalion's nearly 1000 soldiers – from the sentries to the commander – had all been deployed to allow her to fight to her fullest. She had short blonde hair and pale blue eyes, she never batted an eye no matter what might happen, and she would move swiftly and aim accurately to protect the battalion and defeat the enemy. She had a beauty so great it could not even be compared to anything as cliché as ice.

“Bwuh...it's so hot. Why does the A/C have to be broken???”

But this...this had broken her.

She was in no state to be seen at present.

The sweaty girl sat limply in the cockpit located at the center of her nuke-resistant Object. But she was not exhausted after moving that 200,000ton mass around with MMA-like footwork. It was hot. Just plain hot. Wiping off her brow did little to stem the flow of sweat.

Silver-haired and busty Frolaytia breathed an exasperated sigh on a small window on the cockpit screen.

“That cockpit was designed to endure a nuclear attack, so of course it can't take in outside air. Your own body heat is trapped in there, so blame yourself!” “Ayyy seee.”

“I do feel bad about that, but there was no room in the schedule to fix it. Oh, and the transport plane carrying the new one was just shot down by the elevator's anti-air lasers. I honestly have no idea when the next one can arrive, so you'll be better off finishing this job so you can leave that cockpit than continuing to stew in your own sweat. It's 28 degrees with 40% humidity out here, which is even nicer than Hawaii.”

Their commander was apparently lounging on a beach chair with a cold drink in hand. She was of course positioned somewhere that no snipers or mortars could easily target her, but it was still wrong to be commanding your troops while wearing a bikini, sipping on a colorful soda, and munching on assorted fruits.

As the legend foretold, the Princess did not bat an eye.

Her expression remained entirely blank as she puffed out her cheeks like a squirrel.

“I can't take it anymore.”

“Hey, wait!”

She quickly stripped off her blue skintight special suit. She freed her pink-flushed nape and then the

entirety of her back. She unzipped the suit, removed the sleeves, and then pulled it down to her hips.

Her sports bra left her flat tummy visible, but she was beyond caring. She shook her head like a puppy wet from the rain and drops of sweat flew from her.

This was enough for Frolaytia to sit up from her beach chair.

"That special suit helps fight the Gs and protect you from impacts."

"You don't get to talk when you're lying around in a bikini." The heat must have really gotten to her because the Princess did not even try to hide her flushed skin as she replied in a gloomy way. "And I'll be fine. Nothing is going to happen anytime soon."

"That kind of carelessness is exactly what-"

"I'll be fine," she reiterated. Still with no expression on her face.

It was true that the attack on the Capitalist Corporations space elevator was essentially at a stalemate. The Baby Magnum should have been at an advantage since it could move and the space elevator was immobile, yet she was stuck here and unable to attack. The space elevator effectively had more firepower than the Object.

(But Objects are supposed to be the strongest weapons.)

She pouted her lips like a small child and reached around toward the minifridge installed behind her seat. She felt around for a pouch of ice-cold jelly drink and pulled it out.

"Unyahhh."

Instead of quenching her thirst with it, she first held it between her flushed cheek and shoulder to let the chilliness soothe her soul.

"Mother Lady has two main attacks," she said. "The ultra-long-range laser beam that it fires horizontally from the top of the spear-like structure, and the artificial meteor shower attack that it calls down from outside the atmosphere."

There were also close-range coilguns on the side of the elevator, but those were only anti-tank weapons and Object armor could shrug them off.

"The laser beam has a range of about 700km and the artificial meteor shower uses chunks of depleted uranium and tungsten alloy," said Frolaytia. "Just one of those hitting the ground creates a

crater on par with a small nuclear warhead, but we're talking about 100 to 1000 of them."

That might sound like a truly horrifying attack, but they were only hunks of metal with no rockets or tail fins. And Objects were designed to perfectly intercept a MaRV that's movement was controlled by a program or a MIRV-class nuclear warhead that scattered nuclear weapons across a set area.

With the anti-air laser beam weapons covering the spherical main body's surface like a sea urchin or chestnut burr, it would not miss a single one. And when something was entering the atmosphere, the slightest crack would increase the air friction to the point that it broke apart and created a massive shockwave. She could actually use the high altitude from which the artificial meteor shower was dropped. After determining its distribution, she could shoot down a bare minimum of the pieces so that the resulting shockwaves would hit the surrounding pieces, causing them to break apart, and resulting in a chain reaction. Even if 100 or 1000 artificial "meteors" filled the African sky, she did not have to target each and every one of them individually.

"Get too relaxed there and they'll attack," warned Frolaytia.

"I know."

The Princess held the drink pouch between her thighs.

With her hands free, she grabbed the grips on either side and kicked the Object to the right.

The dust and moisture in the air were scorched orange as a powerful beam passed by just barely to her side.

She had only moved one Object's-width to the side, but that meant the 200,000ton mass had moved 50m at more than 500km/h. It had to have whipped up a wind more powerful than when a train passed through a subway tunnel.

It was so easy she did not even bother humming.

"I'm so bored."

"But you can't move in any closer."

Construction equipment had been used to dig into the ground around the space elevator and pour in static-absorbing gel, barbed wire coils thicker than a tunnel had been set up, and other Object-obstruction methods had been implemented. She might be able to power her way through all of them, but if they slowed her at all, she would be pummeled by the thick laser beams and artificial meteor shower.

That meant this was a job for the infantry.

She must have been too hot to care because the Princess kept the pouch of jelly drink in a fairly indecent place as she continued the conversation.

“But with a range of 700, I don’t see how Quenser and the others can get close either.”

Keep in mind that the units here were not in meters.

“It never fires its laser beam into the ground,” said Frolaytia. “That might be because the ground would rapidly absorb the heat and produce an unnatural updraft that could produce clouds not in their meteorological data. Mother Lady’s wires are carbon nanotubes, so they’re strong against impacts but weak to electricity.”

And if they had a weakness like that, it was best to take advantage of it. The Princess fired her high-power laser beams onto the empty ground while making sure not to hit any of her allies or the battalion’s vehicles.

(Sigh, why is the world’s strongest weapon doing a rain dance?)

“Princess, um, shouldn’t you put your top back on soon?”

“It’s not like Quenser and the others can see me.”

“You’re as careless as the people who bring a tablet with a camera into the bathroom with them. Now, I might not care that much, but I’m worried about the old maintenance lady’s blood pressure. Are you trying to get her to lecture you?”

The Princess ignored that kind warning and continued to fire her main cannons.

But this time, not to indirectly create unexpected thunderclouds.

She tried directly targeting the elevator, but her laser beams and railguns curved unnaturally before reaching it.

Heat.

Smoke.

Water.

Sand.

To avoid clouds, the enemy had to have some way of manipulating the atmosphere. She could not hope to hit just by adjusting for a margin of error.

EM and IR weapon lock-ons were well-known, but that was why so many countermeasures existed. And sometimes pushing for quantity could reduce accuracy.

By spreading around iron sand or gel to increase the density of the air, shells that pushed through the air resistance would have their trajectory distorted and laser beams would attenuate.

That was why she could not score a clean hit on the stationary elevator that she could plainly see in front of her.

Long-range attacks were not good enough. If she wanted to force her attacks through that interference, she would have to move in closer.

It towered into the heavens so conspicuously, yet she could not hit it. It felt like trying to attack a divine spear made out of a mirage.

The colossal landmark seemed to entirely rewrite the rules of war.

This was different from all of her previous battles.

(It's no fun at all.)

The frustration building in her body must have caused her to tense up too much.

"Hyah!"

Her thigh pressure grew too great for the cap of the jelly drink held against her teenage crotch because it popped off and the heavy liquid within splattered across her body. She reached up to touch her cheek and bangs before growing somewhat tearful.

"Ugh, this is the worst."

"Princess, I know you didn't mean to do that, but the old lady is definitely lecturing you until morning this time."

Part 4

Things could hardly be worse.

The cargo tank must have been loaded with something like tank shells with their fuses swapped out. With those van-sized containers packed full, this reached the level of a small aerial bombing. The blasts and shockwaves covered a radius of 200m.

The only reason Quenser and Heivia were not turned to mincemeat was due to falling into a thick trench in the dry ground. There were traces of concrete mixed in with the scorching sand. This must have originally been an agricultural irrigation ditch, but it had completely dried up.

"We're dead. We are so dead. That big mama's ass exploded in our faces. That ultra-heavyweight mama has no tact at all. Don't just fart in people's faces."

"More importantly, what happened with the real cargo tanks? The guerillas didn't collect them, did they!?"

The smoke would not cover the battlefield forever. The wind had grown stronger, so Quenser and Heivia made certain they did not stick their heads above the former irrigation ditch. They watched as the cotton candy cleared away overhead, revealing the brutal near-equator sun overhead once more.

With the pink smokescreen gone, they switched from ultrasound to ordinary encrypted radio for their transmissions.

Their 18-year-old leader, Frolaytia Capistrano, had this to say:

"A9 failed to reach their target. I repeat, failed to reach their target. The guerillas have entered the cargo tank. The threat level just increased, so be on your guard!!"

"Shut up! If you don't like it, get out here and do it yourself!! Oh, this isn't good! The adrenaline is hitting me in all the wrong ways!"

They were not going to fix anything by saying unwise things much like someone in a sleep-deprived high after trying and failing to get to sleep. It would only get them in trouble later on, so wise Quenser asked about something else.

"Frolaytia, what weapon did the guerillas obtain?"

"Hm, hmmm."

"Look at the screen and stop covering your eyes!! I'll record any more of those naughty-sounding groans, so please just tell us the bad news already!!"

He really wanted their beautiful and capable adult of a commander to understand the simple fact that they were the ones who wanted to cry. Please.

Finally, the silver-haired and busty commander responded.

"They managed to acquire some of the UGV22 Lunchboxes used by the Capitalist Corporations. They now have around 20 of those unmanned ground vehicles."

"Unmanned!?"

"The enemy must like packing things in tight to fit 20 of those in a single cargo tank. What are they, a Class Rep or a young housewife? Each one is 3m long, weighs 2 tons, and has 50cm-thick armor on the front. Their primary weapons are a heavy machinegun and a grenade launcher. They've made those small things as tough as an armored truck and they can charge right into a barrage since they're unmanned. Do not let them near you because they will ignite their remaining ammo to self-destruct if they're immobilized. I don't want to waste our human primates on those masses of metal and silicon, so prepare for electronic warfare!!"

Armored trucks had thin armor compared to tanks, but they were still too much for an assault rifle or grenade to handle. These unmanned vehicles were apparently only 3m long, but since they did not need any space for anyone inside, they could be packed in tight to reduce the size of the entire weapon.

They might as well have had 3m hunks of metal coming for them.

That was a problem.

No one wanted to try punching or kicking something like that and throwing rocks from afar would do nothing to slow them. They would always move at a constant speed and attack with deadly accuracy. They did not even care if they stepped in dog doo.

"What do we do? We left our machinegun in that crater and the others in this area will have already retrieved it. We only have its spring! This thing won't not even satisfy a bored housewife!!"

"Quit flopping that thing around, Heivia. Argh, why'd the smokescreen have to clear up now? If we don't find another way to stop those things, they'll turn us to Swiss cheese from a safe distance."

They only had so many shoulder-fired missiles and it would be foolish for the humans to raise a war cry and go charging in against remote-controlled toys. They were fighting with their one and only life which could not be repaired or replaced if something happened to it. Their best bet was to find some way to cut off the guerillas' line of communication, cause a malfunction in the unmanned weapons' circuitry, or otherwise avoid fighting them altogether.

"Hey, what do we do?" asked Heivia. "Unmanned weapons were supposed to be our thing. I don't wanna fight a war with inferior tech, so I vote we go home."

"How in the world did you look at that enormous elevator and conclude we had the superior tech here? Besides, the guerillas are only borrowing those things from the Capitalist Corporations. Come with me, Heivia, this has turned into a battle of engineering. Those guerillas haven't read the manual and just assume they know what they're doing, just like pretty much everyone with their phones, so let's show them how wrong they are."

Part 5

However, things did not always work out the way you wanted.

"Never mind! I was wrong! Retreat, retreat!!"

"I should really tie up that overconfident skinny boy and leave him out here!!!!!!"

Part 6

Quenser and Heivia rolled into a crack in the dry ground while pursued by the roar of an automatically swiveling heavy machinegun that scattered 700 bullets a minute. And each of those bullets was the same size as the 12.7mm ones used in anti-materiel rifles. A graze to the thigh would be enough to tear off the leg like wringing a rag.

The bugs hiding in a gap in the ground groaned while protecting their heads with their hands.

"This is worse than I imagined!!"

"Why do you always do this!? You're always so shocked every time some new Object shows up!! Why give the enemy the reaction they want!?"

Quenser had tried to use an attack that was harmless to people but deadly to machines: heat, EM waves, dust, dirt, static, moisture, etc. Unmanned weapons were giant communication devices encased in thick armor. Just like with a phone or computer, machines had plenty of weaknesses unique to themselves.

Or so the theory goes. But...

"Damn, it didn't work. They're completely airtight, so no dust or moisture can get in. What kind of cooling system do they use? I didn't see the wire mesh for a radiator. Do those bastards use stylish fully-enclosed liquid cooling!?"

"Keep bragging about the enemy's specs and I'm shoving my magnum in your yapping mouth, skinny

boy!!”

They heard the sound of metal panels scraping together.

Those 3m box-shaped machines called Lunchboxes did not need any space for someone inside, so they were filled with armor instead. That made them heavy. They were only about 2 tons, but that was still too much for skinny tires that matched their size.

“Are you kidding me with these brand-new things? They’re all bright and shiny like at a motor show.”

“That isn’t just paint or wax.”

Quenser and Heivia were lucky the Lunchboxes’ weight prevented them from moving very fast. They traveled at about the speed of a scooter while suppressing the enemy with their machinegun and grenades. Instead of nimbly pursuing their target, they were likely meant to be placed at a particular point to prevent anyone from getting through. By generally surrounding a target with several of them, they could then slowly close in on the target.

But as Quenser and Heivia were pushed back by them, the fear was much like being slowly crushed by the moving walls in some ancient ruins. They were already within range of the barrage. At this rate, the unmanned weapons would catch up to them on their continuous tracks, but carelessly sticking their heads up from the crack in the ground would only get their torso torn in two by anti-materiel bullets.

Quenser looked up into the slice of the blue sky he could see out of the crack.

“From the way they move, I’m guessing they’re operated remotely instead of using a program to patrol a set area. Can’t our side jam them or something?”

“They refuse to attempt something when they know they’ll fail. Since it detracts from their score. Have you forgotten what we’re up against here, Quenser? The Mother Lady space elevator. That thing moves the elevator cars by blasting them with microwaves from the surface to get the motor running. And the Capitalist Corporations controls everything in space up above. Their signals are more powerful than ours, so we can’t forcibly jam theirs.”

“Wait, that would mean...ah, ah, ahhhh!?”

Deafening static pierced his head from right to left, so he grimaced and removed his earphone.

His mobile device might as well have been a ceramic tile.

The emblem on the corner of the screen said he had no signal.

“The data link is down.”

“So’s the radio. Damn, what century of warfare are we fighting now!?”

This is what happened when your side’s communications equipment was inferior. The guerillas protecting the space elevator could communicate and coordinate all they liked, but the 37th had to figure things out individually. Their maps were no longer updating, leaving them in the dark as to what was happening, where their enemies and allies were located, what the current timetable was, or even where they were located themselves. And since they could not share their own locations, there was a chance that the Princess would blow them away with an attack. Luring them in and then cutting off their communications was downright cruel.

The Legitimacy Kingdom was one of the four world powers, so they would not normally run into this kind of trouble.

That showed just how unusual this battle against the space elevator was.

“What do we do?” asked Heivia. “We’ll get lost out here if we’re not careful. Do we just charge toward Mother Lady as the most obvious landmark?”

“And die just like Frolaytia taught us to!? Anyway, be quiet, Heivia. One of those unmanned weapons is coming, so shut up!”

Some sand came away from the walls as the ground shook from continuous tracks similar to on construction equipment. It was close.

Quenser and Heivia curled up at the bottom of the crack just before the sunlight was blocked.

A Lunchbox was passing by directly above the narrow crack in the ground.

“-----!?”

“(Settle down, you noble chicken! Do I need to stuff a handkerchief in your mouth!?)”

Dust was falling down on their heads and the sunlight could not reach them. Quenser felt a squeezing in his heart as the 2 tons of thick metal passed by overhead. If they were discovered, they were dead, but it could also lose its balance and crush them to death. At this point, his life was entirely in the hands of luck.

Looking up, he saw the metal belly of the machine and the track thicker than a chainsaw.

The bottom was not as shiny as a sportscar.

It symbolized death as much as falling rocks or a cave-in, but there was nothing more there. The lunchbox did not have any cameras or sensors to detect anyone below it. Of course, it was only 3m long and did not sit very high up from the ground, so there would not normally be enough of a gap for someone to crawl underneath it.

Yet Quenser saw no opening here.

A tank could not fire from too close to avoid being caught in the blast or hit by a ricochet, but this thing was unmanned. It would not have to worry about human damage. The instant it noticed them, the fireworks show would begin.

Unlike the tank Myonri had been using, he did not smell any exhaust. Was it actually electric despite weighing so much?

It must have only taken 10 seconds to pass by, but that felt maddeningly long.

The Capitalist Corporations unmanned ground vehicle passed above the two idiots, but Heivia still did not stick his head out of the crack for a while.

“What now? We’re past their defensive line!”

“Why should we do all the work? Myonri and the others have their tanks back there, so they can blast through that thick armor with-”

Quenser trailed off when he realized something.

The Capitalist Corporations’ Federation of Elevator Industries was jamming them using the microwave bases surrounding the ground base and the many military stations built up in space, so Quenser and Heivia could not communicate or use their datalink to tell their allies where they were.

What if the tanks began their own individual attacks right now?

The Legitimacy Kingdom would want to do something about the slow-moving but thick-armored Lunchboxes, so those would be the top priority target at the moment.

But. Would the others notice that the two idiots were hiding in a crack not 10m away from this one?

“W-we need to use a smoke bomb!! What’s the color for an emergency signal!?”

They did not have time for that.

A shell flew in from a Legitimacy Kingdom tank.

It very kindly knocked them unconscious as it blew them away.

Part 7

Quenser Barbotage was being dragged.

He could not tell up from down and his memory was still fuzzy, but he could tell someone was holding him by the arms and dragging him.

Wherever he was, it was dark, but he could not figure out if it was a cave or a basement somewhere.

“Ah, ugh?”

“(Stay quiet if you want to live.)”

A suppressed male voice brought the blood rapidly back to the student’s head. His mind quickly regained its focus.

Who was this?

At the very least, it did not seem to be Heivia Winchell.

“You’re one of the foreign soldiers, aren’t you? You might not want treatment from a blank zone doctor with far from the latest equipment, but it’s better than dying. Listen, you need to stay still. I disinfected you and stopped the bleeding, but I don’t have any real equipment here. I can’t even guess what state your bones or organs are in.”

“Who...are you?”

“Braskine Mintfrappe.”

The young man slowly named himself.

He had dark skin and short black hair. He was wearing a desert military uniform, but he also wore a starched white coat over that. He was tall and fairly muscular, but it looked somehow calculated. Like he had intentionally built up that muscle instead of coming by it naturally.

That family name was unfamiliar, so he was probably native to this blank zone instead of any of the four world powers.

"You people might see someone like me as no more than a witch doctor, but I'll have you know I studied medicine in Berlin when I was younger. I never managed to spread that knowledge after returning here, though."

In that case...

"You're with the guerill- agh!?"

Quenser tried to roll away from the man, but every last joint in his body cried out in pain.

The man named Braskine shook his head.

"I said I don't know what state your bones and organs are in, remember? You might have been hiding below ground level, but you were still in the lethal range of that shaped charge. I held off on giving you morphine so I wouldn't medicate you without your consent, but how about now?"

Now it was Quenser's turn to shake his head while trying to catch his breath. He was not trusting enough to let some random person inject him with something.

Anyway, it turned out miracles did happen.

In that last moment, Quenser and Heivia had been hiding in a crack in the dried ground. That very ground must have been blown away (by the tank gun operated by that dumbass Myonri), but the crack must not have fully collapsed since Quenser was still in one piece. And how had this supposed doctor collected him from the crack while the tank and the unmanned weapon fought?

That question had a simple answer.

"The battleline has moved on. The tank and unmanned ground vehicle can both move, so the frontline left you two behind while you slept."

"Dammit."

Quenser was not going to just believe everything this guy told him, but that did seem like the only

real possibility.

He had thought the area was so dark because this was a cave with thick bedrock overhead, but it was just that enough time had passed for the sun to fall beyond the horizon.

He had been abandoned out here for that long.

Essentially, he had fallen into enemy hands. The largescale jamming from the parabolic antennas on the ground and the space station up above meant his radio and datalink were useless. That made it unlikely the operator in the maintenance base zone was monitoring his location.

Help was not on its way.

He slowly breathed out before checking on something.

"You said 'you two'."

"I treated another boy in the same uniform as you. Over there."

Quenser intentionally avoided mentioning any names, but Braskine gestured with his chin toward where Private Heivia Winchell was lying sprawled out on the ground. Shockingly, his large handgun remained in its holster. Whatever this man's intentions were, he must not have been interested in confiscating their weapons.

A small old truck and a roofless buggy sat nearby.

No, the doctor had probably carried the buggy out here in the back of the truck. The cheap emblems told Quenser both vehicles were Island Nation brands. That country had withdrawn into partial isolationism, so it was unclear how these had made their way all the way to Africa.

"Can you drive?" Braskine dropped a simple key without a keychain into Quenser's hand. "Then you can take the buggy. Load your friend in there and hurry back to your maintenance base."

"Are you sure about that? If we return alive, we'll report everything that happened. If you're walking around without any real weapons while the Legitimacy Kingdom and Capitalist Corporations clash here, you must have some kind of secret route, be it tunnels or pipelines."

"Keeping you here would be a bigger problem," spat out the man. "What if your people put together a largescale rescue mission for you two? That benevolent act of charity will keep the war going. My job is to treat the wounded, so I don't want your people hurting anyone else."

"You're with the guerillas, so don't you want to protect the elevator no matter what?"

"Mother Lady has brought us money. A lot of money. Over the nine-month test period, the Turkana District has probably become the wealthiest part of Africa. And with the profits going unrecorded since it's all supposed to be a simple test. I bet we're doing even better than the diamond mines or the water business."

He sounded bitter, so he must have noticed this was not exactly a good thing.

"But wealth doesn't necessarily bring happiness. We're going through lives even faster than we used to. Clutching a still-unpaid contract in your hand doesn't do you any good when you take a bullet and die."

"..."

The Capitalist Corporations were using the local guerillas knowing what it would mean for them.

They had bought up the land for the space elevator and made lucrative promises to be fulfilled after the elevator's completion to hire a defense force against the other world powers. And if those defenders died before the Capitalist Corporations had to pay them, all the better.

Even when the locals realized they had been betrayed, they could not turn their weapons on the elevator.

Why not?

They had abandoned their old lives and invested in this new path. That had earned them some new wealth. Could they really throw out that new life and redo things just because they knew it was wrong?

They could not.

Humans could not fight the new desires they discovered. Like TV, air conditioning, online shopping, refrigerators, convenience stores, microwaves, delivery drones, and smartphones. It was the same for everyone. No one could give up everything and return to a more natural life just because people had lived that way a hundred years ago.

Without the space elevator, the world powers would lose all interest in this region. The test period was only a test. If the results were unsatisfactory and it was branded a failure, the Capitalist Corporations would be freed of their obligation to build bases and cities here. All that would remain was the dry and cracked desert.

And they would no longer need to maintain the high-level infrastructure they had put in place.

The locals would have been given a taste of a more comfortable life only for the tap to be shut off. That was the same method used by rotten drug dealers on the streets who would initially sell their white powder for almost nothing to get people addicted before they jacked up the prices.

In that sense, it was a very Capitalist Corporations negotiating tactic.

On the other hand, Quenser had no right to criticize them. The Legitimacy Kingdom only cared about the Turkana District for its flora and fauna that might make a useful drug. The minority of royals and nobles had sent in everyone from the royals to the commoners because they feared a genetic bomb that their special genealogy might possess.

Did no one at all care about the local people?

Was that why the locals had been left with no choice but to fight as guerillas?

And then even that decision had been used against them?

"We never should have agreed to it," said Braskine Mintfrappe, the doctor who had helped caused all this through the pursuit of happiness. "We made a fatal error with our very first decision. We've worried over every decision since, trying to do the best thing at every fork in the road, but we were already stuck on a path straight toward the precipice."

Part 8

Things were going well.

The space elevator was the largest structure in human history, but that also meant it had an absurd amount of secondary facilities and equipment. Enough so that the infrastructure for a whole city was not enough. The entire region's water was sucked up for cooling purposes, a massive amount of power was needed, and powerful microwave was used to wirelessly send power to the elevator car.

A Legitimacy Kingdom tank traveled through the pitch-black night without even a single streetlight.

With a crew of four teenage girls, the inside ended up smelling awfully sweet. Specifically, it smelled of deodorant spray.

"We will have control of the #4 parabolic antenna power transmission station soon! Send the fuel and ammo supply unit this way! We will move on ahead once we have resupplied!!"

The tank commander, who was a bit older than the rest, pulled a moistened towel from the small

fridge and placed it against the back of her overheated neck.

“Myonri, we’re being jammed, so the maintenance base can’t hear you.”

“There are four of us crammed in here, so can’t one of us at last shine some laser art on the night sky to communicate!?”

Whoever made the suggestion was generally stuck with doing it. Especially when they were the lowest ranking member. Myonri grew tearful as she was handed a special ray gun with a barrel about as thick as a relay baton, but she had no choice but to push open the manhole-like metal hatch and poke her head out from the sweet-smelling tank.

Needless to say, that ray gun was not a next-gen portable superweapon.

It was a backup signal device that could send instructions to their allies by drawing out lines not visible with the naked eye. They were used to prevent friendly fire during a nighttime aerial bombing or to call for rescue when stuck out on the battlefield, so it was a useful piece of equipment everyone much preferred to never have to use.

“I have plenty of qualifications, so I really need to see about getting a transfer.”

“I heard that, Myonri.”

“I really, really need a transfer!!”

Just as the short-haired girl tearfully bit her lip, she saw a flash of light in the night sky.

It almost looked like a shooting star, except it was not alone.

The night sky was soon filled with a wild dance of light.

“I-is there an alert!?”

“Why?”

“It’s that elevator!! Mother Lady!!”

She did not hear a single electronic tone from within the tank before the explosive boom pounded on her eardrums.

It came from beyond the horizon.

In a long horizontal line as far as the eye could see, a terrifying dust cloud rose several dozen meters into the air. And instead of stopping there, more explosions occurred a bit in front of that after a short pause. The pattern repeated like that, moving ever closer. The desert was filled with explosive blasts just like an industrial printer filling a blank piece of copy paper with small text.

And the explosions were gradually approaching their position.

(The artificial meteor shower!? Are the Capitalist Corporations sending down a storm of titanium or tungsten alloy!?)

“Noooo!?”

Myonri forgot to even duck back into the tank as she screamed.

Didn't each and every one of those falling titanium or tungsten pieces rival a nuclear warhead in destructive power?

The entire scenery was obliterated by the solid walls of destruction that were spaced out enough to avoid any overlap in explosions.

Even if Myonri did duck inside the tank, the entire vehicle would be blown away. This was worse than gathering clams on the beach at low tide. This was like tearing up the entire beach with a cultivator's row of rotating blades. Any clam that shut itself up tight would only be smashed to pieces.

Just then, a bluish-white beam of light shot up from the surface and blew away the evenly-spaced downpour of death.

A huge hole was torn into the lights in the sky. The hole had a diameter of more than 3km. That area of darkness remained as the lights descended, allowing Myonri's group to survive, like they had been in the gap of a falling ceiling. It felt a lot like being forced through a ring of fire.

The beam of light had been a low-stability plasma cannon.

Myonri covered her mouth and nose against the powerful cloud of dust that filled the air and she saw a giant silhouette through that filthy screen.

That was the First Generation Baby Magnum.

The all-purpose multirole was an older model, but that was why it was actually capable of intercepting ballistic missiles. Thanks to the various methods of obstruction that messed with its targeting and the paths of its projectiles, it could not attack the stationary elevator without moving in close, but it could still protect the 37th while they were within that range.

“W-we’re alive?”

The artificial meteor shower continued to fall, but it was more definitive this time. More artificial light was launched upwards to fill the starry sky and protect the soldiers down on the desert.

“Our guardian deity,” said a sweaty and hotblooded girl inside the tank.

Their datalink was down thanks to the enemy jamming, but people had to be saying much the same thing all across the battlefield. In fact, a stadium-like cheer shook the desert night just a few seconds later.

“Ohhhhhh!! We have a guardian deity. We aren’t going to die here!! This battle is ours!!”

Part 9

Meanwhile, the Princess’s small butt had slid forward from its usual position.

She was operating the control sticks with her toes.

She had unintentionally taken a position where her legs formed an M as she muttered expressionlessly to herself.

“I’m so bored.”

Part 10

More low rumblings came from elsewhere. The “copy machine” was running somewhere else. The battlefield was tilled from one end to the other, destroying everything manmade along the way.

Tens of thousands of titanium or tungsten alloy pieces dropped from satellite orbit.

It was known as an artificial meteor shower.

The Princess was tearing holes through that to protect them, but it was too soon to celebrate. The Baby Magnum was just one Object. She would be overwhelmed if too many requests for support came in. Once that happened, she would start with protecting whatever was most strategically valuable. The potatoes stuffed inside a tin can of composite armor would not make the cut there.

Their safety was not assured unless they took matters into their own hands.

(But what exactly are we supposed to do?)

Myonri was at a loss when she heard a voice from within the tank.

“Myonri, they aren’t using radar or IR. I can only guess, but they’re probably targeting us by directly looking down at us with lenses in the sky.”

“ ... ”

“That’s why we aren’t receiving any alerts in advance. We’re already done for once the night sky lights up. Their warheads aren’t using tricky chemistry or nuclear physics. They can rival a small nuke just by dropping garbage on us, so they won’t feel any need to hold back.”

They could do the same thing anywhere in the world, battlefield country or safe country, without worrying about air superiority or an invasion route. And they could drop as much as they wanted. This could be used for more than just general aerial bombings. If they were hooked up to a city’s security cameras, they could track an individual. And once they had a lock, that person could not escape no matter how many times they fled all the way around the globe.

Now was no time to worry about appearances.

When Myonri took a look out from the tank again, she saw that the #4 parabolic antenna power transmission station they were meant to take over had been torn to shreds. That station was necessary to send up the elevator car and there would have been staff still working inside, not to mention the many guerilla soldiers defending the perimeter.

But the enemy had shown no mercy.

The Capitalist Corporations determined people’s value based on the size of their savings and salary, but this still felt excessively callous. They had destroyed their assets rather than let them fall into enemy hands. Whether it was a cornerstone of the jamming or whatever else, the number suggested there were other parabolic antenna power transmission stations. Hence the arrogance of their decision.

Even if someone fought for everyone’s sake and achieved record-breaking results, they would still be thrown out the instant that was more convenient.

(Isn’t there something?)

Myonri thought to herself almost as if praying.

(Isn't there something we can do? Something that will turn the tide here!?)

Part 11

The M became a V.

The Princess had detected a change in the battlefield's momentum, so her slender legs had stretched upwards in alarm. However...

"Ow!? Leg cramp!!"

Thanks to that, she was slow to provide assistance.

A monotone beeping filled the sealed cockpit.

The change had begun with a transmission. She had detected a coded transmission using ultrasound that was not influenced by the jamming. It came from the maintenance base zone far behind her.

"Princess!!"

"I-I am only accepting good news right now."

"Then you might as well destroy all of your communication equipment. I don't want to tell you this anymore than you want to hear it."

The conversation with Frolaytia continued a while longer.

Something had changed.

But not all changes were for the better. And it was no use complaining after the fact.

"I can't believe this."

The Princess tearfully placed her hand on her right big toe and pulled it toward her while using just her other hand to accurately operate the Baby Magnum's anti-air weaponry.

"This really is mind-numbingly boring," she said. "Aren't there any more exciting battles we could be fighting?"

"Getting addicted to war is a good way to end the world, you know?"

Part 12

Myonri heard more and more explosions, but she could no longer tell if those meant she had been saved or abandoned to die.

Everything falling from the heavens rivaled a nuclear warhead and the Object intercepted them with extreme low-stability plasma cannons. It was the most apocalyptic fireworks show ever.

A staticky voice managed to break through the powerful wide-range jamming to reach Myonri's ears.

"I'm so bored."

It was the Princess.

Her communications equipment was on the level of an entire radar station, so she was using that to force her way through the jamming.

And the first words out of her mouth were not what Myonri wanted to hear.

They might as well have been a death sentence.

"Wait, what's this? Is she losing interest in the battle? Oh, no! I'll play a word game with you, read you a book, or whatever it takes! Just don't get bored! Please don't go home and leave us here!!"

Myonri paled and shouted in desperation, but there was no response.

The jamming must have prevented the Object from receiving anything from the tank. She simply heard the Princess's flat voice accompanied by intense static.

"I mean, that's just bullying the weak locals here. If the Legitimacy Kingdom decides this is a good way to use Objects, they'll never be able to stop. This war is not going to end well at this rate."

"?"

"Check through the peephole."

Myonri grabbed the grip of the heavy machinegun attached in front of the hatch. She was interested in its multipurpose scope. She looked through that to see several lines of light in the night sky that were not visible with the naked eye. They were either infrared or ultraviolet. They flashed red, red, blue to mean "major damage".

Other invisible lines of light rose from a different angle. Those came from the maintenance base zone.

They flashed blue, red, blue. Then red, red, red.

The two signals meant “retaliation operation, get ready.”

The atmosphere in Myonri’s tank grew heavier. This was different than the fear of being killed.

And the Princess again spoke over the radio with a sigh in her voice.

“This really is boring. Maybe I should run away to a tropical island.”

Part 13

Quenser held the assault rifle he had borrowed from unconscious Heivia.

He needed the multipurpose scope.

He had thought he saw something flashing in the sky. Infrared and ultraviolet were not normally visible, but the diffusion and diffraction caused by atmospheric conditions and sand in the air could alter the wavelength. The lines in the night sky could be understood by anyone with the appropriate equipment and knowledge of the code.

“Wait, wait, wait! Why are bigshots in the base making that decision for us!?”

“Because the elevator attacked you.”

Quenser saw a small light in the darkness. The guerilla doctor named Braskine had placed a frying pan on top of a portable camping stove.

His response was made with a hateful tone even though that attack should have been exactly what his side needed.

“The elevator’s artificial meteor shower hits everything from the front line to the base in the rear. Those officers with chests full of medals assume they’ll be safe as long as they send their troops out as cannon fodder, so it was probably a surprise when they found they were in danger too.”

“You mean our busty commander...I mean, uh, Frolaytia feels that way too!?”

“Fro-? I don’t know how your chain of command works, but that artificial meteor shower can be sent

anywhere in the world. Your safe countries and home country are no exception. It's possible this didn't come from the local commander in charge of your maintenance base. And if it was their higher ups who are panicking, then they would be powerless to stop it."

The skinny boy blinked before asking another question.

"Um, what does that mean for us?"

"Exactly what you think it does, unfortunately."

"What happened to them putting together a rescue mission for us!? Have they completely forgotten about us!? We'll be slaughtered in their big aerial bombing mission along with all of you!! Dammit, if they're gonna pretend I don't exist, then I might as well go peep on the women's bath!!"

It looked like he would have to figure something out on his own.

If the rules of the battalion would not protect him, then he had no reason to obey those rules. He plopped his butt down on the ground to eat some delicious food in violation of military regulations. If the man was going to poison him, he would have injected him with something while he was unconscious.

Also...

"Wait, you're making pizza toast?"

"Yup. I can't carry around everything needed to cook a whole pizza, but the toppings are a different story. Although there's a trick to cooking even this with just a frying pan."

"No, that's not my point. I thought African food was more...well, not this."

"You don't even know what African food is, do you?" Braskine breathed an exasperated sigh. "I learned how to cook this kind of stuff when I was a poor college student in Europe. My roommate Louisiana loved this kind of junk food."

"So like cooking pasta in salty water and only adding a bit of olive oil for flavor?"

"You think I had anything as fancy as that, boy? You aren't a true poor college student until you're figuring out what you can do with a cabbage core."

The two of them shared a laugh.

They were in completely different positions and there might be no room for compromise between them, but they had both lived as students. That gave them something in common.

"What kind of toppings do you like?" asked Braskine while lightly shaking the hot frying pan. "We need to heat those up in a smaller pan before toasting the bread."

"Cheese goes without saying, I assume? As long as the cheese isn't too strong, then I like some basil and sliced olives. Oh, and some kind of seafood if you have it."

"Hm, are you from a coastal area?" inquired the young doctor while opening a can of shellfish.

While gathering information even more crudely than with a blood type horoscope, Braskine added some cheese and tomato puree to his pizza toast and then placed some cooked chicken on top of that. It was all very formal and by-the-book. He was not the type to ever take a step beyond the basics.

"Has anyone ever told you you're a boring guy? Girls in particular?"

"All the time. But I can't help it - I'm just an ordinary guy. I just can't do pizza toast the way Louisiana did. She would pile on thinly-sliced melon and fries."

"Melon?"

"It's not even about whether it would be good or not - you never would have even thought of it, right? She claimed to like the mix of sweet and salty, but that's what a true genius is like. You might want to copy them, but they're too far out of reach."

Quenser drank some of the coffee he was given and wrinkled his brow at how strong and astringent it was. It was probably meant to wake you up more than taste or smell nice.

"My time at school in Berlin was more fun than any other time in my life," said Braskine while watching the portable stove.

"Couldn't you have stayed in Europe? I mean, a medical license is a sign of being in the privileged class. I'm jealous."

"There's more to life than fun." The words were soft and almost seemed to spill from his mouth. "You have to face reality. Besides, I decided to become a doctor so I could support the people who were dying because they could not receive the medical exams and treatments most people take for granted. I couldn't protect my home if I remained in a world that already had everything it needed."

Quenser fell silent for a bit before asking a question.

“Is it really that bad here?”

“When a child has to prepare to die after a simple mosquito bite. That’s how fragile lives are here. And it wouldn’t be that way if we only had vaccines that cost 5 dollars each.”

“...”

“Yes, only 5 dollars. But we can’t get them. Being declared a nature reserve actually worked against us because we can’t capture and sell the rare plants and animals here. I thought maybe we could dig out and sell some stones or sand if we only needed 5 dollars, but no. The small bits of quartz or iron sand mixed in makes them useless trash. Not something anyone’s going to bother sending a truck all the way out here to buy. The fuel costs would leave them in the red.”

He could not protect his home if he remained in a world that already had everything it needed.

Quenser was starting to see what the man meant.

The ordinary ways of doing things did not always protect people’s lives.

“That’s why we were all so thankful for that elevator. It dried up the ground and we couldn’t preserve our traditional way of life, but it ended an era where you had no recourse while your precious child was dying.”

Braskine smiled in a self-deprecating way.

He wanted to protect his home.

He had gone as far as earning a medical license, but he still found himself unable to save people without sufficient medical supplies. Ironically, it was Mother Lady towering up from the desert that had provided him with that.

It had saved their lives.

Their own and those of the people they cared for even more.

That was why the local people continued to fight even if it meant becoming guerillas. Even though they knew deep down it was wrong and even though they had an inkling that more people would die of this war than of disease.

If they lost, they would lose the benefits of the space elevator.

They had not wanted to return to an age when they were forced to accept so much as unavoidable.

“Louisiana, the college roommate I mentioned, apparently wanted to protect the entire world. The thing about ordinary people is that we restrict our own dreams and stuff them into a smaller box. She always found it puzzling why I was so delighted while restricting my own possibilities like that. And she was right. I was so busy polishing up a comfortable fish tank for myself that I never lived up to my potential. I couldn’t head out into the vast ocean to change the world like her.”

The pizza toast was like a feast compared to the soap-like rations.

And once Quenser’s stomach was full to give him some energy, he could no longer distract himself that way. The immediate problem weighed on him all the more.

At this rate, the Legitimacy Kingdom was going to begin a retaliation operation.

Quenser and Heivia had been forgotten thanks to the powerful jamming, so they would be blown away along with the enemy. And Braskine of course did not want the local people to be attacked.

No amount of prayer would cause a hero or powerful warrior to appear.

So they would have to solve this themselves.

However, Quenser Barbotage could not drive and Heivia still showed no sign of coming to.

Braskine seemed to want the stranded soldiers to leave before they brought disaster, but their plan for returning to base had been ruined by the Capitalist Corporations elevator. The Legitimacy Kingdom was so intent on retaliating they had completely forgotten about the cheap soldiers they had sent out there. Nothing about this was likely to change any time soon.

As things were, there would be a full-on clash between the Capitalist Corporations artificial meteor shower and the Legitimacy Kingdom’s ground-based retaliation. Neither side was giving any thought to the guerillas who were not part of the four world powers. If anything, the Legitimacy Kingdom might actively target the guerillas in order to add more to their kill count and preserve their honor.

Braskine used a special detergent to wash his cooking utensils with as little water as possible and he grimaced after Quenser shared what he knew.

“I need a vehicle,” concluded the student. “And I need your help.”

“Dammit, then you’d better give something in return. If I help you, then you’re fighting to protect my people!”

Quenser himself did not want the Princess to dirty her hands with unnecessary retaliation. He doubted attacking the local guerillas would cause any trouble at all for the Capitalist Corporations operators. And besides the armed guerillas, there would also be plenty of noncombatant residents in their villages. What if the Object was sent in to attack there? That kind of needless killing would not even be war – only a massacre.

So Quenser calmly nodded.

“We’re after the Capitalist Corporations space elevator, so we’re not interested in who lives in the area. So as long as you help us destroy that thing.”

“So what’s your plan!?”

“We find a way to take control of the elevator before the retaliation can begin. Or we at least bring back a way to do so as a souvenir. Then the Legitimacy Kingdom will lose its excuse to slaughter the guerillas. This battle is over the space elevator, so the guerillas are only a distraction.”

“That’s not a plan!!”

They argued back and forth as they walked to the beat-up truck.

The young doctor got in the driver’s seat and Quenser in the passenger seat. Unconscious Heivia, the buggy, and the camping supplies were loaded into the enclosed back.

They drove out into the desert night, but it was unexpectedly warm.

And not just because they were so close to the equator.

“It’s that elevator. It uses the chill of the night to cool the coolant once it’s taken in so much frictional heat. I’m sure you could calculate out the amount of energy from the length of the wires, but you only need to know it’s a lot.”

“I assumed they were cooling it with a nuclear reactor.”

“They use thermal power down below the parabolic antenna bases. Were you overwhelmed by the laser beams and coilguns? If you link together enough power generation facilities to supply an entire state’s worth of electricity, you can do most anything even with older tech.”

“Can you draw me out a map of those underground waterways?”

“What good is that? We never would have had it so hard if we could get water that easily.”

“Stick a thick metal sheet deep in the earth and you can block off those waterways. Then the elevator loses its supply of coolant.”

“Finally, an actual plan,” laughed Braskine.

He kept one hand on the wheel and used the other to draw something out in the notebook he had open on his lap. Then he tossed the notebook to Quenser.

With that souvenir, they might be able to stop the meaningless retaliation operation. But they did not drive the truck straight back to the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base zone.

They kept the headlights off and Quenser kept an eye out ahead with night-vision goggles while they repeatedly drove around certain obstacles. The goggles were from the Capitalist Corporations. They were one of the kind gifts given to the guerillas. The rich had essentially told the locals to put those on so they could look stylish when they died.

“Can’t you wear these while you drive?”

“Are you sure you want that? Those old-style goggles blur your vision a lot when you turn your head too quickly.”

It was obvious what they were using the goggles to avoid.

“Another one,” said Quenser in disgust. “There’s a Lunchbox 500m ahead. Those things have finally gotten tired and decided to take a break.”

“Wouldn’t they normally be even more fired up and ready to go after a successful counterattack?”

“The operators probably think moving them will get them caught in the artificial meteor shower.”

“I believe those things’ batteries can last a week in standby mode.”

They made sure to steer clear of every single one they saw.

Since they had to repeatedly take detours, it felt a lot like they were driving around in circles. Especially since the continuing jamming from the elevator’s military station made the map on Quenser’s mobile device entirely useless.

“There’s no time to spare. Yes, I expect the retaliation will begin within 12 hours from now.”

“How do you know?”

"It's the Legitimacy Kingdom way. You can't help being take off guard at times. We aren't Faith Organization fortunetellers, so there's only so much we can predict in advance. So the royals and nobles prefer to defend their honor through appropriate retaliation. But if enough time passes after an attack, you're labeled as a fool who couldn't do anything to get back at your attacker. And 12 hours from now is about the limit on that. You can't let a full 24 hours pass. You need to use that time to make full use of a huge-ass simulator and calculate out how much damage you need to do in retaliation for the damage you received."

"..."

"The going rate is killing ten times as many people as you had killed, I think. Sometimes the calculation comes out closer to nine times or eleven times, though." Quenser clicked his tongue. "We really can't get back without doing something about those unmanned weapons. Could we go to the guerilla HQ and have them open a path for us? They're on the verge of having their village razed after all."

"We don't control those things from our village. They're directly controlled by Federation of Elevator Industries operators in Mother Lady's ground base. We don't have that kind of technical skill."

Braskine made it sound like they were being lent equipment but not being trained in how to use it.

The Capitalist Corporations saw them as replaceable and disposable, so they were not going to increase the cost of each one by pouring money into training them. That would only lose the Capitalist Corporations money.

They slid the truck down into a V-shaped dip in the ground to avoid being seen by the unmanned ground vehicles. It was probably the remnants of a now-dried river. They saw the occasional remains of a wooden pier or small boats left behind there.

"We have 12 hours until the 'swift retaliation' begins. I expect they'll repeat the simulation as many times as they can before the limit to make sure they can put together a mission that causes exactly the damage their calculations say they need."

"Is there any chance they'll remember you're out here while they do that?"

"If they did remember, it would affect their timetable, so anyone who does will do everything they can to forget again. If they 'unknowingly' kill us in friendly fire, no one can be charged with a crime."

The potatoes' lives were just not that important.

Quenser sighed while leaning back in the stopped truck's passenger seat.

"That means tomorrow at noon is the limit. Heivia and I need to return to the maintenance base zone before then so we can force them to redo the simulation based on a new calculation sheet. And if we don't give them the information needed to block up the underground waterways used to cool the elevator, they really will begin their misguided retaliation against the guerillas. Since that means you, I know you don't want that."

Needless to say, the Legitimacy Kingdom's enemy was the Capitalist Corporations, not the local guerillas.

But with only the immediate records available, they would satisfy themselves by attacking the guerrillas. Even though the Lunchboxes were actually being controlled by the operators in the air-conditioned elevator ground base.

"You world powers seem to think you can just dig into the ground around here and find an unlimited supply of guerillas, but the people dying are the kids raised in my village. No, not just my village. They come from all the villages and towns around the elevator. All of them had their own hopes and dreams and the idea was for them to realize those dreams by using the money from the elevator to get an education in Asia or Europe. You can't just plant some seeds in a field to grow more of them. I want to avoid any more sacrifices here."

Truth be told, Quenser was not 100% in agreement with Braskine. No matter what the man said, Quenser was on the side trying to destroy the Mother Lady space elevator. He felt it was too naïve to think he could just grab that outstretched hand and find a solution to the entire mess without going to any real effort.

Children had to be prepared for death after a simple mosquito bite.

The vaccine to prevent it cost only 5 dollars.

It was a moving story, but the Capitalist Corporations had not been offering help out of the goodness of their hearts. Given their intelligence-gathering capabilities, they must have known about the disastrous situation in this region long ago. They had ignored it for so long and only now approached with a smile on their faces so they could use it as a bargaining chip to get the land they needed.

Quenser was a commoner, so he would normally live his life having the nobles and royals extracting everything from him they could get.

But he also knew how risky it was to fight back against that. That was why he had come all the way to the battlefield to learn about Object design. He had made a powerful enemies and barely dodged death more than a few times to have his way.

You were free to break free of society's role for you if you wanted.

But once you did, you were choosing to face the unnecessary dangers placed upon any who dared defy society's rules.

Opportunities always came with risk.

Generally, the ones who won were those who made the rules and made sure they were paid first.

If you did not understand that and were not prepared to use it to your advantage, this is what happened. You would fail to see past the tempting promises. Just like someone who took out a generous student loan without realizing that was actually a debt system set up by the state.

What should they have sold instead? Could they have found a way to attract tourists? Quenser did not know the right answer here.

Regardless, he would have to rework his plan.

He started by double checking an important fact.

"Since those unmanned weapons aren't run by the guerilla villages, there won't be any hard feelings if we destroy them, right?"

"Right. But can you destroy them? Those Lunchboxes are the Capitalist Corporations' latest model and they've repelled soldiers with advanced equipment a few times already. Not to protect our lives, of course."

The conditions for that would depend on the time and situation.

For now, Quenser hopped out of the truck's passenger seat, circled behind it, and opened the boxy enclosed back.

"Heivia. Hey, Heivia."

"Ugh...where am I? Panty heaven???"

"I'm not expecting anything from you, so just hand over your water and rations. You can keep dreaming in here. Food is for people who actually work."

Once he realized he would be slowly killed if he did not help out, Heivia rapidly woke back up. The mindset of cruel Frolaytia's 37th had reached even the lowest levels.

As a doctor, Braskine was particular about a healthy diet.

He could not believe his eyes when he saw Quenser.

“What’s this? You only just ate some pizza toast. Maybe you’re in a growth spurt, but it’s best to avoid forming bad lifestyle habits.”

“Dammit, Quenser!! You were having the time of your life while I was out, weren’t you!?”

“I don’t know what he’s talking about. You really shouldn’t trust everything these guerillas say.”

They munched on the soap-like flavorless rations while holding a strategy meeting.

“The retaliation operation begins tomorrow afternoon, right? Then why not wait until then?” That was newly-awakened Heivia’s opinion. “It’ll be a ground operation primarily carried out by the mechanized unit, so we can find our way to an allied tank or armored truck and have them pick us up. I don’t give a crap what happens to the guerillas.”

That was an impeccably logical plan, but the idiot had left all of his kindness behind somewhere.

That was when Braskine pulled out a weapon even more frightening than a Gatling gun. It was a bottle rocket with a whistle attached. The doctor who saw all lives as equally important spoke with a blank expression.

“This is used to signal an enemy’s approach. People are sensitive to unusual sounds, so the villagers will rush in from all over even in the middle of a sandstorm. Whatever your reasons might have been, you’re the ones that killed these people’s sons and daughters. But if you think you can handle those grieving parents, then be my guest.”

“...”

“There was nothing a doctor could do. In the 9 months since the Elevator’s testing period began, I’ve attended so many funerals. I even helped dig their graves, but a lot of the bodies couldn’t be retrieved. Now, let’s talk about emotions. Do you think these people will care at all who started it now that they’ve lost their kids? Do you really think they’ll accept your logical explanation of events and back off? This is just my personal opinion as a doctor, but there is little violence as brutal as that of an enraged group that has never even heard of the various war treaties. Do you want a lesson – a deadly lesson – as to why the constantly bickering powers-that-be really need to sit down together and work out their differences peacefully?”

Heivia shut his mouth and raised both hands in surrender. While trembling.

Then Quenser got down to business.

"I want to know the basic specs of the Capitalist Corporations' Lunchboxes. We can't return to our maintenance base zone in time without doing something about them. And even if we do get back, we'll still be forced to continue the attack on the elevator. It wouldn't hurt to come back with a way to destroy those boxy machines as a souvenir. We were separated from the battalion thanks to some asshole's friendly fire and I'm sure Frolaytia is absolutely pissed at us by now, so we need something to calm her down."

"But that's suicide," said Heivia. "You aren't planning to abandon our temporary safety to attack those cutting-edge murderous paperweights, are you? You'll just get yourself torn apart by their heavy machineguns and grenades!!"

"That's what will happen if you don't hand over any useful information."

He had mostly been on the run, but Heivia had indeed fought the Lunchboxes. They had to rely on his observations from then.

"First of all, they're basically big hunks of armor. Firing a missile at them head on, from the sides, or even on the top won't destroy them."

Since unmanned weapons did not need space for anyone inside, they could add in more armor. That much Quenser had already known.

"It goes without saying that assault rifles and anti-materiel rifles are useless against them. You might be able to destroy the exposed lenses or sensors, but the act of shooting would also give away your position. Even if we were hiding behind cover, they could fire their fully-auto grenade launcher to fill the entire space with explosive flames. Explosives would be raining from the sky, so I wouldn't call that an effective tactic."

Quenser licked his lips before responding.

"That means they're heavy, doesn't it? Could we focus our attacks on the continuous tracks?"

"Maybe we could stop them from moving, but they'd still fire back on us and they have a longer range than us. Making the mobile turrets into stationary ones won't prevent this used truck from being obliterated by bullets."

In fact, they were currently stopped because of all the Lunchboxes in standby mode. Those things were not frightening because they made unpredictable patrols. Even if you immobilized them, they would already have you surrounded. Stopping them was not enough to escape.

"What about their power usage?"

According to Braskine, they could last for a week while in standby mode.

But on the other hand...

"They're electric and it has to take a lot of power to move something so heavy. If we had them run a needless marathon to drain their batteries, they wouldn't be able to shoot back anymore."

"You want us to wait for their batteries to die while being chased by a machinegun that fires 700 shots a minute? Our bodies would be riddled with tens of thousands of bullets before that happened. It isn't realistic." Heivia breathed an exasperated sigh. "Besides, we got lucky and slipped through a gap in their circle. Just like some small fish left behind in a tide pool. If we do anything to stand out now, they'll change their formation to include us. And once that tide pool is gone, we suffocate. The end."

"..."

Their objective was returning to the maintenance base zone.

Beginning a misguided retaliation operation against the guerillas would not solve anything. The armored Lunchboxes were being controlled by the operators in the space elevator's ground base, so the retaliation operation had to be reworked to attack them instead.

The data they needed for that could be found in the underground waterways Braskine had told Quenser about. Since the jamming prevented them from transmitting with a single tap of the touchscreen, they would have to bring it back themselves.

If they could do that, they could avoid carrying around that unnecessary guilt.

In other words, Quenser was not looking for any major upheaval on the battlefield. Finding a way to take out those cutting-edge unmanned ground vehicles would be best.

"If you're going to act, you should do it soon," said Braskine to hurry them along. "Those unmanned ground vehicles are worth more to the Federation of Elevator Industries than the local guerillas, so they'll want to avoid having to abandon them after their batteries die. They periodically send around an unmanned power vehicle to recharge them. And the Lunchbox formation might change when that happens."

This was all thanks to the elevator.

Everything needed for war, from lunches to bombs, could be sent down from the heavens. And in quantities of several dozen tons. The power vehicles, the work vehicles needed to maintain those, and even additional Lunchboxes to protect the work vehicles could be sent down in near limitless numbers.

Quenser agreed that it would be best to take action before the next time that happened.

"They're covered in armor and taking out their continuous tracks only turns them into stationary turrets." The student placed a hand on his chin. "We also can't wait for them to run out of power. And they were designed to withstand the extreme African environment, so I doubt they're going to malfunction all that easily."

"There you go again, bragging about the enemy's specs."

Heivia sounded annoyed, but that was not what Quenser was doing.

He had wondered about something this whole time, so he returned to that question here.

"Then what do they do about that?"

Part 14

They waited until the following morning.

The battle would begin once the sun had risen.

Braskine Mintfrappe's impatience had him in an irritable mood.

"Hey, how long are we going to wait here? The largescale retaliation begins this afternoon, doesn't it? That's not long now!"

"I really would have preferred to wait longer, but you're right about us running out of time," said Quenser after waking from a nap. "Things have heated up now, so I guess we should get started."

Heivia walked up and whispered to him. His face was greasy since he had not had a chance to wash it.

"(Gotta admit, this is clever.)"

"Huh?"

"(Cut the act. You don't have any plan at all for the Lunchboxes, do you? You're just buying enough time for the retaliation operation to begin. But I say we forget about letting them pick us up. Why not let them think we're dead while we run off to a tropical island? We can reveal our 'miraculous survival' once we've got a nice tan. So just keep lying to that guy while the clock ticks down until the afternoon.)"

After satisfying himself by punching that heartless bastard, Quenser got down to business.

Quenser and Heivia had no equipment that could accurately pass their location to the Legitimacy Kingdom. And even if they did, the jamming would block it. Once the retaliation operation began, they would be blown away as much as any of guerillas. The only question was whether it would be Myonri in a tank or the Princess in her Object that did it.

The skinny boy rapped his hand against the hood of the beat-up truck.

“That should about do it. Braskine, let’s get started. Given the current wind direction, we can start heading northwest.”

“What are you- hold on, what’s that?”

Quenser answered Heivia while showing off what was filling the heavy sack he held.

There was a black powder inside.

“I cleaned out the truck and buggy’s mufflers yesterday. That was a much bigger job than cleaning up a kitchen’s grease stains.”

“Nitrogen oxide?” The young doctor looked puzzled. “Are you saying we can defeat those unmanned ground vehicles with that? They’re machines, so poisons don’t work on them.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

They did not want to trigger any explosion that would draw a lot of attention, so it would be best to quietly stop the machinegun-equipped hunks of metal from operating without even having to approach them.

(That elevator is constantly casting a giant shadow here. The contrast between light and shadow will create a temperature difference and that will create air currents.)

Quenser dug through the powder as he thought.

Braskine still looked skeptical.

“You really think this will work?”

“They’re using the same thing themselves.”

Quenser got down on the cracked ground and peered out from behind a boat left out here. He could see one of those 3m boxes a few hundred meters away. Maybe it was to preserve power and maybe

it was to avoid being caught in the artificial meteor shower, but they did not seem to move unless something warranted it.

They still blocked the way as stationary turrets, but there was a way of using that.

Opportunities always came with risk.

The student gently lowered something to the dry ground. It was a handmade unmanned device made from a container that resembled a cake box with wheels attached and had a cable coming from the back. It was even cheaper than the toys found at safe country electronics stores. But cheap as it was, it could still be operated from Quenser's mobile device.

"I call it the Kitchen Knife."

"Do you really have to name these things?" complained Heivia.

"I thought that looked awfully clean for a sweaty and sandy guerilla."

Quenser pointed at the white coat Braskine was wearing.

It looked good as new after being washed with detergent, bleached, and starched.

"That's thanks to the elevator, isn't it? The Turkana District is under the control of a massive online shopping company, so you can find motors, batteries, sensors, and plastic boxes lying around everywhere here. Because they have delivery drones flying all over the place."

"So you're operating that thing via a cable?"

"Weapons like this have been around for a very long time. They predate the word drone for things like this. Besides, we can't send wireless signals with the jamming in effect. And wired control has its advantages. It can only move 200m away from us, but it can also approach the enemy without the control signal being detected."

The Kitchen Knife was only 30cm tall, so it could get stuck on the terrain pretty easily. A crack in the ground or even a small stone in the wrong spot were all it would take. They had to get as close as they could, control their precious device from there, and have it approach the unmoving Lunchbox.

They had already confirmed there were no cameras or sensors on the bottom of the Lunchboxes.

Once the Kitchen Knife had slipped below this one, Quenser tapped his mobile device's screen while still hiding behind cover.

The result could not be called an explosion.

After a muffled sound, the Lunchbox was coated in black powder.

Quenser pulled the thin fiber optic cable back like he was reeling in a fishing line.

“Okay, that worked.”

“I seriously doubt that’s enough to destroy a Capitalist Corporations unmanned weapon.”

“You’re right about that, doc, but the point was to color its surface black.” Quenser grinned. “This is Africa near the equator. Once the sun rises, it’s so blazing hot that the land here is all dry and cracked. And needless to say, black absorbs light most efficiently.”

“Oh,” said Braskine.

“Since the Lunchboxes are covered on all sides with solid armor, I was curious how they managed to cool their electronics. They clearly aren’t using air cooling and even liquid cooling would need to expose the metal pipes to the air to remove heat from the coolant. Y’know, like a car’s radiator or that elevator’s heat exhaust. But the Lunchboxes had nothing like that. So how do they do it?”

There was nothing hidden below them either.

Quenser and Heivia had seen one slowly pass overhead while they were hiding in a crack in the ground, but they had not seen anything of the sort. It would also be foolish to put their weak point at the spot easiest to target with landmines.

So...

“Do they use the same method as modern smartphones and tablets?”

“Bingo. The metal exterior itself doubles as the cooling plate. By exposing that metal to the air, the heat inside can escape. That’s why those unmanned ground vehicles don’t have a wire mesh anywhere and why you can’t hear a vent fan turning. ...So this should work. By coating them with a black substance, the sunlight will deliver the finishing blow. The cooling can’t keep up with the unexpected rate of heating. We don’t have to touch the weapons or the tracks when the overheating will shut down its computer. We just have to set things up so we could fry an egg on the hood, just like in an informercial for car wash soap.”

If they attacked with a flamethrower or napalm, the Lunchbox would quickly work to put out the fire. Either by rolling over to cover itself with sand or by triggering a nearby explosion to rob the fire of the oxygen it needed.

But they had not caused any major changes here.

Something had quietly ruptured below the Lunchbox where it lacked cameras and sensors, but it had been too small to call an explosion and the machine remained unharmed, only covered in a black powder. It might have felt a small tremor, but smaller than if its thick tracks crushed a rock and a piece struck it from below. It was unlikely that would trigger an error report or an emergency inspection.

Not even that cutting-edge unmanned ground vehicle would occasionally pull out a mirror to make sure its makeup was not coming off.

“But will that really stick to it? It’s just powder, right?”

“That depends on the material.” Quenser checked to make sure it had worked. “That thing is coated in sand, right? They’ve coated the metal armor with a gel to increase the cooling effect, so the powder will stick to it nicely. If that hadn’t worked, I was thinking of borrowing the starch you use for your white coat.”

They were not using any guns or knives, but the damage was increasing.

Once the heat had built up far enough, a slight change came over the Lunchbox. It tilted to the side. It had lost the ability to match the hydraulic cylinders of its tracks to the slant of the terrain. That was all it really was, but it almost looked like the machine had passed out.

“Heivia. Hey, Heivia. Attach your mid-range scope.”

“Shut up. Why should I have to help with this?”

“If you don’t want me tying you up and leaving you here as I head back to base, then get your gun ready and shoot that thing.”

After a gunshot muffled by the silencer, the rifle bullet knocked on the Lunchbox’s armor and sparks sprayed out, but there was no response from the machine.

The overheating had killed it.

“Okay, let’s move on.”

They turned back and set the beat-up truck in motion.

Quenser used a small knife to cut off the end of the fiber optic cable skinnier than pasta that he had

reeled back in and he attached it to the back of another Kitchen Knife. They had needed to wait until the sun was out, but they had not spent that time doing nothing. They had prepared a large stock of wired drones.

It was a race against time.

The wait for the sun left them with less time before the retaliation operation. They had no time to spare.

The Lunchboxes generally stayed in standby mode until they were needed, but that did not mean they never moved. Even if the affected ones would fail to notice the change, another one might spot an unnaturally blackened Lunchbox. Once they knew that was not a simple malfunction or accident and it was in fact intentional sabotage using the sun, things would get way worse.

So they needed to escape before that happened.

They had to return to the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base zone.

"Lunchbox at 2 o'clock. Distance of 700," said Braskine from the driver's seat.

"There are too many cracks there for the Kitchen Knife to get through, so take a clockwise route around it. This side of things is lower down, so it probably won't notice us. And if we run into another one that way, we can take care of it instead."

The Kitchen Knife could incapacitate the Lunchboxes, but it required certain conditions to work. The terrain had to be fairly level and its wheels could get tangled in dried weeds if too many of those remained. Fine sand was also a risk. They had a lot of the black powder and the Kitchen Knives to transport it, but it was still not an unlimited supply. It was a nerve-wracking experience. If they did not choose the correct Lunchboxes to attack, they would find themselves at a dead end before long.

It was shockingly sunny yet again, but there were some white clouds in places. Those were artificial clouds created by the pressure difference of the elevator's wires slicing through the wind. The clouds cast areas of shadow like an inverted spotlight and those shadows were like zones of death for Quenser's group.

Braskine groaned.

He stepped out of the truck, got down on the ground, and looked downwind.

"The Lunchbox up there is in a shadow."

"Stay still. We're not talking about a daylong rain shower and the black powder has recolored its

body. The artificial cloud will move on in time, so just wait. We'll be fine."

That "we'll be fine" was more for Quenser to convince himself than the doctor.

Quenser did not want to die either. As things were, the Legitimacy Kingdom would begin a meaningless retaliation operation. That could get him killed by friendly fire, but it could also trigger the Lunchboxes into motion. Opportunities always came with risk. How many people knew where they were? Did the Princess? Did Frolaytia?

(That would never end well. It's even possible we'd be crushed to death under the Princess's ass.)

After all, they were talking about the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion which was led by a commander kind enough to react with even more surprise than Quenser each time a new Object made an appearance. She was responsible for so many lives he really wished she would gather more information in advance.

At any rate, his life was on the line here, so he wanted to take control.

But just then...

"Hey, something isn't right," said Heivia while waving his sensor-equipped rifle around.

Quenser had also noticed the sound of metal continuous tracks and clouds of sand rising into the air.

The Lunchboxes in the area were moving even though they were supposed to stay curled up in standby mode unless something was wrong.

"It's the power vehicle," spat out Quenser when he realized the truth.

A military vehicle larger than the 3m boxes was slowly approaching from the horizon. It was shaped like a large semi-trailer truck with two linked cargo containers attached. After seeing that, the unmanned ground vehicles left their positions to gather around it. Almost like children swarming a military convoy to beg for treats.

That set the entire area in motion.

Their temporary safe zone would not be safe for long. Quenser's group had survived so long thanks to the tide pool, but they were now thrown out onto the exposed rock.

First, one Lunchbox spotted another one colored an unnatural black. Then it spotted the thin fiber optic cable running along the ground and its camera turned to follow that back to its source.

The unmanned ground vehicle turned on the spot and its eyes met Quenser's.

It had noticed them.

"Dammit, get down!!"

The attack began with a horizontal burst from the heavy machinegun. Quenser and the others rolled to a lower point of the dry ground to avoid that, but then they heard several sounds like corks popping.

Grenades even larger than hand grenades were launched into the blue sky like a long throw in baseball.

Fourteen in all.

"!!"

Heivia grabbed the skinny boy's uniform and dragged him below the truck.

The grenades detonated not three seconds after landing.

The explosions and impacts from above caused the beat-up truck to bounce up and down several times. The suspension must have broken partway through because it ended up tilted at an unnatural angle. If Quenser had not quickly pulled his legs in, they would have been pinned below the truck.

The explosives were only designed for anti-personnel use.

The heavy machinegun was actually the more frightening weapon when they had a truck.

Quenser grimaced at a ringing in his ears like someone had jammed an icepick into them. When he shouted, he felt like his voice was not reaching Heivia despite the boy being right next to him.

"What happened to the doctor? Where's Braskine!?"

"How should I know!? He's just one of the guerillas even if he did help us! Or would you prefer I rescued him and left you to die!?"

Quenser immediately silenced the stupid noble with a punch.

Heivia had been unconscious for so long he must not have remembered who had saved their lives

after they were blown away by Myonri's friendly fire. But Quenser knew. He knew it was silly, but he had gotten to know the man too well. He could not just abandon him now.

The scenery around them blurred.

The color of sand filled their vision and the sun dimmed like it was evening. A localized sandstorm must have whipped up.

This was their only chance.

"Why did this have to happen, dammit!?"

"Hey, wait! Quenser!!"

The student ignored his awful friend's calls and crawled out from below the truck.

He already smelled blood.

He could barely see anything in the sandstorm, but that much he could tell. As he pushed his way through the thick curtain of sand, he spotted someone lying on their back.

It was Braskine Mintfrappe.

If the Capitalist Corporations really saw them as allies, that doctor never would have been caught in the attack by the unmanned weapon.

"Go," said the man. "Hurry."

"Are you kidding me?"

"The truck isn't going anywhere now, but there's still the buggy in the back. The Lunchboxes can't target you in the sandstorm, so get your bearings and then take a straight shot for your base. This is your only chance."

"Are you kidding me!? I still haven't repaid you for saving us!!"

Braskine smiled at that.

As a doctor, he would know better than anyone how bad it was he had gotten so much sand in his wound, but he showed no sign of caring.

"You've done enough. I've won just by finding someone who actually cares."

"Cares about what?"

"You must stop the space elevator. You must stop Mother Lady."

He was having trouble breathing, but he still got out his request while looking up at that colossal tower that would bring no one happiness.

"Stop it before it becomes a disaster even greater than a disease that can be prevented with a 5-dollar vaccine."

"..."

"Mother Lady is too powerful a medicine. I'm certain she didn't want this, so someone has to stop it. But no one ever cared no matter what I told them. Not even the parents whose kids had fought valiantly as guerillas only to die. None of them could give up the modern lifestyle Mother Lady gave them."

"She?" asked Quenser without thinking.

But that may have been a mistake. The doctor uttered a name he had brought up a few times before.

"Louisiana was moved to emotion when she saw the beautiful nature of the Turkana District. That much I know is true."

Quenser did not like where this was headed.

Braskine's eyes began to focus on somewhere other than here and now.

"It happened back when I was in college."

"Hey, now's not the time for reminiscing."

"That was where I met Louisiana who was studying aerospace engineering. It was a completely different field, but it didn't take long before we hit it off. And she believed that a space elevator would shine a spotlight on Africa since the conditions needed for building one were so restrictive. But she was wrong. It pained her to see it and she wanted to save the Turkana District. She wondered why Africa and Europe were so different and what made the desert here so different from the ones in North America. She thought it was unfair to treat different lands so differently just because some terrains are easier to develop than others. Someone needed to stop her, but I couldn't

do it myself.”

“I said stop!! Come back to reality! Stop withdrawing into your memories!! Hey!?”

Quenser kept calling out to the man, but he had stopped moving altogether.

The powerful sandstorm blew right into his wide-opened eyes, but he did not even blink.

There was nothing Quenser could have done.

He looked away from the dead man and shook his head.

Then he returned to the slanted truck. Specifically, to the enclosed back of the truck. The surface was torn up, but that did not mean the contents had been.

“Heivia! Help me drag out the buggy. We need to get back alive no matter what!!”

Part 15

The engine roared.

They could not see in the sandstorm. Even with the headlights on, visibility was limited to a few meters ahead at the most. On top of that, their radios and the map on their mobile devices were still useless thanks to the jamming.

After searching out the direction of the barely-visible orange sun, they had to take a straight shot toward the maintenance base zone. If they got lost even once, it was all over. With zero visibility, they could easily end up driving in endless circles.

The Lunchboxes were not functioning either.

Their cameras, microphones, and sensors were useless with the sandstorm scraping against them and the sand might also be blocking their transmissions. The Capitalist Corporations were probably using ultrasound or infrared transmissions to avoid their own jamming, but not even that was perfect. During the day, the desert sand would be hotter than a human body and it would be mixed with plenty of iron sand. The sandstorm might function even better than chaff or a flare.

Quenser and Heivia crossed a few different humps in the road in quick succession.

The buggy flew off of those like a ramp.

They passed by only a few meters from something like big hunk of rock. No, that was probably one of the Capitalist Corporations' unmanned ground vehicles. They heard machinegun fire shortly afterwards, but they could not even imagine where the bullets were flying.

The buggy had no roof.

Heivia held the collar of his uniform over his mouth as he shouted.

"We should've just waited for this in the first place!! Then we wouldn't have had to risk our lives getting so close to the damn things!!"

"It wouldn't work out that well. Do you know a space elevator's biggest weakness, Heivia?"

"Huh?"

"The carbon nanotube wires are resistant enough to heat to be constantly exposed to the thermosphere, but they're still weak to high-voltage currents - in other words, lightning. The Capitalist Corporations has to be using defensive meteorological weapons to avoid that!!"

With a loud bursting noise, things cleared up overhead.

Some kind of giant explosion had blown away the sandstorm. Several large holes had formed in the filthy screen and the blue sky was visible beyond like a famous model's head pasted onto a nude body, but each of those holes had to be kilometers across.

"What the hell!? Did Mother Lady drop something again!?"

"There was no flash of light or explosive boom, so that was probably concentrated sulfuric acid or something."

"Those greedy bastards are dropping that dangerous stuff on our heads!?"

Heivia's eyes bugged out, but Quenser maintained a serious expression as he continued.

Whatever it was had detonated at more than 10,000 meters up, so it would not fall straight down. But it would contaminate the ground somewhere. Either as a mist or as acid rain after absorbing more moisture.

In other words...

"Similar to a thermobaric, weapon, they cram it into the warhead in a concentrated state and it

spreads out over kilometers in a mist-like state once it detonates. Sulfuric acid can dissolve metal, but it can also be used as a rapid drying agent. Clouds are basically collections of moisture, right? If you want to chemically eliminate the thunderclouds, there's no cheaper and more effective chemical. If you don't give a crap about the local environment, that is!!"

Rapidly removing the moisture would change the density of the air, causing a large shift in the atmosphere. In other words, it created wind. The localized sandstorm vanished like they were waking from a dream.

A single space elevator made all of this possible.

Weather forecasts were no longer necessary. Whether it was sunny or rainy, the direction of the wind, and the humidity could all be manipulated from one hour to the next.

And for fleeing Quenser and Heivia, the sandstorm had been a thick curtain protecting them from harm. With it suddenly stripped away, they were exposed to the Lunchboxes' eyes.

"Can you use those little drones of yours!?" asked Heivia.

"The Kitchen Knives can only move as fast as a toy and they're wired! You can't just throw one out of a moving car and expect it to work!!"

Quenser instead grabbed the shoulder-fired missile launcher that Heivia had been walking around with.

He had not been trained in its use, so he could not fire a missile from it.

However.

The instant he leaned out from the passenger seat with the launcher on his shoulder, the machinegun fire strayed away from them.

"The hell? What'd you do!?"

"This thing has to use a really powerful IR laser for targeting, so I aimed that at the Lunchbox's camera lens. It's the same as a rude spectator shining a laser pointer in a soccer player's eyes. That trick works on machines too!!"

But it would not work every time.

If something that simple would have worked consistently, the Lunchboxes never would have been

such a threat.

Quenser knew they would have to use every trick in the book here, so...

“How much further to the maintenance base zone!?”

“We’re going 120km/h right now!! I’m flooring this thing to the point that it’ll burn out the lawnmower-size engine eventually, so I doubt it’ll take even an hour!!”

The 30cm Kitchen Knives were no longer helpful.

To avoid being shot from behind, Quenser leaned out and dumped the contents of his water bottle and the black powder on the exposed rear wheel. The power of the tire launched the stuff backwards.

“Everything you’re doing is like a makeshift weapon built from items at a dollar store, but these are cutting-edge Capitalist Corporations weapons. Can you really keep tricking them like this!?”

Several grenades were launched in an arc so they fell in a line, but they exploded a decent distance away from the two boys. The air overhead must have been so unstable that they veered off course. That meant it had nothing at all to do with Quenser and Heivia’s efforts. Without the wind, that would have killed them since the simple buggy had no roof or walls.

“Figure something out already!!” snapped Heivia while holding the steering wheel in both hands.

“Shut up and give me time to think!!”

Needless to say, driving along an unpaved area of land was enough of a risk in and of itself. Doing so at more than 100km/h was tantamount to suicide. The buggy was made for off-roading, but as it bounced around, it could have lost its balance and tilted up onto two wheels at any time.

“They have to be using IR – we just can’t see it ourselves. And even if the grenades fly in an arc, they have to have a direct line of sight when targeting. Distance is more important than direction. If we can get them to mistake our distance, they won’t be able to hit us.”

“Here it comes, Quenser!!”

“Dammit!!”

Heivia heard the sound of splitting plastic and looked over in shock.

“Why are you destroying your own equipment!? Have you gone insane!?”

“Shut up and watch where you’re driving!!”

Quenser removed his uniform’s jacket, dismantled one of his Kitchen Knives, and removed the black powder. He coated the outside of the jacket with the powder but left the inside clean. Then he tied the two sleeves to the metal bar on top of the buggy so it flew like a flag.

It flapped wildly like a pirate flag in the 120km/h wind.

The unusually round sounds of weapons fire continued, but the soaring grenades exploded well before reaching the buggy.

This time, it was no coincidence.

“Black absorbs light and white reflects it. That’s true for the invisible infrared range too. Laser range finders shine a straight-line laser and measure the reflection and attenuation, so they can’t deal with something that rapidly switches between white and black. The value keeps changing, so they can’t figure out the actual distance.”

They continued racing across the desert.

They drove ever closer to the maintenance base zone.

But none of their makeshift countermeasures were a fundamental solution. The Lunchboxes could retry no matter how many times their attacks failed and the Mother Lady space elevator could drop more cargo tanks from the heavens if need be.

Some unnatural static burst from the buggy’s radio.

They were under the effects of some powerful jamming, but this was something else.

“Radar targeting? We can’t do anything about that!!”

“Hang on tight!!”

Heivia slammed down the gas pedal even more.

With their thick armor, the Lunchboxes could only move as fast as a scooter, so the buggy could lose them while zooming 120km/h down the wasteland.

But losing the physical machines did not necessarily mean they could escape firing range. The heavy machineguns that fired anti-materiel bullets thicker than someone's thumb could blow away a soldier's head from a range of 2000m. The grenades launched along parabolic arcs could reach even further than that.

And there was an even more horrifying possibility than either of those.

What if the targeting data from the surface was being shared with the giant space elevator?

"What?" Heivia was not watching where he was driving. "It's midday, but there are stars shining in the sky."

"That's Mother Lady's artificial meteor shower, dammit!!"

A kilometers-long wall of dust clouds rose from beyond the horizon behind them. And it did not end there. Another row appeared and then yet another like a giant copier printing something on the ground here. The ground was torn apart evenly, thoroughly, and mercilessly.

It did not matter that the allies giving the elevator its targeting data were still in that area. The Lunchboxes were unmanned. And for that matter, would the elevator have responded any differently had the data come from living soldiers?

The explosions were advancing faster than the buggy.

Heivia Winchell knew only one way they could survive this.

He had noticed something earlier.

The buggy flew right past a Legitimacy Kingdom turret.

Or more accurately, a tank hiding in a hole in the ground to keep it low and harder to detect.

The instant they passed by, the deafening roar of a cannon slammed into the buggy and the two idiots within.

But not from the tank.

The Capitalist Corporations were not the only ones who could share targeting information. A colossal weapon had received that data via IR or ultrasound and then fired.

The attack came from one of the Baby Magnum's main cannons.

The roar of the cannon really did flip the buggy over as it drove. Quenser and Heivia nearly had their crushed flesh and blood soak into the dry African land, but the massive beam of energy tore through the lights in the sky. A hole was opened in the artificial meteor shower and the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes were spared that orbital bombing.

The unmanned ground vehicles were fully-armored, but they were only 3m long.

The Lunchboxes were obliterated by the friendly fire.

Either being within 10m was close enough or the tank was loaded with powerful equipment because they heard a staticky voice over their radio for the first time in a long while.

“Quenserrrr, Heiviaaaa. You certainly took your sweet time. Did you finally decide to return so you could be thrown into the detention barracks for deserting?”

“It was your friendly fire that got us into this mess, Myonri!!!!!!”

Part 16

The meaning of their retaliation had changed.

With the underground water data from Quenser’s mobile device, they now had a way to attack Mother Lady’s ground base. Once the data being inputted was correct, they could automatically produce accurate calculation sheets.

The guerillas were only borrowing their equipment, so attacking them would not be emotionally satisfying. Directly attacking the elevator would be better. For example, they could block up the underground waterways used for cooling in order to fully take over the elevator.

It looked like they would have this worked out by sunset.

It helped a lot that Quenser and Heivia’s information had led them to a solution concerning the Lunchboxes. The Legitimacy Kingdom loaded some paint rounds with black paint before heading back out. The tanks would blow away most of them, but any that slipped through would be overheated using the powerful sunshine of equatorial Africa. The Capitalist Corporations operators noticed what was going on and tried to shake it off, but that did nothing with the special quick-drying paint being used.

The combat engineers stabbed thick metal plates straight down to seal off the underground waterways deep belowground.

(The Federation of Elevator Industries isn’t just a company. They’re a massive space development agency jointly funded by the seven major companies that control the Capitalist Corporations’ home

country. This isn't going to end here.)

Quenser held his radio to his mouth near a surface facility several dozen times the size of a domed stadium.

The military station's jamming was still active, but they could communicate using large communication relay trucks. The trick was apparently to convert the signal to high-power infrared.

"We've settled things here, Frolaytia. The Princess used her armor to power through the anti-tank coilguns attached higher up, so we've successfully conquered Mother Lady's ground base. The Federation of Elevator Industries operators have put their hands up and surrendered. Taking them prisoner would be a pain, so can we just hand them over to the local guerillas?"

"No, you can't. Prisoners have a diplomatic use, so treat them with care as you bring them back. A Legitimacy Kingdom spy infiltrating Los Angeles blew his cover, so we already need as many bargaining chips as we can get on the first day of the new year."

"Tch. Fine, but only if you promise me they'll be thrown in cells smaller than those capsule hotels used for terrorists."

Quenser clicked his tongue and then looked elsewhere.

Just the base of that structure was 2000 meters tall and the wires continued on up out of sight.

"A lot of guerillas died in our attempt to take this thing. And they're going to blame us, not the Capitalist Corporations."

"What, feeling sorry for the enemy, Quenser? Go speak with our counselor about it. Those guerillas had sided with the Capitalist Corporations from the moment they believed those sweet promises and allowed a military base to be built here. You don't get to be a pacifist just because you live in a blank zone. We have no reason to go easy on someone who's benefiting from the Federation of Elevator Industries who are acting on behalf of 7th Core, the rulers of an enemy home country. If that isn't enough to convince you, then go get a prescription."

She was correct.

That answer scored a perfect 100, but that perfection irritated Quenser for some reason.

Did the correct answer not always align with the right thing to do?

"What's our next job? The explosives I have in my bag aren't enough to blow up the base of the elevator here."

"I'm not expecting that much from a student. I don't like it either, but it seems the higher ups want us to solve this troublesome elevator problem before we take time off for the carnival. That means the next battle will be fought elsewhere."

"?"

They had solved the problem on the ground.

But she made it sound like there was still a problem concerning the Mother Lady space elevator.

"In the time the Federation of Elevator Industries managed to buy here, they have apparently spent several days using the elevator to launch their primary forces into space. It seems they intend to take the space station and continue the fight there."

"Are you for real?"

"That fortress has a diameter of 20km and we can't cut off its power supply from down here because the space station uses a separate power system. If that federation is to be believed, the orbital station is loaded with enough weapons to turn any part of the planet - battlefield country or safe country - to ashes just by dropping their equipment from orbit. But unfortunately, the Legitimacy Kingdom refuses to listen to threats. Thus, we cannot choose to stop fighting. We started it, so we have to finish it. You're going to visit space soon, Quenser. But don't upload any photos to social media no matter what color the earth is."

Between the Lines 1

Seven massive companies controlled the Capitalist Corporations home country that covered the western half of North America.

Those companies were known as 7th Core.

They held great influence over every last part of that world power and they were deeply involved in this space elevator as well. The Federation of Elevator Industries was a space development agency jointly funded by those seven companies.

They were an incarnation of capitalism.

All things, from war to philanthropy, were judged by whether or not they would bring profit to the company.

"Then I will sell three company-owned buildings in Seattle, Cascade District. Is that okay?"

"Yes."

"But one of those is an exceedingly high-level IT research facility."

"As long as it will bring us even greater profit."

That elderly man would not bat an eye at a mere 100 million dollars.

He sounded annoyed with his young and beautiful secretary for seeking confirmation about every little thing.

"For example, we could buy out a rival company. In fact, get started on that after inflating the funds with some arbitrary market deals. ...AI research is such nonsense. Get rid of that pesky rival and we're freed from wasting so much money on that pointless development race. Then we can focus on what really matters. What I want right now is steel and sturdy cars."

"Then I will do that."

For them, everything was about money. That meant they had a monetary reason for constructing the space elevator in Africa's Turkana District. And not the immediate benefit of spreading the reach of online shopping to cover the entire planet.

They were focused on much greater profit.

"What do you think?" asked the elderly man while calmly progressing a plan that would ruin the lives of hundreds of his own employees and more than ten times as many of the rival company's employees.

"It seems like a reasonable distribution."

They were in Los Angeles in the Central Valley District of western America.

That was the capital of the Capitalist Corporations' home country. This conversation took place in the top floor of a smart building sticking up even higher than all the other towering skyscrapers.

The elderly man seated in the president's office that took up an entire building floor was named Raphael Goldenclipper.

The much younger secretary in a suit was named Serenade Blackrose.

"Short-term-stay villas have been constructed on the moon, but they are reliant on the

transportation of goods from earth," said the secretary. "No one can move their indefinitely. Mars and Jupiter also seem unlikely at this stage, so relying on any existing planet will likely never be realistic. That is why I consider her suggestion to be useful."

"This planet will eventually run dry."

"Our advertising agency's simulator determined that a plan to reduce the human population would cost too much."

"So the final problem is the humans, huh?"

"Yes," calmly confirmed the secretary. "But if personnel expenses and service charges were eliminated, it would reduce the accepted prices for the products. If the factories were fully automated, we would have no choice but to sell the products for the cost of the original materials. To efficiently make money, inefficient humans must be made a part of the production system somewhere."

"Hm."

"Humans increase the price of the product and humans buy the product at that increased price. But they must have stable lives to do so. That is where Objects come in. If we recruited soldiers from the general populace, it would only allow former soldiers to bring along firearms when they riot. And the damage will be greater the more advanced and unique the technology. Hence, it is best for only a limited few to hold all the power to fight."

The rulers of capital never actually touched paper money.

Money was a status symbol, but what you really needed was a useful position in a company. In that case, the money need not exist in a non-digital form. Paper money might as well have been a silly toy to them.

"What are the other six companies saying?"

"They are mostly in agreement. Some do not trust the Federation of Elevator Industries, but no alternatives have been suggested. If they truly intended to break away, they would instead say nothing at all."

The elderly man did not even attend the secret meetings held over the internet. Some people were safer when they remained ignorant of what was going on around them. All the dirty work was left to his secretary.

It was that special arrangement that had allowed such a young woman to push past a veritable harem of beautiful secretaries to become the strategic secretary who stood alongside the CEO.

“Then you’ll be continuing as before?”

“Yes, I will continue to monitor the situation.”

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