

Chapter 2: Failure >> Attack on the Turkana District Space Elevator – Sp. Station

Part 1

Can your soul keep up with a world at 5x the speed? With 5x the concentration of the traditional recipe, Monster Girl Energy – Maximum Bottle!! has been unleashed upon the world.

A distant look filled Private Heivia Winchell's eyes as he watched the brown-skinned swimsuit women in the back of a pickup truck. Those bikini women had been hired to hand out 500mL glass bottles of energy drink as a campaign for a new product.

This happened in the South American Amazon District.

It was midsummer in the Southern Hemisphere.

"Why aren't we allowed to drink any?"

"You do know what we're waiting for here, don't you? For a space shuttle. Fill your stomach with carbonation and it'll rupture inside you once we launch into space."

"Why are you being such a jerk to those bikini babes? Did one of them pretend to confess to you while livestreaming it???"

"I'm a Bad Bull guy myself."

Quenser yawned while leaning against a tall chain link fence.

He would occasionally rub at his body through his uniform, but not because his new underwear felt weird.

A giant structure towered up towards heaven on the other side of the fence behind them. But instead of an elevator, this was a space shuttle meant to launch into space and return to earth repeatedly. It was more than 40m tall and the jungle-gym-like launch equipment around it was a little taller. Several of them were lined up quite neatly, making it look like a metal corn field.

"This is such a waste of fuel," complained Quenser. "I can see now why the Capitalist Corporations are so obsessed with that elevator. It's all about cost performance."

While the four powers had been competing to see if the space elevator or the mass driver would become the new standard, the research institute here had apparently begun a revival of these old-fashioned but tried-and-true toys. Basically it was the same as a train-obsessed government worker finding excuses to use public money to buy a steam train. Since they were even calling it a "space

shuttle", a term that had supposedly been retired, you could see this was more about a love of the aesthetic than about profit.

Quenser viewed the gate that opened and closed like a city railroad crossing.

"This is a busy place."

"Half the globe can't launch any rockets thanks to Mother Lady. And that's true for every world power. The space station is still controlled by the Federation of Elevator Industries, but that effectively makes it a decision made by 7th Core as a whole. And interference from the sky is way worse than from the ground. They can use laser beams, jamming, meteors, debris, or whatever else. That's a problem for everyone – public sector, private sector, academic, and military. That's why everyone's decided to launch their stuff on the other side of the world, leading to a rush on this place."

"All because of the one elevator."

"I sense a weirdo at work here. Nothing good ever comes from letting intellectuals join the battlefield."

Annoyingly enough, Mother Lady was still not widely considered a villain despite all the news reports on the trouble it was causing. That space elevator could cheaply deliver packages to every part of the world, so it had already become a great ally of safe country family budgets the world over during its 9 month test period.

The electronic simulation division said it would start sucking up more than ten times the money once it began working for real.

There was a negative side to it. For example, what to do about the empty packages and cargo tanks after a delivery was made. If they were allowed to provide a collection service, they might be able to effectively create extraterritorial bases all around the world.

The 37th had to tear the elevator down and end this before that happened.

But that would be no easy task.

"That elevator wasn't built up from the ground. It's dangling down from space."

"?"

"That means the space station at the top is more important than the ground base at the bottom. And I've heard that station is 20km across. We took over the ground base by blocking off the

underground water they were using for cooling, but it's not over yet. In the worst case, the station could cut the wires to free itself and then move to another candidate location. Conquering that desert ground base was far from being checkmate."

That was why the swimsuit women had stopped their pick-up truck next to the fence denoting an off-limits zone so they could hand out sample products. The crowd here had looked lucrative to the PR team that normally operated in big cities.

Quenser sighed in the hot sun.

"Amateur advertising agencies have noticed what's happening, so do you really think the Capitalist Corporations is going to ignore it?"

"That's why we're supposed to get up into space before those greedy bastards bound by military regulations manage to rework the rules so they can act. Dammit, what idiot is causing the holdup!? Are they checking everyone's bags? Or did the health exam show someone had a cavity or an STI!?"

"That's why you use mouthwash after doing oral. Always practice safe sex, kids."

The two idiots' conversation was cut off by a short beep from their radios.

It was finally their turn.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" asked Heivia while following the fence to the gate. "I mean, we left the Princess behind."

"Taking over the elevator's ground base doesn't make the local guerillas magically disappear. If we didn't leave some kind of solid defense behind, they could surround the base and take it back. And those ad-loving Capitalist Corporations are really good at negative campaigns."

"I know that, but we left that sheltered girl to hold down the fort."

"We can check in with her at any time with the cameras. And it's not like she's all alone. The old maintenance lady is with her. Besides, the Baby Magnum isn't the only defense. We took over Mother Lady's ground base, so the others there can fire warning shots with that thing's laser beam."

"Why isn't the space force doing this job for us? Then we could call it quits and enjoy some New Year's leave."

"The space force as you imagine it doesn't really exist. Their name sounds cool and all, but they basically sit at computers on ground bases and send out jamming signals to mess with the enemy satellites and spacecraft."

“What’s your point?”

“None of them are dumb enough to visit the dangerous radiation-filled vacuum of outer space. We’re stuck with a shitty job no one else wanted. As usual.”

Every last one of the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes here were lined up below the blazing sun in their uniforms. Only half of the 37th was here, but they still formed a lengthy line while waiting to have their ID checked so they could pass through the gate. It took a while.

“Is this what it’s gonna be like when we die?” asked Quenser while watching the line move about as fast as a snail. “ ‘The enemy Object will arrive shortly, so please enter the shelter in a calm and orderly fashion’ and then whooooosh, kabooooom!”

“You’re dreaming if you think the desk jockeys are gonna be anywhere near that kind to us. They never even look at the reality beyond their computer screens and they’ll just demand we bravely fight the Object to the last man and die. ...Really, the Legitimacy Kingdom is behind the times. We should really build our own space base.”

This may have been another problem caused by Objects ending the nuclear age. Modern battlefields were still discussed on the talk shows targeted toward housewives, but the focus was more on cyberspace than outer space. The national defense funding that all the world powers used to fight each other came out of their tax money, so they needed to make sure everyone felt terrified enough that funding countermeasures and applied research sounded appealing.

“I’ve heard all the leaked photos of famous actresses that have been making a stir online lately are actually a form of propaganda meant to manipulate public opinion.”

“So are you saying the only way for the space side of things to make a comeback is to start dropping those thin, single-use pieces of rubber from satellite orbit?”

Finally, it was their turn to pass below the gate bar that rose and fell like a railroad crossing.

A small group of people had gathered and begun shouting a short distance away.

“Oh, what’s going on there?” asked Heivia. “Did a fight break out?”

“It’s 38 degrees and crowded, so people are irritable and liable to run into someone from an opposing group,” said Quenser. “So who is it? An environmental protection group and an energy company?”

“It might be the ever-fierce conflict between Team Salt and Team Soy Sauce. People can get heated when it comes to ramen flavors.”

"Your failure to even mention Team Tonkotsu marks you as guilty. But, wow, I think it's two women shouting. Yeah, I'd really rather not see a woman swinging her hair around with a monstrous look on her face."

"Hang on. I think I recognize one of those voices."

"Oh, god, that's Frolaytia! What is she doing!?"

Separating her from the old maintenance lady may have been a mistake.

Two women were pressing their foreheads together while glaring at each other.

One was Major Frolaytia Capistrano, Queen of the Potatoes, but the other was a silver-haired brown-skinned officer with a non-Legitimacy Kingdom uniform.

In fact...

"Ugh!? That's an Information Alliance uniform!"

"Oh, no. I forgot this was an international space launch facility that anyone can use."

Quenser smacked a hand against his forehead.

The military was really bad about turf wars. Quite literally in fact. They fought to protect their national borders year round. Soldiers in the other uniform design were trying to stop their own commander with shouts of "Lendy! Major Farolito! Please calm down!", but they were too hesitant about it and it had no effect. That was one area in which the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance were the same.

The demonic commander, who was busty but made sure no one wanted to get anywhere near that bust, spoke in a deep, resentful way she never used with her own soldiers.

"Oh, what have we here? I thought I detected the unhealthy scent of melted solder in here, but the Amazon District is protected by Legitimacy Kingdom Objects, so surely I must be imagining things."

"Someone too dumb to stop smoking in this day and age may be unaware, but as much influence as the Legitimacy Kingdom may have in this district, it has no official affiliation. But I suppose those colossal fatasses may have failed to notice how much trouble their presence is causing the locals."

Quenser was dumbfounded.

“(Hey, Heivia, does this count as a personal fight or a war???)”

“(Shut up and don’t you dare say anything to them. I want nothing to do with this.)”

The conversation moved on without those two boys.

Frolaytia pressed her forehead even harder against the other woman’s.

“You do understand the situation here, I hope? Do you have any idea how many Objects we have stationed here?”

“I suppose I can’t blame an ignorant country girl for not knowing, but attacking us would be in violation of the Peace and Equality in Space Treaty. But if you insist on being a pest and violating PEST, feel free. I’m sure you will enjoy being assigned to an Arctic base for losing your side so many Objects.”

“Oh, you want to fight!?”

“Bring it on, little girl!!”

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance soldiers rushed in. They had no complaints about a busty catfight, but these particular busts would lead to the world’s dumbest war if a fist managed to hit one of those beautiful faces.

And Quenser was impressed by one thing he noticed.

“You’re actually bothering to hold her back, Heivia? That’s surprisingly responsible of you.”

“With all this chaos, I can cop a feel and she’ll never know it was me.”

The brave warrior who rushed straight into danger ended up writhing on the ground after Frolaytia swung a 500mL bottle of Monster Girl Energy and it hit him right in the forehead.

Quenser’s decision to stay out of it proved wise.

Those jiggling boobs were like a Venus fly trap. Fall for the temptation and you were dead.

Plus, he was officially a battlefield student, not a soldier, so it was not his job to preserve world peace.

"Whoa, whoa, stay away from me, yikes, yikes, yikes, ahhhhh!!"

Potato #1 protected his head with both hands and fled from the crowd of angry, stressed, and excitement-starved people.

After finding peace and quiet, he let out a sigh.

"G-good, they're gone."

(But what is the Information Alliance doing here? What business do they have in space???)

Just as that fundamental question occurred to him, he heard a girl's voice from somewhere.

"Okay."

"?"

He turned toward the young voice to see a large RV parked there. And the external area was surrounded by bed sheets draped over ropes like laundry put out to dry.

The sunlight shining through the sheets showed him the silhouette of a girl who appeared to be only around 10. She was partially bent over and standing unsteadily on just one leg. Her small hands were holding the lifted leg at the ankle. Her silhouette showed through so clearly he could make out all those details.

So was she putting something on, or taking it off???

"If I was going to need a spacesuit, they should have had it ready from the beginning. Oh ho ho. I do understand a spacesuit in my size can't be easy to come by, though."

"?"

"Hey, you there!"

While Quenser tilted his head, a sharp voice shouted at him through the sheets. She would not be able to see him either, but she spoke in a very demanding way. She may have mistaken him for one of her own.

"Oh ho ho. I cannot find the tape measure I had. Is it out there perhaps?"

"Hm? Oh, you mean this one?"

"That should be it, yes. Please hand it here."

An unexpectedly small hand stuck out through a gap between two sheets. She was also being super careless. She seemed to be hiding something, but her own hand had parted the two sheets somewhat. It was possible someone would see her secret through there.

The careless girl's soft-looking hand gestured for him to hurry up, so he sighed and placed the tape measure there.

"Oh ho ho. Thank you. I have my measurements taken regularly, but this is outer space we are talking about."

She pulled her hand back in.

Based on the silhouette, she wrapped the tape measure around that part of herself.

"Not to mention that this is for a special outer space New Year's concert. Yes, you're in for a treat, my many fans! Oh ho ho. I will make sure the world falls in love with me all over again!!"

(Hm, so she's an idol like Monica.)

He doubted she would give him an autograph or shake his hand if he asked right now, though. At any rate, he was finding a great variety of people had business in space. He was honestly jealous of the girl.

Meanwhile, he was headed up there to fight a war.

It was the most depressing reason to be given an all-expenses-paid trip into space.

Part 2

"Countdown - final sequence: 9, 7, 6...ignition. Blast off."

To Quenser, it felt like riding an amusement park thrill ride.

He was seated in a chair, but sitting in this chair positioned him so he was facing straight down. If he were not strapped in with special belts, he would have fallen straight to the rear of the shuttle.

He felt a great pressure in his gut.

He heard a deafening roar.

But none of it felt like he was actually blasting off from the planet earth. The lack of windows played a definite role there. It was like being trained for a form of torture that gradually squashed him with a thick but invisible wall. Maybe this was the world the Princess lived in while piloting her Object.

“Gwehhhh,” he groaned inside his helmet.

But that skinny boy had only been given a few days’ worth of training in a pool and in a centrifugal artificial gravity generator, so he was lucky “gweh” was the worst he got. He gave a proper report using the communicator installed in his helmet.

“Th-the magnetic oxygen guidance is working for now. We won’t die right away anyway, Frolaytia. Dammit, I’m totally groping those things till the tips turn black!!”

A rapid change in pressure was enough for someone to pass out and they could even die if air bubbles formed in their blood. It was known as barotrauma and was best known in the forms of altitude sickness and decompression sickness.

To prevent that, Quenser and the other 37th potatoes had several electrodes attached below their clothing. Barotrauma could cause everything from fingernail injuries to fainting, but it was mainly caused by two things: a reduced amount of oxygen being transported in the blood and bubbles forming from the nitrogen in the body tissue. So you could solve all of that if you could externally manipulate the iron to stabilize the oxygen transportation and strengthen the bonds of the nitrogen.

“Hah hah hah! Who doesn’t love a secret prototype weapon? You should weep tears of joy at this opportunity! I believe this was originally developed in secret to help Pilot Elites handle the massive Gs of an Object which can reach the double digits at times.”

“B-but, urp, why wasn’t it adopted for general use among Elites?”

“It’s so bad for your health they’d never expose their precious Elites to its effects.”

In the seat behind Quenser, Myonri jumped upon hearing what sounded like metal claws scratching at the wall.

“Gweh. Wh-why am I hearing something from outside!? Ugh, are we going to break apart before even escaping the atmosphere!?”

“That’s just the external rockets separating after using up their fuel. If the heat caused the connections to melt just wrong and they failed to separate, then we’d 100% crash, though. Gwehhhh!”

Knowledge was the best way to conquer fear. It did nothing about the pain and suffering pressing down on their bodies, though.

Then Quenser stared in shock at his neighbor.

The other idiot was there.

"Frolaytia, Heivia broke the regulations! Ugh, he must have filled his stomach with a banned drink cause his helmet is now full of carbonated energy drink barf. I'd really prefer not to describe it in any more detail. Urp, just seeing it is enough to make me feel sick!"

"He only has himself to blame," said Frolaytia over the radio. "Do not remove his helmet even if he is drowning. The instant the gravity is gone, that stuff will fill the entire shuttle."

Heivia responded with a mysterious code: "Bleh this Monster Girl bleh is from the bottle gwehhh you broke on blehhh my head!" But it was too advanced a code to crack, so Frolaytia ignored it and continued with a report.

"The Princess's team is searching for a way up from Mother Lady's ground base, but that is only a diversion. While the Capitalist Corporations' Federation of Elevator Industries is staring worriedly down at the bottom of the elevator, you will circle around from the other side of the planet to attack them from above. The space station is in geostationary orbit at an altitude of 36,000km, so it really and truly is in outer space. I honestly envy you this trip into space."

"Maybe if we were here on vacation, I'd agree with you! Gweh, but we're headed to the most dangerous battlefield in the universe!"

"Ah ha ha. You've finally move past the most dangerous in the world, Quenser. That's a new record."

It was no use. She was so used to sending them to their deaths that it barely registered as a problem anymore. Myonri must have been used to this too because she stuck a hose similar to a dentist's saliva ejector into the top of Heivia's head from her seat behind them. A gross sucking sound followed. The device may have been to help the crew since the helmets prevented them from using a handkerchief to wipe away sweat.

"Mother Lady is being guarded by soldiers recruited from the PMCs they love so much. And they are all top of their class, so be careful. There is one other person you need to be aware of: Louisiana Honeysuckle."

"..."

Louisiana.

And Honeysuckle.

“The researchers who develop technology with military applications are generally erased from all public records, but a few of her papers for academic conferences slipped through. They were about the influence a colossal structure would have on the planet’s environment. Until the elevator was completed, she was apparently known for her work in preserving rare animals.”

“Preserving rare animals?”

That did not seem to fit.

Especially when he thought back to the dry and cracked desert.

“There are records of her being sued by an environmental protection group, but it was completely shut down by an army of lawyers armed with ample funding. But a researcher of her caliber would have not trouble making money, so the environmental group’s claims seem unlikely to me. They claim she traveled all the way to Africa, stole the genetic information of rare animals there, and then sold that to European zoos.”

Then Frolaytia got back on topic.

“Anyway, Louisiana is the genius researcher who worked out all the problems with the theoretical concept of a wire space elevator and created an actually usable plan. The elevator is everything to her, making her a rare Capitalist Corporations resident who doesn’t care all that much about profit. The intelligence division’s report says she is likely holed up in the space station. She does not behave like a soldier does, so it would be best to kill her before she can cause any trouble.”

The scratching sound grew louder. They were surrounded by it. But this was no longer about the rocket booster connections. The air’s friction itself was probably tearing at the shuttle’s exterior. From the outside, it would look like they had been thrown into a prison of orange heat.

The battalion had split in two, half on the surface and half in space, but Frolaytia did not seem to be having too much trouble. Everything was done over the network these days, so commanding remotely was not a problem at all.

It was while that thought occurred to him that Quenser felt his bangs float up. And that was not all. The pressure bearing down on him completely vanished, and not just because he had gotten used to it.

The concept of up and down was gone.

From his perspective, he might as well have been seated in an ordinary bus. He was now facing forward. The weird part was how his butt had left the seat just like his back had left the chair back.

Without the belts, he might have floated up to the ceiling and started slowly spinning.

“Hello, world of zero-g sex. Now we can invent a brand new kama sutra with none of that pesky gravity restricting the glorious possibilities!”

“Let’s see. Which tube is Quenser’s oxygen?”

Myonri’s dangerous hand reached in from behind and Quenser very nearly died of asphyxiation.

The scraping sound on the outer walls ended.

Only silence surrounded them.

This time, not even Myonri made a noise. They were all holding their breath at the painful silence.

“Welcome to space,” said Frolaytia to drive the point home.

It did not feel real. They had not encountered any aliens and they had not rapidly evolved as lifeforms. They were surrounded by thick walls and contained in awkward spacesuits. It only felt like being restrained by those two layers of cramped protection. They were in space that continued forever with no horizon, yet they did not feel remotely free.

There was zero atmospheric pressure.

This was a vacuum devoid of oxygen.

Radiation stabbed directly into them without anything to weaken it.

People would die here if they were simply exposed to it without any protection. It was a lonely place where they could scream in terror and not a peep would reach their awful friend right next to them. It was a profound place where the human beings who had spread across the planet and chewed through its resources were separated out into individuals and forced to face their own insignificance. People were not meant to exist in space. It was a hell colder than the sea and hotter than fire.

“Your next step is to circle across the Atlantic to reach central Africa,” said Frolaytia. “The battle begins once you arrive. Overeagerly unstrapping yourselves now will only get you injured before the fighting even starts, so be careful.”

“You make it sound all fancy, but we’re basically following the long mountain trail around so we can peep on the open-air bath from above, right? Are you sure they won’t notice us???”

"Do you have any idea how many rockets and shuttles are being launched from the Pacific and South America right now? We didn't paint 'The Legitimacy Kingdom's Super Cool New Weapon' on the side, so you'll be fine. The official paperwork says you're a construction crew."

"Construction?"

"For a lunar villa."

That was even more outside Quenser's experiences than an indoor golf course or casino built in the middle of the Las Vegas desert. Rare bugs and plants in the jungle were biological resources, new online possibilities were data resources, and the deep sea - considered to be the final frontier on the planet - was all about oil and shale gas. And now people were attaching price tags to the moon's land and selling it off. Humanity really knew how to turn anything into a quick buck.

"I almost feel sorry for those lunar villas," said Frolaytia. "The space station's jamming has brought down their high-speed wireless internet, so they have no way of knowing what's going on. And without control signals, they can't launch any rockets or shuttles. I don't know if the Federation of Elevator Industries meant to do it, but the moon is like a remote island out in space."

"Serves 'em right," spat out Quenser.

But more importantly...

"Should we really be doing this? Won't soldiers get in trouble from a number of organizations if we pretend to be civilians for a sneak attack?"

"We have no other choice since physical stealth only goes so far. Oh, and I would recommend not checking outside. That way you won't have to see all the deadly eggs that have been laid out there."

"There are that many of them?"

"The space elevator allowed them to send an obscene number of those killer satellites outside the atmosphere, so the area above Africa is filled with tens of thousands of those military satellites that can move around on their own with explosives filling their belly. If the enemy notices you, they'll approach silently and then - boom - you have a hole in your hull. And you know what even a finger-sized hole means out in space, don't you?"

"..."

"Explosions in space have a wide lethal range. With no gravity or air, there's nothing to slow the razor-like shrapnel. To be blunt, not even a pizza delivery worker who knows the side roads by heart could slip through that floating minefield. Which is why - in my infinite kindness - I chose to rewrite the official paperwork."

"Anyway, we've made it into orbit. The first challenge when launching into space is the separation of the booster and tank. 50% of the risk of death comes from that, so now that we've gotten past that without incident..."

He was cut off by a quiet clunking sound.

He looked up (from the perspective of his seat and the movable range of his head) and Myonri laughed at him.

"Ah ha ha. So much for sounding smart there, Quenser. Sounds like we still had one more piece to separate off."

"..."

He fell quiet.

He checked his helmet's seal and the remaining oxygen meter on his wrist while his thoughts turned to the extravehicular activity unit on his back. He grabbed and then let go of the grip connected to the cable that would emit nitrogen gas from 32 different nozzles. He finally reached for his seatbelt, but he had trouble operating it with the spacesuit's thick fingers.

Or were his fingers trembling?

"Myonri, you should check your equipment. Like right now."

"Why?"

"The shuttle only had the booster and tank to separate off, so it should only have happened twice. There is no air friction out here in space, so that just now was something else – an accident! Something's coming!!"

All of a sudden, the lead-shielded roof of the shuttle was torn away.

The shuttle's cabin was exposed to the vacuum of space.

The starry sky as seen from earth was like viewing it through the wall of a plastic greenhouse. The real thing was much too distinct. More than that, they could see a shining blue disk overhead. That was the earth. It was a lot smaller than he had expected.

Without the electrodes attached all over his body, the pressure difference might have made his red blood cells rupture, killing him before he could have even seen this.

But he could not just stare at that strange sight.

Something was attached to the shuttle.

A perfect 2m cube shined silver in the sunlight. Much like an attack helicopter, weapons were attached below the solar panels spread out on either side. Work arms with multiple joints were extending this way. The shuttle's roof had been made to open and close, but the four arms had used a chemical or something to slice through the seam, grab it by force, and pull to either side to tear it open. Just like opening a bag of chips.

"A killer satellite!?" shouted Heivia with eyes wide.

Those satellites were used to destroy other satellites. Human nature had finally made its way into space. The Capitalist Corporations had their space elevator, so to bring quantity to the outer space conflicts, they had created a space minefield made from tens of thousands of killer satellites.

"Dammit, we need to protect the shuttle!!"

"No, Heivia!!"

A few of the soldiers responded to the boy's voice (that reached them via their helmet transmitters, not by sending vibrations through the air) by pressing their assault rifle stocks against the shoulder of their spacesuits and aiming at the killer satellite.

"Dammit, this round helmet makes it hard to look down the scope!! And these giant gloves make it hard to hold the gun. And that's after cutting away the trigger guard!!"

But...

"Gah!?"

"Gyah, my eyes!!"

The soldiers groaned before they could fire. They seemed to be writhing in pain and trying to hold their eyes, but the thick helmet got in the way. This was yet another accident. The killer satellite must have struck first while continuing to widen the wound in the shuttle, but it had produced no light or sound.

Or maybe...

(Did it shine its sensor-destroying laser in their eyes?)

“Go to hell!!”

Heivia’s assault rifle finally opened fire.

He had no way of fighting the recoil in space, so he simply had his body pushed back into his seat. The most training they had gotten was wearing VR goggles while submerged in a giant tank of water, but he pulled it off pretty well.

He was firing away in the next seat over, but Quenser could not hear a thing. That suggested he would die if he removed his helmet now.

And the student did not hesitate to remove his seatbelt.

“Watch out, everyone!!”

Did his warning reach them?

What happened next happened whether it did or not.

There was no sound, but he saw a flash of light brighter than a lightning bolt.

The killer satellite had taken enough damage, so it detonated from within, scattering 2000 metal balls smaller than pachinko balls.

Killer satellites were not expected to accurately shoot down fast-moving ballistic missiles with laser beams or railguns like in the SDI program of a former age.

They would generally approach slowly and then self-destruct.

Simple and primitive destructive power was all they needed.

As machines and computers advance over time, they had enough space leftover to do other things before self-destructing. So they now had plenty of optional functions such as shining powerful lasers on the enemy satellite to destroy its sensors from afar or using metal arms to grab and break solar panels.

But in the end, they would still explode.

So they were not given the latest tech; their exteriors were even made from flimsy aluminum foil. They did not need nimble mobility. They were mass-produced for cheap as disposable tools. The wars fought in space were so tediously realistic, with barely any bizarre technology to be found.

“Gahhh!!”

After undoing his belt, Quenser sprayed nitrogen gas from the nozzles on the extravehicular activity unit on his back to slip into the slight space below the seat. He curled up and protected the soft spacesuit with its back – with the metal tank there.

In space, an attack did not need to punch or slice through the enemy. Without any pressure or gravity, a single scratch was enough for the satellite to slip out of stable orbit or for an oxygen-filled shuttle or station to break apart from the difference in internal and exterior pressure.

The trick was to cause as many shallow scratches over as wide an area as you could.

An attack similar to a shotgun with unlimited range was ideal. As long as you did not care if the debris you produced got in your way afterwards.

And in fact...

“Bhhghhwahhh!!”

“Help me out here, Myonri! Hold Cottage’s arms in place while I seal his suit up with airtight tape. He’ll die if we don’t hurry!!”

Quenser had no idea how effective that tape was. It might have been issued to them more to make them feel better than because of any scientific evidence it worked. But he had to believe using it was better than leaving the soldier with a torn spacesuit. While the soldier nearly lost consciousness from a rapid pressure change similar to elevation sickness, Quenser forcibly bound his thigh with a tool similar to duct tape and filled the invisible gaps by melting the adhesive with an electric iron similar to a soldering iron.

“Don’t die, Cottage. You’re being treated by a girl. You’ve dreamed of this situation! So don’t you die!! Listen, your wound is being treated by a soft-skinned girl in a short-sleeved gym shirt and sports bloomers at the sports festival. You’ve never been happier!!”

“Oh, you seem to be doing well given the circumstances, Cottage.”

“Good, more like that, Myonri. Fill him with your medical girl power. If I tried to cheer him up as Quensette, the shock of learning the truth might just kill him!!”

The shuttle had reached its limit.

It was never going to fly normally again after the roof was peeled away like a convertible.

And the Capitalist Corporations' Federation of Elevator Industries was equipped with killer satellites. That one had been part of a networked minefield. If they continued on like this, the killer satellites waiting up ahead would gather together like a soccer defense. The shuttle was not the most maneuverable craft, so they could not nimbly dodge out of the way. Many more explosions like that one and the shuttle would not last.

Quenser shouted to the others.

His physical voice could not actually reach them in the vacuum of space, but his earth habits were hard to shake.

"You can't hold onto your weapons with these gloves, so wrap their straps around your wrist and then jump out from the shuttle!!"

"But this is outer space!"

Heivia's eyes widened, but they had no time. Quenser kicked off his seat while holding still-shaking Cottage. Even though he would have been thrown out from the broken roof anyway.

Heivia waved his hands wildly even though it was program controlled.

"How can you use that extravehicular unit so well? It's got 32 different nozzles."

"It's basically the same as the civilian models I saw back in my safe country school. Those were marine leisure toys that let you float in the sky by spraying pressurized seawater. There hasn't been much military value in spacewalks, so the civilian side is more advanced. Basically, the controls have been simplified to the point that an amateur can pick up and use it. Paper manuals aren't a thing anymore. If it's more complicated than a stick and two buttons, you lose customers fast."

"Your point?"

"If you volunteered to help with the R&D, you could play around with them all you wanted in the school's huge 5m-deep experiment pool. Eh heh heh. Which included providing hands-on tandem support for unsuspecting swimsuit girls."

Whether they had obeyed Quenser or simply been thrown out of the shuttle, most of the potatoes escaped out into deadly outer space while still plastic-wrapped in their spacesuits.

But not all of them made it.

Either they had not trusted Quenser or they had been too panicked to undo their seatbelts, but a few of the soldiers remained inside the torn-up shuttle.

Quenser could have sworn his eyes met theirs through their thick helmets.

A moment later, the many killer satellites gathered together and produced a series of silent explosions. The shuttle was transformed into an orange shooting star as it broke apart while enveloped in explosive flames.

The sharp fragments scattered by the explosion had nothing to slow them in space. Simply watching was risky, but Quenser was in no position to respond to that threat.

There was nothing he could do.

He could only clench his teeth and squeeze his eyes shut.

But then he opened them again.

“...”

“That violent mom just took away our precious shut-in room,” said Heivia. “So what do we do now? What about oxygen!? How many hours will the tanks on our backs last!? I know it’s less than a full day!”

“Focus on regulating your breathing instead of worrying about how much you have left. And avoid talking too much.”

“What kind of bizarre corpses are we gonna leave out here in space!? Dried up mummies? Or maybe something like frozen food!?”

“If you don’t want to die, then use your head! Complaining isn’t going to produce oxygen from your garlicy breath!!”

The student was panicking too.

They were in the silent vacuum of space with nothing to even stand on and mother earth’s blue shine felt like it was rejecting them. When he looked up at the planet hanging above them like a ceiling, he could make out some red dots of light. Those all symbolized human civilization. They were the massive flames of war caused by Objects.

(The earth is blue, my ass. Or does this mean things were still relatively peaceful back when everyone was threatening everyone else with nuclear missiles?)

Quenser cursed to himself before speaking again.

"Which way to that elevator – Mother Lady? Something that damn big should be obvious even from space."

"You're still trying to continue the mission!? I think we've got bigger issues right now. We can't keep fighting, so we need to withdraw!!"

"Withdraw to where? Do you think if you ask for help, Frolaytia's gonna blow the trumpet and lead the cavalry in to rescue us? You'd better hope she can pull a secret space cavalry out of her ass."

"..."

"If we want to survive this, we have to figure something out ourselves. The only place nearby with plenty of oxygen is the space elevator's space station. If we don't pay them a visit before the tanks on our backs run out, we're all dead. If you get that, then get moving. We don't have much time. If the Capitalist Corporations was judging the success of their attack using radar, they should assume we all died with the shuttle. We can pass right through the network of killer satellites right now!"

The killer satellites were of course designed for use against large machines like enemy satellites and spaceships. People in space was generally unthinkable, so they did not search for them. Just like the giant doppler radar on an airport control tower would fail to detect skydivers or a pair of panties blown off the clothesline, the killer satellites would likely overlook Quenser and the others since they were outside the design specs.

"No radio. Switch to close-range lasers."

"Goddammit. Like always, that busty commander goes silent the second things go south."

"The killer satellites would pick up any transmissions, so this is her way of being nice. It's just that her tsundere levels are so high it can be really hard to tell."

"Hmm, hmmm!!"

"If you don't like that explanation, then how about this? Imagine she shut off the transmission to stick her hand down her underwear and enjoy herself. Pray hard enough and the video footage might just start transmitting by some freak accident."

They were equipped with extravehicular activity units that sprayed compressed nitrogen gas from nozzles for attitude control, but that was only meant to keep their balance and counterbalance the recoil of gunfire, so it was really like having brakes they could only use a limited number of times. They could not be used as accelerators like a space ship or robot's rocket boosters.

Orientation was everything in zero-g.

If their nitrogen gas tanks ran out before their oxygen, they would be stuck spinning helpless and alone in the silence of space waiting for their oxygen to run out. Running out of oxygen first would actually be the better way to go.

Quenser operated the LCD screen on his arm. It was designed for use with the fat fingers of the spacesuit, but the screen was less sensitive to his touch than an ordinary phone.

“Man, that thing is sending EM signals everywhere. It must think it’s the king of outer space. Anyway, I found it. The elevator is 50km thataway!”

Compared to space as a whole, 50km was nothing, but the potatoes could not move a single centimeter forward no matter how hard they moved their legs. They could not walk without ground and they could not swim either.

“What do we do now?” asked Heivia.

“There are tons of killer satellites out here and we can’t be the only things they’ve attacked. There has to be some large scraps in a satellite orbit out here. We can calculate out where they’re going and hitch a ride with one of those trucks as it passes through.”

Fortunately, they had countless opportunities.

Space was vast, but satellite orbit around earth was a fairly packed area. 1800 pieces of rocket and satellite wreckage were floating around up there (and that was only the number that had been officially reported and confirmed). Add in all the bolts, nuts, paint chips, and other tiny pieces, and the number had to be close to 3 million. Most of those were abandoned remnants of the Nuclear Age when humanity had been in a race to develop ridiculous rockets while claiming it was some great dream for the future of humanity (while it was actually just an excuse to develop more missile tech). Space development had been more sensibly planned out once the Object Age arrived and people awoke from that particular madness. Although “got bored and lost interest” may have been the more accurate way to phrase it.

Quenser wanted a piece of scrap that was sufficiently large, not moving too fast, and not spinning.

A scorched cylindrical cargo tank (perhaps originally meant to send additional supplies to a space station) was about to pass them by.

(The laser range finder says...good, it isn’t moving so fast it would tear my arm off the instant I touch it!!)

“Try to keep up.”

“Wait, they didn’t teach us this in the pool training!”

Touching it directly could slice his glove open with the jagged edges, so Quenser instead attached a carabiner to the handle sticking out from the door. That way it dragged him along with it.

He was swept through that cramped area of space filled with killer satellites.

After seeing Quenser pull it off, Heivia, Myonri, and the others began locating their own debris and hesitantly following after him.

“Eek, eek, eeeek!?”

“Mute yourself, Heivia. That’s just painful to listen to!!”

“There’s so much trash out in space,” said Myonri. “Do the people in the elevator just use the atmosphere to burn up their trash and defective parts?”

It seemed unlikely elevator parts would end up floating around in space if they were sent straight up the wires, so this had to be intentional. Some of the debris was as large as a bus.

Even if they could transport large quantities of supplies into space, the self-destructing killer satellites were still a limited resource. You would lose one every time they were used, so non-hostile scraps would be registered as such and removed from the attack list to avoid wasting the satellites. By pressing against the scorched side of that scrap, Quenser could slip right past the Federation of Elevator Industries’ defense network.

The moon was always smaller than the earth that seemed to be pressing down on them from overhead.

But even out in space, a mere boy could not reach it.

The moon remained a lonely queen.

“...”

With how terrified he was of the vacuum held at bay only by the thin spacesuit, Quenser could not believe those wealthy people would actually build villas out here. He wondered if he would come to understand it after becoming a successful Object designer and diving into a bathtub full of cash.

But for now...

(We can finally make this an actual battle, even if just barely.)

With no horizon or air in space, there was nothing to block your view. Or so he thought, but the sun and its reflection off the earth itself created a blinding blue shine. That was why he could only see it after moving so close. A long, long line extended unnaturally up from the surface. The spread of the manmade had finally broken free of the planet and arrived in space.

That was the Mother Lady space elevator.

"Hey," said Heivia through their helmets.

They were using close-range IR at the moment, so he had to be pretty close. He must have been riding on a different scrap.

"Do you honestly think we can arrive there without issue?"

"Wow, Heivia. Frolaytia really has you brainwashed, huh? How can you look at everything that's happened so far and think 'without issue' is even remotely still on the table?"

"That's not what I meant."

Heivia's usual worrying nature was rearing its ugly head.

He tended to grow cowardly the instant some unknown technology, like a new Object, showed up. Just like someone who saw new smartphones and tablets and decided they preferred an insular regulated society over a bright future. Quenser was annoyed by that elderly way of thinking, but...

"Yes, we might be able to slip past the killer satellite defense network if we hitch a ride with the registered scraps," said Heivia. "But there are scraps too big to call debris headed toward the elevator's space station."

"If they weren't, we would be starting an endless journey into space. What's your point?"

"Ummm, won't those scraps look like a threat to the space station? Won't they have defense weapons ready to shoot down the scrap metal???"

The elderly way of thinking contained wisdom this time.

Quenser frantically unhooked his carabiner and kicked off the side of his scrap just before a thick, bluish-white electron beam stabbed through the silent vacuum of space. It pierced the center of the cylindrical cargo tank, causing it to rupture from within.

Incidentally, the supplies that never reached their destination happened to be sex toys.

Since any videos watched or VR data accessed on a space station's computer equipment would be contained in the logs sent back to the control center back on the ground, Quenser was surrounded by a blizzard of analog paper magazines, silicone tubes, and life-sized dolls.

"Get away from the scraps!!" he shouted "The defense system meant for meteors and large scraps can't detect anything human-sized!!"

"Oh, no. That cloud of sex toys is floating out into space," lamented Myonri. "The aliens are going to know all about the most embarrassing side of our civilization."

"Huh? What are you worried about, Myonri? This is tradition. Have you ever heard of the space probe they launched back when the country called America still existed? The world's brightest scientists got together and decided the best way to contact aliens was to carve a picture of a naked man and woman into a metal plate. But since being bright doesn't mean being a good artist, they got some complaints about spreading a poor representation of earth's civilization."

If you were not sure how to use the books and dolls, they would only look like detailed examples of human anatomy. With that much reference material, the little green men flying around in saucers and harassing farms could stop abducting humans and pulling out their insides. The books might even be preserved in an alien museum as anatomy textbooks. But right now Quenser had to focus on the space elevator more than the aliens who seemed to have a thing for milk and busty country girls.

He was in the middle of a war between humans.

The Mother Lady built by the Federation of Elevator Industries was right in front of him.

The wires extending all the way from the earth seemed to pierce through a giant disk-like structure that looked something like a flower with petals or like an analog clock face. A donut-shaped block for living space and cargo storage were connected to the central sphere and 8 "flower petals" extended sharply out from there. From the central sphere to the tip of the petals, it had a radius of more than 10km.

The wires seemed to "pierce through" it because they did not stop there. They continued a long, long way up into space. Space had no horizon or atmosphere, but the faint blue light of the planet got in the way, preventing Quenser from seeing the end. It was probably connected to some kind of weight, like a wire reel that was no longer in use.

The space station was located at an altitude of 36 thousand kilometers, but the wires apparently continued past 100 thousand. That was the only way for it to remain balanced, but that meant the distance from the station to the top of the elevator was about twice the distance from the ground to the station.

The moon was even further out at 380 thousand kilometers. The luxury villas disconnected from all the wars on earth seemed to be coldly staring down at the incompetent potatoes who could not stop

the killing even after launching into the silence of space.

“Heh. That thing’s the world’s biggest piece of space trash,” spat Heivia.

Even now, the bluish-white rapid-fire beam weapon continued to tear through the vacuum of space to burn away the large scraps the station had created itself. The kilometers-long flower petals were covered with solar panels and had apparently been converted into weapons, so a careless look at the sharp tips could expose your eyes to the blinding light.

But just as Quenser had predicted, the weapons were only attacking the scorched hunks of metal. Once the potatoes let go and floated away, they no longer had to fear the defense weapons.

They soon arrived at the giant station that only looked like a smooth wall from the outside.

They touched it.

“God, this is terrifying!” said Heivia. “Where am I even supposed to grab this thing!? I’m gonna float away from it again!!”

“Don’t come to me for comfort just cause you’re worried. It’s creepy!!” said Quenser. “Using your extravehicular unit to press against the wall would be a waste of gas, so attach yourself with a wire!!”

Something as simple as landing proved to be a trial and error affair. Heivia seriously did end up flipping away into space, so Quenser had to seriously think for a moment whether he would grab at the filthy guy’s waist or let him fly off never to be seen again. He ultimately decided to throw over the other end of the wire he had attached to the wall, snagging it around Heivia’s leg.

Once he had finally arrived safely on the station’s wall, the idiot forgot all about saying thanks as he changed the subject.

“Pant, pant! A-anyway, where do we get in? Let’s not make our space adventures into a trilogy. We only have so much oxygen.”

“We have airtight tape. And since Cottage is still breathing, it must work. Let’s blow a hole in the airlock with a bomb and then seal it up from the inside. We need oxygen too, so no one survives if we just thoughtlessly pop the place open like a balloon.”

They had arrived at the space station, so the killer satellites defending its surroundings would have a hard time aiming for them. The Capitalist Corporations’ Federation of Elevator Industries would not want to blow a hole in the wall and dump themselves out into the vacuum of space.

Using the extravehicular activity unit's gas for movement was not recommended, but they had no choice at the moment. Trusting that he could steal some equipment from the station, Quenser used the nitrogen gas to approach one of the large flower petals. Instead of the sharp tip, he was interested in the donut-shaped living space and cargo block located inward of the petals. He felt like a bug going for the flower's nectar.

He pressed up against a rectangular section reminiscent of an elevator door reinforced with a rubber seal.

"Is this the airlock? I was expecting something more like a bank vault door, but this is pretty flimsy. Hey, Heivia, let me use your rifle's sensors. I'll check the material and thickness of the door with the ultrasound sensor and then set up the plastic explosive."

He held out his hand while staring at the airlock and then looked over to see someone there.

They shined silver and stood over 3m tall.

It was a Capitalist Corporations powered suit used for extravehicular activity.

"....."

His mind went blank.

A beat later, a scream too high-pitched to even call girly erupted from Quensette's mouth, signaling the beginning of a battle between Legitimacy Kingdom shoulder-fired missiles and a Capitalist Corporation shotgun.

"Kyaaaaahhhhh!!"

"Stop worrying about your nitrogen supply, Quenser! Get away from that wall!!"

Part 3

The Capitalist Corporations' strategy was to cause shallow scratches over a wide area instead of concentrating penetrative power on a single point. Even if the attack did not break through the enemy spacesuit, it would still cause them to spin uncontrollably and a single pinprick in those thick plastic suits would cause the person inside to die. The conditions were entirely different from when everyone was covered in bulletproof fibers and thick armor plates. Air was the dividing line between life and death, not blood.

Shotguns could cover a wide area with a single shot, so they were the perfect choice.

With no air or gravity in space, their power was not reduced by distance.

They saw a bright muzzle flash right in front of them.

“C-Cottage!?”

“Pull out the bullet before using the airtight tape! Those are smoke rounds, so seal it with tape now and he’ll smoke alive in his suit!!”

“Wow, it actually worked. I think he might be immortal.”

Being treated by cute Myonri was enough. A guy who could convert lust into strength in battle was unbeatable. Quenser complained about the guy’s survival, but then he heard Heivia click his tongue over the transmission.

“Dammit, I can’t get a stable trajectory with my rifle or missiles. Earth projectiles designed to be used in the air are useless!”

“Wait, you couldn’t even aim the missile you fired to save me!?”

It was just like a student from a safe country to complain after having his life saved. A child who did not know how to cook and always had his mama cook for him could never appreciate how wonderful it was to always have a homecooked meal made for you.

Were the Capitalist Corporations using shotguns because the ballistic trajectories were so unstable?

With all this tech developed for use in space, it was easy to forget they had been hiding in cracks in the ground to avoid the enemy not long ago.

“The Island Nation is the holy land of robots and they’ve also got Hollywood that insists on doing everything in full 3DCG.” Heivia sounded disgusted. “That must have influenced them. We’re in trouble cause I can’t even imagine what kind of bizarre weapon they’ll pull out next!!”

“That just means this place is a treasure trove of tech they can’t go public with. I’m gonna get a look at it and steal all their ideas. This deadly trip into space won’t be worth it otherwise.”

A powered suit was a lot better than a spacesuit, but it was still only as sturdy as an armored truck. They could be shot through with a missile or an anti-materiel rifle.

At any rate, the soldiers on the run triggered a silent explosion in space, launching the powered suit away from the station and into the emptiness beyond.

"They know we're here now, so blow open that airlock already," said Heivia. "Who knows how many are going to be rushing over here soon!!"

"You might want to move outside of the blast range. Unless you want to go crashing through a lunar villa's roof, that is."

They blew up the airlock and moved inside.

They did not have time for them all to pass through the one airlock. Luckily, there were plenty of airlocks. Once Quenser had a few more people in his, they sealed the outside door with airtight tape, pried open the inside door with some tools (because using another bomb would have killed everyone inside the airlock), and finally paid the space station a visit.

The bright white LED lights made the inside look unnaturally sterile. It was so perfect it instead looked unhealthy. It was reminiscent of a research lab deep underground where a zombie virus or something was being developed.

They were in a simple corridor, but it was as wide as a road with two lanes both ways. It followed a gentle curve, so they could not see all the way down it.

The place was unnecessarily large, evidence that they had no trouble transporting things into space. A station like this would have been unthinkable back when everything used rockets where people racked their brains to reduce the weight by even a single gram.

The space elevator was neither a train station nor a hotel, so they did not bother using centrifugal force to produce artificial gravity. Everything remained zero-g like normal.

(Zero-g like normal, huh? Humans adapt so fast.)

Quenser smiled cynically in his helmet. He hoped he would be able to stand on his own two feet once he was back on earth.

He glanced at the computer on his arm. Operating the simple screen controls was difficult with a hand larger than a baseball glove.

"There's pressure. One atmosphere in fact, so there's probably air."

"Then open your helmet's visor and prove it. I'm not about to open mine and have my head swell out and pop like a balloon."

Heivia's ideas of space appeared to be based on a hodgepodge of misinformation. Death in a vacuum would not be that gruesome. You would still be dead, though.

"Come to think of it, what happens when you die in space?" he asked. "There aren't any bacteria to make you decompose out here, so would you float on outside of the solar system inside your enclosed spacesuit without ever rotting until some aliens finally picked you up???"

"You have a ton of bacteria in your gut," replied Quenser. "Not to mention mites on your skin and cavity bacteria on your teeth. Some people will have parasites like athlete's foot too. Once we die and our immune system shuts down, we'll be devoured from within. Inside a sealed spacesuit, you'll be reduced to a sticky goop made up of rotted flesh, filth, and even the squid-smelling goo in your balls. That would make for an awful surprise for the little green men who open up your suit. They'll be wondering why the earth sent them such a cruel present."

He made sure not to hold his breath since that could damage his lungs.

But he still wanted to preserve his suit's oxygen tank, so he went ahead and raised his visor. If the tank did run out, he could still suffocate to death inside his spacesuit even when he was surrounded by oxygen in the safe station.

He felt dizzy the instant the outside air reached him.

"Ugh!"

"Hey, your eardrums didn't burst, did they!?"

"I'm fine. I think it's just my inner ear."

He shut off the oxygen supply from the tank while he thought.

Could he find a Capitalist Corporations oxygen tank anywhere?

The two idiots searched around. This structure was generally shaped like a donut, but there were a ton of sturdy metal doors for airlocks on the outside of the metal ring. Those were connection joists for attaching additional experiment rooms.

The delinquent noble (who now removed his helmet after seeing Quenser was fine with his visor open) frowned as they checked inside those.

"Pwah. The hell? These are so boring."

"No, they're not. These are a treasure trove."

The two of them had vastly different opinion on what they saw.

The experiments came in all types. The cylindrical experiment rooms were each the size of a large bus and had various company logos plastered on them. Were all those companies supporters of the Federation of Elevator Industries? The one with plants growing on steel racks protected by glass cases was probably a plant factory that grew vegetables which could be harvested dozens of times per year. In addition to food, there were frozen earthworms and slugs. Those may have been a cold sleep experiment.

(Hm? Is this the latest space trend? I could have sworn the focus was more on new alloys and microscopic chemical development.)

“Look, they’ve got drinking water.”

“Heivia, that machine recycles the astronauts’ piss with a filter.”

“Bfff!? Thank god I didn’t swallow!!”

Heivia’s over-the-top spit take made him spin around in the zero-g.

There was also a section with genetic information preserved in cold storage. Basically, it was the fertilized eggs of animals.

“This one is a zebra and this one a giraffe. There’s even a lion and a hyena.”

“What the hell’s the point? Can you order endangered species with the click of a button in the Capitalist Corporations???”

“...”

Quenser thought for a bit and then faced the machinery again.

He saw water, dirt, nutrients, and even fertilizer. A closer look showed none of it appeared to have been created in a sterile lab. The dirt had apparently just been dug up from the ground because the bags full of it still contained chunks of mold and small bugs.

“Heh,” laughed Heivia. “Do those rich bastards even want their experiments to be free of additives and agrochemicals?”

“No, wait. Is this what I think it is?”

“?”

Heivia tilted his head, but Quenser was not even looking his awful friend's way.

"Was this for Re Terra?"

"I don't know and I don't care because we're bringing this elevator down today. Here, isn't this what we wanted? Capitalist Corporations oxygen tanks!"

Sure enough.

In fact, there were tanks everywhere.

"Wow, the elevator sure is generous to its people. They have so much precious oxygen they can just leave it lying around like curly hairs in the corner of your room."

"Couldn't you at least compare it to a fire extinguisher or AED, you bastard?"

But once they actually pulled a tank out of its metal box, they found the socket did not match. These could not be attached to Legitimacy Kingdom equipment.

"These mystery hairs are completely useless! Why can't they be more accommodating, dammit!?"

"Probably to prevent their enemy from using them. Y'know, like we're trying to do."

If they borrowed the lathe in one of the experiment rooms and shaved down the metal connector to match the tube's width, they could probably get it to fit, but they were in space. They were dead if any oxygen could escape, so they were afraid to trust DIY work. Unfortunately, they would have to give up on the oxygen tanks for now.

(I have no idea if we're making these decisions based on the reality of space or based on an idea of space born from dubious facts we picked up somewhere, but it's our lives on the line here.)

Quenser gave a self-deprecating smile.

Taking over the space station would be their best bet, but if that did not work, they at least needed a spaceship they could stay on for longer periods of time. Either way, securing a survivable environment was top priority. Being kicked back out without any new supplies would be the worst-case scenario. Whether it was oxygen or nitrogen, if they ran out of the supplies needed to operate in space, they could not avoid drying up and dying in the emptiness out there.

"I'm honestly pretty jealous of that powered suit from before. One scratch to our spacesuits and we're dead, so that thing must be such a relief. Maybe we can find some in storage somewhere."

"That's Capitalist Corporations gear," pointed out Heivia. "Steal one and our own people will shoot you the instant you step out the door."

For that reason, stealing just a tank or even a full spacesuit from the Capitalist Corporations would be dangerous.

"This station is more than 20km long, so it's huge. Whether it's manned or unmanned, they must have far more firepower than us. So where do we make our attack? If we don't choose a specific target, they'll use their superior numbers to surround us."

"I'm aware of that."

This space had no gravity, but it did have artificial air. That meant bullets produced for use on the surface would hit their targets here. With the exception of long-range sniper shots that took gravity into account.

(Mother Lady must have a power source up here as well. Otherwise, the Princess's group could have cut their power from the ground base. Is it just those flower petal solar panels, or do they have something else? No, that won't help. Even if I did know they have a nuclear reactor here, I wouldn't know where in this 20km fortress it is.)

Quenser could only think of one option.

Since they lacked a detailed map of the station, they could only aim for somewhere they could generally guess was important. In other words, something that structurally had to exist.

"Let's head to the center."

"You wanna go straight on in without even kissing the nape or earlobe first? Got a particular target in mind?"

"No matter how big this thing is, it still needs attitude control. It isn't a spaceship just floating out here - it's an elevator connected to a long wire. Since the wire is 100 thousand kilometers long - a quarter of the distance to the moon - you could calculate out its natural frequency. They must have some a gyro or a pendulum that counteracts the vibration of this giant string instrument. And that has to directly interact with the wire, so it must be at the center of the station. Take that down and the vibration of the wire will tear the station apart from within."

"Even though it's 20km long?"

"It could be 100 or even 200km long. The size of the building doesn't matter."

They could use that to negotiate.

If they were going to settle in anywhere, the center of the station would be best.

Instead of running, Heivia walked along with his hand on the wall.

“Hey, how about we let the station break apart while we escape to safety in an escape pod!?”

“Sure, if you can find enough of those wonderfully convenient escape pods for everyone and prove that the station can’t fire those thick electron beams up our fleeing asses while it falls apart. Whatever we’re gonna do with this giant thing, we need to take the center if we want any bargaining chips at all.”

They heard a distant sound like thick rubber being crushed.

A six-wheeled armored vehicle appeared from around a corner of the wide corridor.

It was the size of a van.

“What the hell!? We’re inside right now!!”

Heivia shouted and immediately tried to shove the frozen skinny boy aside, but he completely forgot about the whole zero-g thing.

He could not suppress the force of his own shove without using the extravehicular activity unit on his back.

The two boys ended up floating away in opposite directions.

The armored vehicle’s machinegun gave a roar and red-hot bullets flew through the gap between them.

“That was too close!”

“Where’s Cottage!? We can test this new weapon on him!!”

Heivia was trembling behind a metal tank filled with who-knows-what, but Quenser analyzed the situation while hiding behind a pillar rising from the floor.

“The recoil didn’t push it back? Oh, I get it. That thing’s an asteroid probe. Its tires aren’t filled with

air. They attach to the floor instead. Does it use suction cups? No, maybe it uses spikes similar to a cocklebur. It must be able to electrically change the angle of the spikes.”

“You’ve got a huge boner for tech! I get it already! Got any useful information for us!?”

“It looks fancy, but it’s really the same old thing.” Quenser seemed awfully calm for having an armored vehicle’s machinegun aimed at him. “They took a lightweight aluminum probe and attached some armor panels that defeat its entire purpose. Its defenses are flimsy as hell compared to a real tank and the bullets its firing are only made to ‘scratch’ the target instead of punching through them. ...This isn’t anywhere near as bad as a normal battlefield. Having our spacesuits tear isn’t all that bad when we’re inside a space station full of artificial air.”

Yes.

It was harmless.

It did not have a bunch of legs or antigravity tech. Forcing a new method would only lead to malfunctions, so the Federation of Elevator Industries had stuck with the tried and true standard of wheels. That suggested it also used ordinary electric power. Burning gasoline or diesel was out of the question since there was no air in space, so what else could they use? They had likely avoided anything too bizarre.

Even if they had the equipment, the other side would not want to fire anti-materiel bullets thicker than your thumb at a rate of hundreds per minute. They would not want to tear apart their space station from within after spending so much money and effort building it.

Everything was normal, ordinary, and unsurprising.

Even though they were in space. Or maybe because they were in space?

“I get your reasoning.” Heivia was still curled up behind cover. “But what are we supposed to do about it?”

“Weren’t you listening, dumbass? We fight the kind of war the Capitalist Corporations doesn’t want. Fire your gun and fill the wall to our right with holes 150m ahead of here!!”

To avoid wasting the nitrogen for his extravehicular activity unit, Heivia grabbed onto a large tank with one arm to hold himself in place while firing his assault rifle. He only held it in one hand, but that was fine when he only needed to hit the wall and not pinpoint target someone between the eyes.

The wall was blown through right next to the armored vehicle.

There were different kinds of walls on the station.

For example, there were the extra airlocks that did not yet have an additional experiment room attached.

Once there were too many holes to count on your fingers, the pressure difference tore the entire metal door away. A gust of wind formed, like air escaping a giant balloon, and it tore the nearby armored vehicle from the floor, sucking it out into the black of space.

That was a major kill for Heivia, but for once he did not brag about it.

Instead, he paled in horror at what he had done.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait!! What do we do!? What do we do now!?"

"If the Capitalist Corporations have any sense at all, their central control will close the shutter."

There was no response.

The Federation of Elevator Industries had no sense at all.

"In that case, escape to the next block over!"

"How dumb are you!? Your plan should never be reliant on the enemy's benevolent nature!"

The storm was rapidly expanding.

"Oh, god. It's sucking like crazy! Once that greedy old hag gets her lips on you, she's never letting go!!"

"Try to knock some sense back into your messed-up brain, dumbass."

Before the air could be sucked out of their current location, the potatoes kicked off the wall, passed to the next section of the segmented corridor, and pulled the lever to manually lower a thick shutter.

They had barely escaped with their lives, but they had learned something through nearly dying.

"The Federation of Elevator Industries isn't some unbeatable enemy." Quenser took a deep breath to confirm that there was still air here. "The space elevator and the station up in satellite orbit are a hell of a first impression, but nothing they've done in this fight has been all that crazy. So far,

anyway. They're only using whatever weapons were available and they're intentionally reducing the amount of explosives. I was afraid what we would find in a zero-g war with no Objects, but this isn't a destructive war where everyone's aiming nukes at everyone else to ensure their own safety."

"And?"

"We should be able to negotiate. Maybe by placating them and maybe by threatening them."

But that did not change where they needed to go. They had to leave the donut-shaped living space and cargo area and enter the center of the elevator itself. The long, long wires would vibrate at a set frequency, so there would be a device that counteracted that. Control that, and they could begin to negotiate with the Federation of Elevator Industries that was losing more and more people because they were too worried about damaging the space station to take sufficiently strong action.

They aimed their guns at anyone they came across, but most of them were more Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes.

"Hey, Phillip. Make some kind of signal before stepping out. I nearly shot you!"

"And let everyone know it's me in advance? They might 'accidentally' shoot me because of some stupid grudge they hold."

The potatoes were indeed potatoes. Gambling and moneylending within the same unit led to mutual suspicion in a flash. A military unit meant to protect the world could be destroyed from within by a single deck of cards.

After rejoining with a few other Legitimacy Kingdom groups, Quenser and Heivia approached the center.

There was a shutter down between the areas, but the student's plastic explosive made short work of that and they continued on.

The inside was not at all what Quenser had expected.

He had been imagining something like the bridge of a giant aircraft carrier, but the central area was more like an airport luggage management room or a drink factory. Conveyor belts with protrusions to hold them in place ran every which way, creating lanes like a highway interchange or junction. But instead of suitcases or plastic bottles, the conveyor belts were transporting large cylindrical cargo tanks.

The area was larger than a domed stadium.

A few parallel lines pierced straight down the very center of the vast space, but these were not thin threads. They were shaped like flat belts about 80cm wide and thinner than a razorblade. Needless to say, those were the elevator's carbon nanotube wires.

But Quenser did not have time to stare at that piece of the space elevator.

A girl with a fluttering lab coat floated in the zero-g world beyond those wires that looked like a giant string instrument.

But she did not seem to be a soldier.

What kind of soldier would be dressed like that?

In what was probably the gym outfit of a safe country school, she wore a short-sleeved gym shirt and red sports bloomers. On her feet, she wore black knee socks and functional sneakers. The baggy lab coat she wore above all that was the only thing hinting that she was a researcher.

This was a female researcher involved with the elevator.

Each of those symbols and facts danced through Quenser's mind. Plus, a tablet floated next to the girl whose long hair and lab coat were fluttering in the lack of gravity. The alphabet stickers on the tablet's back spelled out the name Louisiana.

"Eh? What?"

The answer was right in front of him, but Quenser still blinked in confusion.

"Do you just happen to have the same name? Is this a body double? Because you can't be her! I mean, Louisiana Honeysuckle was the girl in Braskine's story! And it has to have been at least 4 years since he made those memories!!"

"Try 6. I went to graduate school."

"Hm? Hmm??? But then how are you only 17? Or did you master immortality so you always look 17!?"

"I'm what they call a genius, so I skipped several years of school."

"B-"

Quenser Barbotage was not usually the type to speak ill of the dead.

He was proud of that fact, but he chose to break that rule here.

It was a reflexive response in this case.

“Braskiiiiiiiiine!!!??? Why did you make that sound like a bitter love story!? How young a girl did you fall for you, you son of a biiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiitch!!?”

“What, she’s a friend of his!?” asked Heivia while still aiming his assault rifle.

Louisiana Honeysuckle.

She might be a monster in the field of space technology, but it was hard to imagine that clothing had been modified to be bulletproof or blast-resistant. Nevertheless the gym clothes girl grinned and did not even put her hands up as countless guns were aimed her way.

“What’s with the weird getup?” asked Heivia.

“Oh, sorry about that. It may depend on the material, but your bra shows through some of them.”

“This isn’t a joke!!”

“This is a logical choice. Do you know how much your muscles deteriorate while living in zero-g. It also effects your calcium, so I’m worried about the strength of my bones.”

“Do you really think you’re in any position to speak on equal footing with us? Or what, do you think you can stop our bullets with some very scientific psychokinesis!?”

“PK? No, that’s a bit outside my field of expertise.”

She kept a jocular tone of voice.

Quenser sensed something more to this unusual confidence and then he gasped.

“No!! Wait, Heivi-”

A gunshot and muzzle flash burst out.

But the one who froze in terror was the very one who had fired the warning shot: Heivia.

The rifle bullet flew just a few centimeters past his head to hit the wall behind him.

“Oh, how kind of you.”

The 17-year-old girl continue smiling thinly in midair as she quietly applauded Heivia. Her shirt was not tucked in, so it floated up to reveal her shapely navel.

Evidently, she really did not need bulletproof equipment.

“If you had aimed between my eyes with that first shot, that would have killed you.”

“...”

“So even after seeing it in action, the soldier remains in his egg. That baby chick there seems to have noticed, though. These carbon nanotubes are the heart of the giant transportation infrastructure supporting this 100 thousand kilometer elevator. Mere bullets cannot tear them. If you do hit them, they will take in the bullet like a bow or slingshot and send it right back at you.”

Jack-of-all-trades Myonri had rejoined them at some point and she glanced down at the grenade on her chest. And with this many people paying Louisiana a visit, they could split into two teams and circle around from both sides, preventing the wires from acting as a shield.

“Any questions?” asked Louisiana while slowly flipping upside down.

“Was your relationship with Braskine a, uh, p-platonic one!? You didn’t throw out your inhibitions and do a lot of experimenting just because you were in college, did you!?”

“Why do you hear about a boy and girl being friends and immediately assume it’s sexual in nature? Is that just how it is with you high schoolers who run entirely on lust?”

Louisiana breathed an exasperated sigh.

Quenser’s question must not have been clever enough for her liking because the genius girl reached her slender finger toward something while still floating upside down.

Namely...

“I can us these carbon nanotubes in more than just passive ways. So how about I get more aggressive this time?”

She flicked the edge of one of the belt-shaped wires. With just the one finger.

The immediate result was more like an invisible wall than a noise.

The bizarre shockwave hit the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes, slamming all their backs against the walls and transportation equipment.

Quenser thought he was going to expel the contents of his stomach.

“Gah!?”

“The wires are wires. This facility is meant to restrict their vibration, but it can also give them a new vibration. And since this room is filled with artificial air, sound and vibrations can of course propagate through it. How do you like the music played by the world’s largest string instrument that covers a quarter of the distance from the earth to the moon?”

It was more than he could have imagined.

The very technology being used was different. Instead of supertechnology that were just guns and bombs but better, this was like being thrown into a sword and sorcery fantasy world.

The Federation of Elevator Industries was not just a single company.

It was a giant space development agency jointly funded by 7th Core, the seven large companies that controlled the Capitalist Corporations home country. Simply put, the Federation spoke on behalf of the Capitalist Corporations as a whole. It had been given funding and the latest tech from those seven monstrous companies, so of course they would have some crazy stuff.

However...

(We were caught off guard by new tech we’d never seen before, but we’re still alive.)

Quenser forced down some sour saliva and pushed his thoughts in a positive direction.

(This isn’t like the Object wars. If we let an Object’s first attack hit us like this, the entire unit would’ve been reduced to ashes!!)

“If possible...”

The genius girl in gym clothes and a lab coat traced her slender finger along the vibrating wire. She was looking at the carbon nanotube, not at Quenser and the others.

Guns were not a bargaining chip against her.

That extraordinary aerospace researcher had displayed something that seemed even more supernatural than psychokinesis.

"I would prefer not to use her to kill. I accept that Mother Lady is a weapon that will change the very era we live in, but I want to use it to help the Turkana District."

"After you tricked them and stole their land for your precious elevator and then turned the whole place into a desert by sucking all the water out of the ground!?" shouted Heivia. "Your supposed philanthropy makes no sense!!"

"Re Terra." Quenser slowly interjected while grimacing in pain. "Re Terraforming. Are you trying to give the world a single unified environment?"

He searched for the meaning of everything he had seen so far and constructed a theory he would much rather not know about.

"I saw the plants, animals, dirt, and water of the Turkana District in this space station. You plan to suck it up from the ground base and scatter it from space. Across the entire world! Then Asia, Europe, North and South America, and the rest of the world will all be remade to have the same environment as the Turkana District. You aren't planning to alter some other planet - you're remaking earth. Because you believe that will make every part of the world equal, regardless of terrain or environment!!"

"Hmm?"

Louisiana did not provide a real response.

Instead of a yes or a no, she brought her finger to the back of her hips. Fixing the red sports bloomers riding up in her butt was apparently more important to her than listening to the enemy.

She did not even look their way when she spoke again.

"You seem to be mistaken about some things. You shouldn't accuse people based on groundless speculation."

"..."

"Besides, you're not the Faith Organization, so surely you don't think the world will be saved if you just continue with your blind Object worship. You have no way to save the world. Rejecting someone else's ideas without one of your own is what children do."

The space elevator was a largescale space project meant to carry great quantities of cargo outside

the atmosphere. If her plan was executed, it would be far worse than volcanic ash paralyzing a city. No matter how much the people on the surface tried to fight it, they would never catch up. Once the environment itself had been altered, the lifeforms already there would die out. Everything would be made uniform.

Slugs could not live on the dry ground and moles could not live in the hard ground. The distribution of animals could be easily controlled using soil and water quality. If you could dump dizzying amounts of it from the sky, that is.

The deep ocean bottom barely changed across the entire world, but it apparently grew deeper at a rate of 1mm every thousand years. That was supposedly due to fine cosmic dust that poured down from outside the atmosphere, but Louisiana was trying to dump meters of it in a single day.

That might increase the population of endangered animals like giraffes and lions.

But there would be no variety there. The Legitimacy Kingdom was fighting for the extremely ill-defined plan of “protecting the varied plants and animals that might be useful as a drug at some point”. What if some strange new disease was spreading and the plant or animal needed for the cure had gone extinct? A unified environment would take away crucial flexibility and might even lead to more extinctions.

And that was not an issue with the plants and animals of the Turkana District.

It would be the same no matter what part of the planet you chose. Life could not be ranked in a hierarchy – none of it was superior or inferior to anything else. If a species of wheat or grape considered the most valuable to humans was planted all across the planet, that would only increase the risk of it entirely dying out at some point. Even seemingly useless weeds and the bugs swarming below the streetlights were supporting the world in some roundabout way.

A single person would change the world.

Quite literally so. She really was going to change the planet’s environment.

(I knew Louisiana Honeysuckle was supposed to be a genius, but this is absurd!!)

Even so, if she was going to use sound, she would be bound by the nature of sound. If she was going to use wires, she would be trapped by the shape of a wire. Louisiana Honeysuckle had used her intellect to extend her reach into space where she was trying to remake the planet as a whole, but she was not a witch with a magic wand.

All of this was the result of high-level science. If they figured out how it worked, they could prevent her from using it.

“Heivia, ready your gun.”

“Wait, shouldn’t we withdraw for the time being!?”

“Louisiana is a true monster. She knows the structure of the elevator like the back of her hand, she can entirely ignore standard military tactics, and she can even use ‘magic’. Don’t carelessly try to attack her directly.”

Then was there nothing they could do?

Quenser continued before anyone could ask that question.

“But those wires are 100 thousand kilometers long and they have a known natural frequency. We knew the number from the beginning, so we know what her magic really is and interfering with it won’t be that hard!!”

“Oh, I’m shaking in my boots.”

Louisiana cowered down in an obviously performative way. That kind of confidence was terrifying. She was surrounded by dozens of soldiers who made a living killing and shedding blood, so how could she smile? If it was based on science and not groundless faith, then she had to know her tricks were not absolute.

Anyone could use science as long as they understood how it worked. That was what made it the standard most wildly supported by humanity.

And yet...

“Okay, enough playing around. I should probably just play my trump card now. Time to end this romantic space story and drag it back to the boring world of the military. Development Code: Elinabell.”

The Federation of Elevator Industries had funding and technology from the seven large companies of 7th Core.

This genius and true monster had full authority over it all. She wielded a supposedly impossible privilege in the world of science that should have been equal to all. Genius.

That one word felt like an occult jinx or an invisible barrier. That researcher had everything a student like Quenser did not.

As the snap of her finger rang through the artificial air, Louisiana Honeysuckle introduced them to her insane talent.

“We have developed a Second Generation Object specifically designed for use in outer space.”

Part 4

In that moment, logic vanished from the world.

Part 5

Quenser’s vision returned.

But he still could not fill in the blank in the back of his mind. He could only see things in unpleasant flashes and his brain could not figure out what the colors and shapes meant.

His senses did not return for a while.

It was a weirdly pleasant feeling, like having his fingertip freed from the fishing line constricting it.

“Pant, pant.”

He only now realized he had been breathing rapidly, nearly to the point of hyperventilation. His helmet’s thick visor was down, but that was the correct decision. He had been thrown out into the starry sky where he could not tell up from down or judge distance or direction.

He was in outer space.

(What – dammit – what happened!? How could I be thrown out into space when I was in the middle of the space station!?)

His memories were failing him.

But instead of the memories not existing, his weak mind was refusing to recall them.

“Heivia, Myonri! Is anyone still alive!?”

There was no response.

Had they all been reduced to chunks of flesh floating out in the vacuum of space, or were they afraid sending out a signal would give away their position to the enemy?

The enemy.

The 7th Core's representative.

The symbol of the Federation of Elevator Industries' power.

"..."

He could not calm his breathing. Beads of sweat swam through his helmet and he could not even brush them away with his hand.

(That's right.)

It was like a jigsaw puzzle or like defragging a hard disk.

The fragments he had been refusing to recall began to piece themselves together, whether he wanted it or not.

(We were caught off guard. Louisiana fixed herself in place with a carabiner and pulled a lever while laughing. That opened a smoke vent in case of fire, so we were all sucked out of the space station.)

But how had Louisiana Honeysuckle managed to catch them off guard?

That lab coat girl may have been a genius, but a large group of Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers had gathered there. She was not the star of a samurai movie, so it was unrealistic to think she could take on so many enemies at once.

Real war was much crueler and more boring.

They were not fighting in order to look cool, so that was not too surprising.

So what had happened?

(It arrived.)

There was only one thing that could allow one side of a battle to crush the other: sending in greater firepower. It was a simple but absolute law.

(She did something...and then the whole station shook violently. Which distracted us enough for her to catch us off guard.)

He gulped.

Pain flashed in the back of his mind. The blinding light was coming from his brain, not his eyes. Was it really this painful to recall a traumatizing experience?

He did not want to believe it.

He did not want to accept that was real.

But his head moved all on its own. It turned. He could not fight the ultimate charisma carried only by the strongest weapon.

There it was.

It was a few kilometers away, which was nothing in space.

It was more than 50m tall.

He saw a colossal nuke-resistant mass.

The spherical main body was covered with so many laser beams and plasma cannons it looked like a sea urchin or a chestnut burr. The most notable trait was the large half-circle piece attached around the main body. That bridge piece was fixed in place like headphones and had cylindrical tanks attached at even intervals.

The large rings on the back and bottom of the main body appeared to be the propulsion devices.

But they seemed insufficient to support its 200 thousand ton weight. The rings probably had some kind of engine equipped at even intervals for a multipurpose attitude control device that could act as retrorockets as well.

"She cut her precious daughter loose from its huge umbilical cord," said a dazed voice over the radio. It was Heivia. "Where the hell was that thing in the elevator!? In a higher station? Or in the weight at the top!?"

"How should I know!? And that isn't what matters!!"

Quenser could not imagine what this thing would do.

What kind of main cannon did it have? What kind of propulsion did it use? Were its armor panels and reactor different from the surface Objects? What kind of tactics would it use?

It was right in front of him, but the information refused to enter his head.

Instead...

“Gyaahhh!!”

“Stay low. We need to withdraw. Find something to hide behind!!”

“That’s useless against an Object. What good is playing hide-and-seek with that thing!?”

Only the sounds of lives being shredded shook his eardrums and then his entire body too.

Then he realized this should not have been possible in space.

(I can...hear them? I’m in a vacuum, but I can hear the sounds directly???)

This was not reaching him through his communicator. He could tell the physical voices were reaching him. It was just like a movie or game where firing a laser beam filled outer space with noise.

He heard an odd sound of ejection.

It came from that Object. It had a main cannon on either side, but instead of from the front, some kind of gas was being ejected from small holes covering their sides.

In fact...

“Oxy...gen???”

He thought this had to be some kind of joke.

But that nightmarish waste of resources did not vanish from his view.

7th Core and the Capitalist Corporations as a whole had sent this monster out into the world.

The Federation of Elevator Industries was not your normal organization. That much had been obvious ever since Louisiana Honeysuckle made an appearance, but the nightmare had taken physical form here.

The vacuum of space was such a basic and fundamental concept, yet it had been shattered with a single attack.

“Are you insane!? That Object controls oxygen in the vacuum of space!?”

The sound of burning metal reached him.

It was like hearing a cheap cigar lighter.

But this was concentrated oxygen filling deadly outer space. Some of the soldiers had to be breathing a sigh of relief when they did not die after their spacesuit tore or helmet broke. Was there really enough oxygen there to have some level of atmospheric pressure???

They were surrounded by lifegiving oxygen.

But.

That very oxygen was used as fuel for a fire hot enough to melt steel.

There were screams.

Those death cries normally would not have reached him through the vacuum of space, but he could not get them out of his ears or brain.

“Ah, ahh, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

He was on the outer edge of the oxygen area, so he was flipped over and thrown beyond the reach of the explosive flames. The flames had not hit him directly, but he still would have been roasted by the heat if not for his heat-resistant spacesuit.

He could not perform the calculations necessary to determine if this was possible with just oxygen.

It may have also used some other gas like hydrogen or acetylene. But it was not the technological issues that left him speechless.

He saw countless spheres the same color as flesh floating around.

It took him a second to realize that was the result of human flesh being liquefied, gathering together in zero-g, and then cooling. It had long been said that people became stars in the sky when they died, but that had finally been made a reality with technology. But this was not something anyone had wanted to be real. In contrast to the original saying, the reality had no hint of dignity or respect

to be found. They were just round blobs. People were reduced to things. No more and no less.

This was not the only way to use oxygen.

It could be used to burn, to cool, and to oxidate. Since the Object had a near endless supply of the element necessary to maintain life, it could also be using some kind of biological weapon. Like a microbe that eats aluminum or a larva that chews through plastic.

“Louisiana.”

The Capitalist Corporations had completed their space elevator.

They had carried materials into space for war.

Was this why they had needed so many supplies in space that they needed to build Mother Lady?

“Louisiana Honeysuckle!!!!!!”

Part 6

“A Second Generation built for use in space?” groaned Frolaytia Capistrano in the civilian space base in the distant Amazon District of South America.

Their Object was in Africa. Their First Generation could intercept ballistic missiles, but the Baby Magnum could not hit the Capitalist Corporations Second Generation from the ground.

(All seven 7th Core companies paid obscene amounts of money to build that thing up in space, but what do they hope to use it against? The killer satellites are sufficient if they only want to take down enemy satellites and control the wireless data network. Are they hoping to attack the lunar villas, or do they think they need to fight space aliens???)

The busty silver-haired commander reminded herself of the forces available to her while she stared at her laptop. She had sent a request for emergency support from their home country, but (as expected) that was not looking promising. Every minute and every second counted, but after spending 10 minutes trying to get through, she had only received a single sentence in response: “The Federation of Elevator Industries’ new Object has been given the enemy codename of World’s End.”

(World’s End, huh? They do love their dark humor, giving that name to an oxygen-controlling Object. If we define the “end” of the world as the farthest territory filled with breathable air, then that thing’s location is indeed the world’s end.)

Of course, humanity was observing more than just the planet they had been born and raised on.

They were observing outer space in several ways, including radar and radio telescopes. If a 50m mass had been floating out there, it would have led to a number of UFO sightings.

So...

(There was apparently another station located higher up the space elevator than the main one in geostationary orbit. The Object was probably constructed in there.)

"What should we do?"

"Sit tight, Princess. You need to wait. We can't launch the Baby Magnum into space even with that elevator."

"That isn't what I meant. Is there anything we can do from the ground base?"

"Hm," thought Frolaytia while holding the long, skinny kiseru in her mouth.

Mother Lady was controlled by the Capitalist Corporations out in space, not the Legitimacy Kingdom on the surface, but did that meant there was nothing at all they could do?

"Okay, I have an idea you can try out, Princess. The elevator's wires are carbon nanotubes, so they're made from carbon. We can use that to-"

Just as the capable woman was sending out a command to help regain control of the situation, her laptop screen unnaturally froze up.

"Hm!?"

Her lit kiseru nearly fell from her mouth, so she had to quickly grab it in both hands. But nothing else changed. It was hard to tell with the Princess's constantly blank expression, but the communication window had completely frozen.

The connection icon on the edge of the screen had zero bars, so no signal.

Military lines had multiple communication methods set up in parallel and it was set to automatically switch over if one of them went down, yet she had nothing at all now.

With modern information technology, it was perfectly possible to command a team in Africa and a team in space from the Amazon District, but there was nothing she could do if communication trouble cut off all of her data.

But would the officers whose hearts were more sensitive than a rabbit's take those circumstances into account? Those people who never left their home country desks tended to ignore the risks they were demanding and then shoved all responsibility onto the local commander once something went wrong. And after setting up that kind of insurance, they would never allow any damage to their own reputations. So even if they understood the circumstances, they would pretend not to.

Frolaytia knew she was in serious trouble.

She messed with the settings, held her head in her hands, and then placed the laptop on the floor, touched the edge of it with one hand, and stretched her other arm and her legs horizontally with her hips still bent within her tight skirt.

Was this a rhythmic gymnastics stretch, or was it a dancing sunflower toy of an older age?

At any rate, she wiggled her body in that mystery pose.

Since she was alone, she did not bother worrying about her short tight skirt.

"Nh, nhhhhhhhh? Please! Come back, signal! Save my career!! Please! I don't want to be demoted and sent to some godforsaken part of the world for something as dumb as thiiiis!!"

Was it less pathetic to pray to god or to try becoming a human antenna? Since there was no one else around, spoiled Frolaytia tearfully went for the ultimate answer of both. However...

"Excuse me, Major Capistrano."

"Bwahhhh!!!??? Cough, cough, ahem!? ...Do you need something?"

After clearing her throat in a "speak a word about this and you're dead meat" sort of way, she turned around in a composed fashion.

The intellectual girl (age 12) who had skipped so many grades she had ended up in the electronic simulation division was still tilting her head in confusion.

"We have detected high-power wide-range jamming from ultra-high altitude. The Federation of Elevator Industries is likely responsible. The jamming signal is being blindly sent down from space, so it is unlikely they have located us here. But just in case they do begin an orbital bombardment, you should hurry to the tank base's heavily-armored operation command vehicle."

"Curse the Capitalist Corporations. This was a cheap shot!!"

It made sense. Why else would she not have received a single bar of signal after selling off her pride and stretching her arms and legs out like that? All that embarrassment for nothing!

“It defeats the purpose of a laptop, but you can attach a wire to recover communications. Using the undersea fiber optic cable network, you can contact the team in Africa. And the Baby Magnum’s powerful communication equipment can break through the jamming to communicate with those in space. In other words, no good luck rituals are necessary in this case.”

“Then get communications back up pronto. And I wasn’t doing anything!!”

Unable to restrain the heat rising from within her body, Frolaytia shouted (in a display of childishness greater than the 12-year-old).

The Legitimacy Kingdom response to being shamed was to retaliate 100-fold, so the major renewed her resolve toward this harsh and dangerous war: Don’t think you’re getting off with just having to dance in the nude.

“Hee hee. I sometimes rely on good luck rituals too. Like when I’m baking something in the oven while off duty and the tablet displaying the recipe site freezes.”

“Please stop. I don’t want to hit a 12-year-old, so use that genius brain of yours to figure out when to hold your tongue!!”

Part 7

Death was approaching.

It could hardly have been closer in this zero-g space that barely felt real.

Quenser could not even think about the space elevator or the plan to unify the earth’s atmosphere. Not when his survival one second from now was far from guaranteed.

“What the hell are we supposed to do?”

A radio transmission suddenly reached his spacesuit’s helmet.

It was from his awful friend Heivia.

“The World’s End? I don’t want its name! I want to know what to do about it! Was that one staticky transmission all we get!? No one told me they had an Object! We don’t have any equipment capable of taking that thing down, you idiots!!”

(Then stop sending out this meaningless transmission, you true idiot!! Do you want it to detect your location!?)

Quenser did not dare send out a warning.

This Generation Two space Object was bizarre even for the Capitalist Corporations.

It was fundamentally different from the traditional Objects that traveled along land or sea. It lacked a system for keeping its 200 thousand ton weight afloat, so no air cushion engine and no static electricity propulsion device. It had ring-like parts on the back and bottom of its spherical main body, but they looked too delicate. The exact system was unknown, but those had some sort of propulsion device attached at even intervals which were likely used for attitude control and as both rockets and retrorockets.

The central main body had an additional component attached like headphones or like a hagoromo from Island Nation mythology and that component had cylindrical tanks attached at even intervals. Its primary weapons were the pressurized oxygen nozzles extending from either side. It controlled massive amounts of oxygen in the vacuum of space to burn away all enemies in the ultimate act of waste and luxury.

The propulsion devices attached on the ring-like units behind and below it could apparently all be moved separately.

Whether they used oxygen, ions, photons, or jets, those were likely used for attitude control, acceleration, deceleration, and turning. Its main cannons could melt armor, but they may have been able to emit different amounts of oxygen from both sides to rotate the enemy.

(The Capitalist Corporations includes the Island Nation that's gone mostly isolationist, doesn't it?)

Quenser gulped.

(Is it supposed to look like their Fujin and Raijin? Dammit, this is why it isn't healthy to have enough money and talent to actually build every little idea that occurs to you!!)

And he did not have time to just sit there observing it.

He could not escape the Object's attacks by spinning defenselessly around in empty space. Before even thinking about winning this, he had to find a shield capable of protecting him or he would die.

He heard what sounded like a soda being opened but much louder.

That was the oxygen.

If that sound could reach him, then there was enough oxygen for the sound to propagate through.

“The space station.”

He grabbed the grip connected to his extravehicular activity unit by a cable.

He knew it was risky, but he still gave a shout.

“Listen, you don’t have to respond. Doing so would only tell it where you are. That damn thing won’t want to destroy its own home base!! So use your nitrogen or whatever else to get over there. Hurry!!”

The student was traveling toward the giant donut-shaped space station’s wall even as he sent the message. Specifically, toward the back side of a giant parabolic communication antenna sticking out from the gently curving wall.

His reasoning had to be correct.

One look at the sun was enough to tell, but heat traveled differently in space. Instead of heating the air or water, the sunlight was emitted as rays of heat and anything they shined on would receive that energy. In other words, it happened directly. Structures built for space would be made to reflect the radiation that caused machine malfunctions and health problems, so the station would reflect infrared.

However.

The invisible oxygen that normally represented life could move behind anything in the way.

When the oxygen was ignited, some of the spacesuited soldiers were roasted despite using one of the container-shaped experiment modules as cover. The flames moved like a chameleon’s tongue to accurately capture its prey.

That was less than 20m from Quenser. On the astronomical scale of outer space, that distance was razor thin.

“Gyahhhh!?”

The scream that reached the student’s ears belonged to Cottage who had survived so many seemingly hopeless situations before. Not even the miracle boy was a match for that Object. He was killed before he could even fantasize about a medical girl. Quenser actually had trouble telling whether that had been a human scream or simple noise from the heat destroying the communication equipment.

Only a few round blobs remained afterwards.

It was those balls with the same color as flesh.

The exact same tragedy had repeated itself. This was a stabilized form of hell.

People were robbed of their dignity and reduced to mere things. It felt like getting a glimpse of a factory production line that automatically processed human bodies into leather bags.

“We can’t last like this.”

Peeping Tom Heivia defeated the entire purpose of hiding by complaining over his radio. Maybe he feared the stress would destroy his heart if he did not.

“For one, we can barely move! These extravehicular activity units are only meant to stabilize us - they aren’t rocket boosters. If we try to use them like that, we’ll run out of nitrogen in no time. Then we’ll be stuck spinning endlessly through space. Even after we die!!”

The Object would send out just enough oxygen for the flames to reach the soldiers hiding behind cover but not enough that it would destroy the heat and radiation-resistant space station’s hull. It only had to repeat that process to eliminate all of the aphids crawling on its precious flower. As huge as it was, it was surprisingly good at delicately adjusting its power. That meant Quenser and the others could not use the elevator, the space station, or any other Mother Lady facilities as hostages.

(What do we do?)

Quenser could not calm his breathing or even wipe the sweat from his face. It occurred to him that he might be able to breathe right now if he removed that troublesome helmet, but if that were true, it would mean having his flesh and even bone roasted away by a brutal flamethrower a moment later.

(How can we possibly survive this!? That thing’s an Object, so not even a nuke could destroy it. We couldn’t even scratch it if we fired our peashooters at it while carefully keeping our balance out in space!!)

Flames exploded not far away from him. They was more distance this time, so the oxygen must have run out while it was spreading in a marble pattern. He could not hear the explosion, so it had the same empty feeling of watching an old silent film. But the lives being burned away were 37th soldiers in the same uniform as him.

“Can’t we contact the Princess who must be itching to join the fight down there!?” said Heivia. “She has to be directly below us since she was protecting the elevator’s ground base!”

"You heard all that noise in her long-range transmission, didn't you? Not even an RC toy would work out here! Besides, do you really think her attacks could reach up here even if we did contact her? We're 36 thousand kilometers up, so nearly the entire circumference of the earth! And that distance is straight up for her!!"

"What about her anti-air laser beams?"

"Even the old-fashioned ballistic missiles only flew at around 3000km up, so this is another world altogether!!"

In fact, they had to pray that the Capitalist Corporations Second Generation World's End did not have any ground-attack weapons. If it could launch an Object-level bombing from satellite orbit, the Princess would be unilaterally destroyed. From the BCE wars when boiling water or quicklime were dropped from atop cliffs to modern wars where the terrain could be permanently changed with the tap of a touchscreen, holding the high ground had always provided a significant advantage.

But now was not the time to be worried about her.

It was Quenser's group that was being directly targeted right now. Only Object-level firepower could blow away an Object. They knew they were asking for the impossible, but if they could not procure some firepower on that level for themselves, they would be destroyed by that 200 thousand ton weapon.

"What do we do!?"

Part 8

The Princess yawned like a sunbathing cat in the middle of the vast empty desert of Africa's Turkana District. She was in the cockpit of the First Generation Baby Magnum.

She had gotten bored of watching desert reference footage while eating popsicles from the freezer behind her seat. Her stomach was feeling kind of full.

(I'd really like something a little more interesting. Like a shaved ice machine. Or a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top of a large frappe with iced milk tea on top of that.)

The old maintenance lady spoke to her over the radio.

"Stay focused, Princess."

"I am."

"I can see in the data when you snap back to focus like that. Your vitals don't lie."

The ground base at the bottom of the Mother Lady space elevator was stationary. The Capitalist Corporations' Federation of Elevator Industries had provided generous amounts of money and supplies to win over the local guerillas and us them to defend the elevator. Now that the Legitimacy Kingdom had taken the ground base, there had been concerns that they would be worn down by never-ending attempts to retake the base, but that had not happened.

The only attacks came from the occasional mortar shells.

That was nothing to fear with an Object's anti-air lasers that could accurately shoot down a MIRV long-range ballistic missile attack that scattered countless warheads through the air. When the explosives flew in like a long throw in baseball, she shot them down easier than clay pigeons at a shooting range. Sending in an Object had helped immensely. The Capitalist Corporations had thought they could use the guerillas as disposable pawns, but the locals were not rushing in to attack anymore.

The Princess rapidly moved her eyes behind her goggles.

But she was not accurately tracking explosives tearing through the air.

"Hey, how many different birds are there in the Turkana District?"

"According to a conservation group's records, there are 150 species of wild bird...although this data is from before the rapid desertification. Why? Explosives disguised as birds have existed as far back as ancient China, so did you find a special drone?"

(So I've found half of them. Now, where are the other half?)

The old maintenance lady's worries were unfounded because the Princess was locking onto every bird-sized reading and marking them down. Once she got bored with that, she planned to scale the radar down to the insect level. The guerillas must have had their spirits broken and given up on even the mortar attacks because those were the only things she could find in the air here.

It was strange.

This elevator was sponsored by the entire Capitalist Corporations and had been constructed with joint funding from 7th Core.

Surely there was more than just the guerillas making cautious attacks with borrowed weapons. When was the ultimate Capitalist Corporations Generation 2 going to arrive from beyond the horizon? The Princess yawned again while filling in her hand-drawn bird encyclopedia.

(Do I not even get to fight this time?)

“Yawwwwn... This peace is boring me to death.”

Part 9

Quenser felt like the fear was going to awaken something inside him.

The chattering of his teeth was so loud and irritating. He tried to hold his jaw to stop it, but the round helmet got in the way.

He shouted into his helmet’s mic despite the risk.

“I’m going to detonate it. Hold onto something for support, everyone!!”

There was no sound.

The outer wall of the space station was destroyed. With their shuttle destroyed, Quenser’s group had nowhere else to go. If they overdid it and the station fell apart, they could only wait for their oxygen to run out. But if the station held together, they would have created a bunch of debris out in space.

Their extravehicular activity units for attitude control could not provide long-range movement like boosters, but what if they grabbed onto that scattering debris to “hitch a ride”?

“Dammit, they have a cutting-edge Object while we’re stuck surfing on metal scraps!?” complained Heivia.

“Sometimes a dress made by patching together newspapers found at the park can be sexier than full silk mourning clothes. If you don’t like it, then use that extravehicular activity unit of yours, Heivia. Now get going!!”

“I can’t stop trembling!!”

“So what? It’s the same as a baseball. Check the speed with an IR laser and then grab onto a safe piece of debris!!”

Quenser shouted those instructions while clinging to a thin panel about the size of a tatami mat. That finally allowed him to move. The piece of debris could only move in one direction, so he would have to jump to another piece if he wanted to change directions.

The World’s End space Object did not seem troubled.

He heard a gas being expelled. And since it reached his ears...

"Eek, here it comes!" said Heivia. "It's that oxygen. Did it light the deadly fuse sticking out from its ass!? We'll all be roasted!!"

"Shut up! I know that!!"

Quenser shouted back, stuck a pen-shaped electric fuse into a clay-like Hand Axe plastic explosive, and threw it. He used his radio to detonate it once it was suitably far away.

The resulting explosion resembled a thermobaric bomb and was large enough to engulf an entire city. His personal equipment could never have caused that. It had used the oxygen. But he had detonated it before the oxygen could reach them, so no one was hit by the flames.

Quenser breathed a sigh of relief even though he still could not wipe the sweat from his brow.

He was alive. His theory had preserved his life. He was not a chained-up pet dog that shoved its face in a bowl of food placed in front of it at a set time every day. He thought for himself to survive. That was the human way to live.

"The oxygen doesn't care who you are or why you detonate it. If we can ignite it before their Pilot Elite, we can trigger the explosion when we want."

The oxygen was consumed by the explosion, so they could eliminate its power over them by burning it all away before it spread too far.

The oxygen was so frightening because it was invisible, but they could take advantage of the short lag between releasing it and igniting it.

Was the Object not using its laser beams or other secondary cannons because of the oxygen? Those were never meant to aim for such small targets anyway, so it would not want to ignite the oxygen at an unexpected point.

"The earth is covered in oxygen, but that doesn't mean you can just make the whole atmosphere explode. It has to be concentrated pretty heavily and mixed with hydrogen or acetylene to be weaponized like this. Don't panic just because you can hear sound in space, Heivia. There's nothing to fear if it can't reach that deadly concentration!!"

"But how are we supposed to know if it's reached that point!? That's as ill-defined a standard as saying it's healthy to play with yourself 'in moderation'! How much is too much!?"

What mattered was that the World's End was an Object that used large quantities of oxygen.

It could not create oxygen out of nothing in the vacuum of space. Maybe it used electrolysis on large quantities of water and maybe it had the oxygen compactly stored in liquid or solid form at an extreme low temperature, but if it did have it stored in those tanks, they only had to destroy those.

The obvious target here were those cylinders arranged around it like the drums of the Island Nation's Raijin.

"As cutting-edge or bizarre as that thing is, it's basically a giant flamethrower, right? Let's set fire to the enormous flammable tanks on its back and crash it into a lunar villa."

"And how do you propose we do that!? That's a nuke-resistant Object!!"

Quenser ignored the complaints. There was no path to survival that way. If they wanted to live, they had to push past the panic, keep thinking, and challenge their own fear. If they stopped thinking, they would either stop moving and become a stationary target, or they would charge in toward certain doom based on thoughtless emotion. They had to be brave but still rationally face the reality before them. Only those who never gave up on making progress could grab at the lifeline dangling before their eyes.

(It doesn't move all that nimbly for an Object. Is it afraid of knocking some debris into the station it's supposed to be protecting?)

Whatever the reason, it presented an opportunity.

Quenser moved between a few different pieces of debris larger than an Island Nation tatami mat in order to approach the Object's surface.

If he was going to pull out a plastic explosive, it had to be here.

"Here goes. This is your only chance to see how it's done!!"

He threw the clay.

Just as he placed his fat finger on the detonation switch, he sensed a disturbing pressure. He felt someone's gaze crawling across him.

He was not scorched by an invisible laser beam and he was not turned into space garbage by a tackle from that 200 thousand ton weapon.

He heard a gross sound.

He looked down at his right arm. From the wrist to the elbow, the supposedly polished spacesuit was turning black.

“Oxidation!?”

It really was oxygen. The spacesuit was designed for use in a vacuum, so it never should have taken this sort of damage.

There was a reason the spacesuit with over ten layers was also polished bright. It could not deflect the sun’s heat rays or radiation without that. At this rate, he would lose his life to the fury of nature. Invisible poisons would kill him.

He suppressed the rising fear, clenched his teeth, and pressed the switch.

The sound did not reach him.

His vision spun around, but he was certain the explosion had directly hit the headphone or bridge-like part that connected Raijin’s drums in a half circle.

“This doesn’t have to break the tanks. It only has to send a shock through them to reach the internal pipeline connecting them!!”

“What good is that? A shock? You think pressing a massager against that Object is enough for her hips to give out!?”

“Whether it’s from a solid or a liquid, the World’s End has its oxygen compactly stored in a different form at ultra-low temperature. That means it has to convert it back into a gas to use it.”

He tried to hang on, but it was no use.

The piece of debris slipped from his hands and he could only flail his limbs in search of another piece.

“That means we should be able to do the same thing that causes car engines to stall. Mix some air bubbles in with the liquid and it’ll malfunction. So shaking the pipe isn’t useless. We can’t destroy it and we can’t tear it away, but a small impact should still trigger a malfunction!!”

Heivia, Myonri, and some others must have followed him because he saw some poorly-guided missiles flying toward the Object.

Just then, the World’s End quickly changed direction.

The action sent a stir through its surroundings. Specifically, the killer satellites equipped with four arms below its solar panels responded to its presence and approached.

Maybe the space Object was considered an enemy because it had never meant to be sent out to fight and thus was not registered in their systems, or maybe their sensors had malfunctioned from the heat. Either way, the weapons loaded with explosives crashed into the surface of the 50m Object.

Countless explosions followed.

“Gahhhh!?”

Quenser had already been spinning, but now he was given an additional twist in an unnatural direction. He tried using his extravehicular activity unit, but the brakes would not work. However, he must have been thrown toward the space station. He did not have time to measure their relative speed with a laser, so he just grabbed at something hard with his flailing right hand. It was probably the remains of some cargo materials used when sending the killer satellites out into space from the station. He clung to the large piece of debris that resembled a metal wall.

The Object was surrounded by explosive flames, metal balls, and all sorts of debris, but it was unharmed.

“It didn’t work at all,” lamented Heivia, wherever he was at the moment, but his voice was drowned out by another sound.

It was the sound of highly concentrated oxygen being released into the vacuum. They did not have time to let the failure bother them. The next attack had already begun.

And since Quenser could hear the oxygen, it must have reached him.

He quickly pulled out some Hand Axe.

“It lured in all those killer satellites and let them explode,” continued Heivia. “Just so it could blast the fleas off of itself!! There’s no way we can make it malfunction with an external impact!!”

Quenser was still unsure what to do when the city-sized explosion erupted.

Part 10

Louisiana Honeysuckle heard a quiet electronic beeping.

That girl in short-sleeved gym clothes and a lab coat was riding a bicycle. Really, she had only used the station’s cargo sorting system to bring a container loaded with a training bike to the center of

the elevator. With a 20km diameter, she could never live there comfortably without a system that allowed her to transport entire rooms.

This was the elevator terminal at the center of the safe and comfortable donut-shaped station. The terminal alone was larger than a domed stadium, but it may have been more like a switchyard since it included the cargo management and the elevator car maintenance and cleaning.

They did not have to worry about weight since the station had no gravity, so unlike a switchyard, the materials and pathways were stacked vertically as well.

(Today's quota is 30km. They say every part of the human body has its purpose, but when you look at the cellular level, it's packed full of unnecessary functionality. Just like a computer sold for cheap at an electronics store.)

She whispered to herself while pedaling the bike and sending small beads of sweat out into the zero-g air.

"Shouldn't be long now," said the genius girl who had conquered space before anyone else.

The Legitimacy Kingdom intruders might think the Capitalist Corporations had used the space elevator as camouflage for constructing a space Object, but it was actually the opposite. She had been unable to receive funding to simply build the elevator, so she had needed to rework the plan into a military context.

That was where her much older brother Sladder Honeysuckle had failed.

He had dedicated his life to the mass driver system and, once that had been rejected, he had chosen to leave the Capitalist Corporations as a whole. There was nothing wrong with carrying your own ideals about space, but let them control you and you could never make them a reality. Louisiana had possessed the flexibility to allow her ideals to be clouded by compromise.

As the name suggested, the Federation of Elevator Industries was dedicated to the construction and use of the space elevator. As long as she never lost sight of that, she could stay true to her ideals.

She was indebted to the Turkana District. So much so that she had known it had to be the location of the elevator she had bet her entire life on. Yes, that choice may have caused some suffering for the local people, but she would repay them in time. All the necessary calculations were already complete in her head.

She had intended to empty her mind while pedaling the bike, but the simple task had instead turned her focus inwards.

A former schoolmate of hers had lamented the lack of medicine.

His name was Braskine Mintfrappe.

Why were Africa and Europe so different? What made the deserts of Africa so different from the deserts of North America? The two of them had given much thought to those environmental and geographical issues. His straightforward sincerity had drawn her to him.

But that would soon end.

She would correct the world's problems. She would make it all equal. To those in need, it would come as a blessing. To those blessed with plenty, it would come as a crisis. How would this day be recorded in history? She continued down this path because she believed most would rejoice.

Then again...

(They must have already noticed. Since there's still no sign of Object reinforcements sent in from the Capitalist Corporations home country, the higher ups must not have found as much strategic value - and thus attraction - as they had hoped.)

"Hello."

"Sigh. Oh, it's you, Silk S."

The small LCD screen in the middle of the steering wheel changed to display someone's face.

This was one of her contacts in 7th Core, the seven companies who funded the Federation.

She stopped pedaling but remained on the bike as she pulled up the chest of her gym shirt to wipe off her face.

"Don't you have that incompetent president to look after?" she said.

"The baby just had his milk and went to sleep. I mean, we're talking about the emperor who still hasn't noticed his lack of clothes - not that his company has been issuing tons of bogus stock and not that his company has been 'hollowed out' by selling off all of his buildings and factories behind his back. The 'deals' he thinks he's making are no more real than a board game."

"You're a scary woman."

Louisana's tone remained light and she did not seem to care that pulling up on the shirt brought her shapely navel into view.

But light as her tone was, she did mean it.

This meant that one of the most famous companies in the world had no products or assets left. It simply continued scattering bogus stock to gather money from the world's investors while selling the corporate group's countless facilities and personnel to other companies to illicitly absorb double the profit. That was this secretary's true job.

And yet the brand name kept its world-famous reputation.

It overpowered countless other companies with nothing but lies.

Louisiana caught her breath, squeezed the handlebars tight, and began pedaling with her slender legs.

"The Wendigo Vehicle Group has a market cap of 6 trillion dollars. The company is large enough to influence the value of the dollar, yet its actual total assets amount to a shocking 0 cents? If those furious investors saw your HQ now, they'd probably fall on their asses in shock. I mean, every floor except for the president's office is nothing but empty offices with nothing but landline phones inside."

"If they discovered it, they would abandon the emperor in his new clothes and escape while they still could, but it looks like they won't even have that opportunity."

"Let's not forget that he's the man who rose to being one of the most powerful people in the Capitalist Corporations by gathering nonexistent mining rights, wills, and land deeds and then gathering money from the world's investors with fictional deals made with bogus stock and presentations for nonexistent new projects. He started with a paper company that didn't do anything and continued buying up rival companies until he had reached a position in 7th Core. And you're the woman who pampered him to the point he lost it all without even noticing."

"He makes for a decent shield."

"See, this is why you're a scary woman."

The two women shared a bewitching laugh.

Even if this conversation were being recorded and reached that president, he would immediately conclude it was an insulting forgery. That was how thoroughly he had been "educated".

That skilled secretary was known as the Silk Spider.

No one knew her real name. Not Louisiana, and not anyone in the major company where she worked

as a strategic secretary. The company server listed her as a Serenade Blackrose, but that was a common fake name. She was shrouded in mystery, but no one dared risk the consequences of carelessly trying to discover more about her. If you wanted to avoid being forever known on the seedier side of the internet for your role in a video that shocked the world, the wise choice was to let those mysteries remain mysteries.

Eventually...

"Not long now," said Silk S.

"No," agreed Louisiana while continuing to pedal and sending jewels of sweat out into the zero-g around her. "And all because you turned a blind eye to what I was doing."

"Doing accounting day in and day out is so boring, so every once in a while, I like to cheer myself up with an unprofitable fireworks show."

"I'm glad you gave me that honor."

7th Core was made up of seven companies.

This one had been hijacked by a faceless villainess, but the other six had their own plans. They were all likely involved in some equally complicated situation that had no connection to what their business ostensibly was.

They would normally be terribly particular about the accounting, yet they had still provided the vast sum needed for constructing the elevator. That suggested the executives did have their concerns about the world. Hopefully, that would be enough to solve the problem. But even if the elevator failed to live up to expectations, it could still be reused for military purposes and pay back far more money through lucrative wars.

In a way, it was very simple.

Her brother had been the kind of eccentric genius who refused to compromise on his principles, so this had been more than he could bear. Louisiana, on the other hand, simply saw it as something she could easily control.

That may have been why the siblings never worked together on a single project.

"I have high hopes for you," said Silk S.

"Hopes for what? For me to save the world?"

“For you to prove that the machinations of a single individual can defeat all the boring numbers.”

Louisiana smiled while sipping a sports drink from a bottle through a straw.

And she spoke the forbidden words.

“Haven’t you already proven that? You have earned the title of International Eater by taking over an international company all on your own, after all.”

“Hee hee. Not all successful people enjoy the loneliness at the top. I would love to have some company as I look down on the world from such heights. I am praying that company can be you. Bye.”

That was the end of it.

Silk S had not discussed business in any way. It seemed like a meaningless transmission that only brought risk. That secretary used a real war to satisfy her personal enjoyment and set the world in motion for her own entertainment while making sure her name would never go down in history.

So Louisiana had no real reason for her suspicions here.

She stopped pedaling and thought to herself in the bike seat.

(She made it sound like their CEO is going to break soon. Damn you, Silk S. Are you stirring up trouble to find your next target? But what greater mark is there than 7th Core?)

She shook her head.

She shook away those worthless thoughts.

If she was going to let her mind wander, she could guide it in a more meaningful direction.

(Sladder, you failed.)

She bluntly assessed her own brother.

That other genius had only ever focused on himself, so he had failed to become an Eater. He had failed to escape being one of those who was chewed up and spit out by society.

But scientists could still see beauty in a snow crystal or extremely simple equations. And they could

also detest efficiency and consumption at times.

(That is why I will be the one who conquers space. Even you should be able to accept your failure if I am the one to defeat you.)

She sighed and looked to the heart of the space elevator. A few carbon nanotube wires were lined up in parallel like a 100 thousand kilometer string instrument.

She would take victory for herself and this toy was necessary for that.

(I need to settle this while they're busy playing with the Second Generation Elinabell. I acquired my elevator by compromising my ideals and allowing some flies in the ointment. ...To do that, I had to deceive the people trying to preserve their simple way of life in the Turkana District and take their land from them. They've been forced to endure so much hardship up to this point, so it's time someone finally rewarded them in some way.)

"Now, then."

She began pedaling hard and pushed her body so the simple action and faint exhaustion would direct her thoughts inwards.

She thought back to her memories of the Turkana District and of her old friend.

She would repay them. By correcting the world's mistake.

All alone in the enormous core of the elevator, she smiled with the look of a mischievous child in her eyes and spoke as a different type of genius from her brother.

"Time for the world's largest concert."

Part 11

He was spinning.

Quenser Barbotage's vision was spinning.

The timing of the explosion must have been altered. The World's End used oxygen, but that oxygen would detonate the same no matter who ignited it. So if Quenser threw a plastic explosive to ignite the oxygen before it had spread out as much as the Pilot Elite wanted, he could alter how far the explosion reached.

However.

He heard a few cracking sounds like someone stepping on thin ice. Something white obscured the left half of his vision, like he had run into a spider web. He rubbed at his face out of instinctual disgust, but that changed nothing. He could not wipe this away.

They were cracks.

His helmet's visor had been damaged. When he began to imagine what would happen if it broke and lost its airtight seal, intense static filled the back of his mind.

"Eek!?"

He could feel the extreme terror clutching at his throat.

But it was all over if he screamed. His own panic would lead to further panic, starting an endless chain reaction, so he did everything he could to suppress it and think.

(We need Object-level firepower.)

He clenched his teeth.

These thoughts were not a way to avoid the reality before him. They were to face it.

(Nothing we do ourselves can destroy that thing, so we need to bring an Object here. I need to figure out a way to do that!!)

Killer satellites, an Object, and even garbage and defective items meant to burn up in the atmosphere.

The Federation of Elevator Industries had left this area of space full of trash.

And the blue planet shined below him.

He started to think about adjusting his angle to return safely to that planet, but that would not save him.

He viewed his homeland once more. There was more than just blue there. The red lights seen here and there had to be the battlefields where Objects fought. The scale of those battles was so large that they could be seen from space.

But.

What did it really mean that he could see them from here?

“Wait a second.”

“Hey, Quenser, what are you rummaging around for? Pulling out a bomb isn’t gonna destroy that thing!!”

“It doesn’t have to. I’m interested in the path of the trash floating around here!”

“What?”

“Redirect that trash the way I want and I can change the future!!”

Part 12

“Meowww.”

The Princess was so bored she had finally balled up her hands to become a cat.

And she went the whole nine yards by pulling out black cat ears and a tail from the costumes they had prepared for the upcoming carnival.

She had pursued wild birds on her screen for a while, but she had eventually given up on finding them all. She had realized that some of the birds were nocturnal, so she could never complete her bird encyclopedia during the day.

She had nothing to do.

She was starting to feel lonely.

But a transmission reached her ears while she relaxed in her cockpit.

“Quenser here. Kssshhhhhh!! Princess, kssh, can you hear me!?”

“Quenser? You...you didn’t hear anything!! Don’t listen!!”

“?”

She frantically waved her hands and covered her blushing face, but he seemed to have bigger issues at the moment. She was jealous. Those nimble soldiers had flown up into space where they actually had a battle to fight. Time appeared to be moving much faster for them than for the Princess who was bored to death down here.

“Requesting support! Kssshhh, right away!!”

“But I can’t,” she mumbled with tears in her eyes. “My anti-air lasers can’t reach geostationary orbit at 36 thousand kilometers. Even the best ballistic weapons only reach around 3500 kilometers. You’re just too high up.”

“Ksh, I don’t want your anti-air weapons.”

“Hm? Then what do you want???”

“I don’t care about your main cannons! Kssshhh!! I just want your help right away!!”

“Hmmmm???”

Part 13

The prototype weapon was indeed only a prototype.

When Louisiana Honeysuckle had put on an uncomfortable tight skirt suit to make her presentation to 7th Core executives, she had listed out its merits while tapping her pointer against the whiteboard, but she did not actually need an Object in space. She had only wanted the space elevator and the Object had been her way of earning funding. With no need to make it practical, it had been given bizarre equipment that never would have been approved for an ordinary project. That was how it had been given highly concentrated oxygen as a main cannon.

She could check how much exercise she needed on the small screen on her training bike. She pulled her feet from the sandal-like straps, freeing them from the pedals. Her butt in red sports bloomers rose from the seat.

(It was not a necessary part of my plan.)

But an Object was still an Object.

Without a second one in space, it became the unchallenged champion of any zero-g battles.

(It was only meant as camouflage, but I will still use it if I can. This will not be fun for you, Legitimacy Kingdom.)

She bent her legs to bring her knees up to her chest and spun through the air in something like the fetal position.

But her thoughts were interrupted by some ear-splitting noise.

She heard static as some EM waves messed with the communications equipment.

“?”

It was coming from an unthinkable direction: down. The elevator provided a solid sense of up and down, so that meant the surface of the earth. There were plenty of EM sources down there, including radio towers and airport control tower radars, but this was much more powerful. It finally surpassed the limits of the circuit boards for the cameras equipped on the space station’s exterior and the circuitry itself was destroyed. Even though those were designed to withstand a certain level of radiation and EM waves.

What was this? What was happening?

Had someone on the surface detonated one of the nuclear weapons that were thought to have been eradicated long ago? No, not even a nuke could cause this!!

“It can’t be...”

Louisiana Honeysuckle was dumbfounded.

A genius girl like her was quick to understand what this had to be. Even if she did not want to reach the answer, her mind would provide it for her.

“It can’t be!!”

Part 14

There may have been 36 thousand kilometers in between, but the Princess and the Baby Magnum were waiting at the space elevator’s ground base.

The First Generation’s anti-air lasers could not reach that far, but so what?

They only had to make use of some other form of power.

“Kssshhh!! What the hell? Kssh, what’s going on here!?”

Heivia had managed to join Quenser at some point and he grabbed at the other boy's shoulders. In zero-g, that nearly put them both into a spin.

He quickly used the extravehicular activity unit on his back to steady himself before continuing.

"What did you tell the Princess to do!? Kssh, what is that down there on the surface!?"

"Static electricity."

Quenser's answer was unbelievable.

Heivia seriously doubted rubbing a balloon against your hair down on earth could affect anything out in space.

But the student had more to say.

"Listen, the Princess's Baby Magnum uses a static electricity propulsion device. Even if it also sprays a repellant, that's still enough static to keep a 200 thousand tons afloat. With that much power, we can use it."

"Wait, are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"But she's surrounded by cracked desert as far as the eye can see. The desert is primarily made of quartz, iron sand, and probably small amounts of some other minerals. The quality isn't good enough to ship it out for industrial use, but that doesn't matter to us. When sand is floating in the air, the size and weight of the grains affects the covered area. A space with quartz floating around is a lot like a glass fiber duster."

Did it cover an area of 10km in every direction, or was it 100km?

Either way, static electricity would accumulate there. Even commercial carpet could store more than 10,000 volts, so how many orders of magnitude higher would a space this vast contain?

"And any container will spill its contents once its capacity is surpassed," said Quenser. "Just like lightning, it will scatter something very powerful along with the light and sound."

This was what he had wanted.

"Static. A thick EM wall is released toward the sky!!"

It seemed to cover the surface of the World's End's spherical main body. Sparks scattered from it

like fireworks.

Or maybe it was more like carelessly sticking a metal spoon in the microwave.

“Wait, what happened to the Princess!?” asked Heivia.

“Not even a nuke can destroy an Object. And Generation Ones in particular were designed with EMPs in mind, so this won’t do any real damage to her.”

That was all Quenser said before changing the subject.

“The light can reach us,” he said. “The lights down there are leaving the earth. You can see the flames of war caused by the Objects, right? Light is a form of EM, so if we can see the light, we know EM waves can reach us!”

But Heivia’s response sounded skeptical.

The threat had not been eliminated.

“Wait, is that all?”

There had been sparks.

That might have brought down the average tank or armored truck.

But.

“Sending those deadly EM waves all the way up here is impressive. You even managed to hit your target. But that thing’s an Object, which, like you just said, not even a nuke can destroy! You can probably aim somewhat well using the elevator’s wire as a guide, but you still can’t specifically target the Object from the ground. How can you possibly break through its armor like this!?”

“Not to worry.” Quenser smiled a little. If he could still smile, it meant everything was still going according to plan. “I thought of all that. Did you forget, Heivia, that the elevator controls this region of space? Now, do you remember how it launches its cars straight up? It caused us a lot of trouble down in the Turkana District’s desert, if you recall.”

The change occurred primarily at a single point.

Something floated by right in front of the World’s End. Maybe it had been in a transportation container caught in the fighting and maybe it had been dumped by the elevator, but that was a spare

elevator car slowly rotating through space.

It bumped lightly into the Object's spherical main body. That was no coincidence since Quenser's Hand Axe plastic explosive had pushed it there. Either the nuke-resistant Object had ignored it as harmless, or the EM waves had interfered with its sensors.

However, the bus-sized machine had a certain device installed.

"It converts EM waves into electricity."

Space was filled with a white flash of light brighter than a lightning bolt.

"Gahhh!!"

The explosive light was enough to blind someone, but Quenser could still hear everything clearly. That was probably because he was hearing the others through his helmet's communicator. He opened his mouth while trusting his voice would reach them in the same way.

He felt pain more in the back of his head than in his eyes.

He felt like he was going to vomit in his helmet if he did not distract himself.

"Gh...ordinary lightbulbs have a vacuum inside so the filament won't burn, but there are a few exceptions."

"What is - kssh - your point!?"

"A flashbulb. By filling the glass ball with oxygen and passing electricity through it, the filament is instantly burned through to create a massive amount of light. Doesn't that remind you a lot of things here? We've strangled it with the very high-density oxygen it sprayed everywhere!!"

"Kssshhh, you did this while we were trapped inside that lightbulb!!!???"

The filament was made into a thin thread so it was easier to burn through, but the Object was much the same. It had more than just the spherical main body. It had cannons, propulsion devices, tanks, and many other components sticking out.

Not to mention that Heivia, Myonri, and the others had worked so hard to fire missiles at it.

The nuke-resistant Object may have just shrugged that off and it may have only created scratches not even a few millimeters deep on its surface, but those slight claw marks created pieces thinner

than pencil shavings that stuck out from its surface. Electricity gathered around the ends of those and they burned like a filament.

Once the bright white flash faded away, the Object was flipped over and floating toward empty space.

The damage must have been concentrated on the parts sticking out. The oxygen tanks connected like headphones had been torn through and its two main cannons were bent. The heat in the main body had yet to cool, so its surface was still glowing orange.

None of it had been meaningless.

Quenser had just one thing left to say.

"It's over."

Part 15

Clattering sounds echoed through the space station. With the World's End destroyed, Quenser's group had returned to the station.

This was his second time to leave the vacuum of space and enter the artificial air, but Quenser did not feel dizzy this time. It scared him that he was getting used to it.

He saw a short-sleeved gym shirt, red sports bloomers, black knee socks, and sneakers.

Plus a lab coat over it all.

The central figure of the Capitalist Corporations' Federation of Elevator Industries wore an outfit that seemed wholly unsuited for outer space. As before, Louisiana Honeysuckle was floating in the enormous central area. For some reason, the bored-looking 17-year-old girl was twisting her body. She seemed more interested in whether her underwear was sticking out from the leg of her red sports bloomers than in the fate of the world.

When she noticed them, she began to speak without untwisting herself.

"I see you have chosen to help destroy humanity. I assumed it would be the Faith Organization that thoughtlessly caused this sort of calamity, but it seems the true ruinbringers were the Legitimacy Kingdom. At any rate, humanity's last hope has just been extinguished. Even I failed to predict this one."

"Shut up." Heivia made sure to keep his assault rifle aimed at her. "You couldn't calculate this out

with that clever brain of yours? I don't give a crap about your grand Re Terra project about unifying the environment or whatever the hell. This elevator is no more than a weapon of mass destruction. You don't get to claim ignorance about how many people would die if that thing was used against flesh-and-blood soldiers. Or about what any survivors would want to do to you afterwards!!"

"But I notice you haven't shot me yet."

Louisiana was isolated and alone with a few dozen guns aimed her way, yet she still smiled.

Those few dozen were all that remained.

Quenser did not even want to think about how many others had been with them when they first launched into space.

"This space elevator is the world's tallest structure with a full length of 100 thousand kilometers. You might not like it, but you can't just rig it with explosives and blow it up like with an ordinary building. You need accurate plans and a user's manual even if you only want to get rid of it, don't you? You cannot kill me until you have that."

"You seem awfully sure of yourself, but did you really think we would stick to only the strictly legal methods of getting that information out of you? We have plenty of reasons to hold a grudge."

"Oh, and one other thing."

She ignored Heivia.

She was not bluffing. This confidence appeared to be real.

But why?

"You seem to think you have destroyed the Elinabell with that clever method."

"..."

"Relax, boy." She laughed when Quenser's shoulders jumped. "You have indeed defeated the Elinabell. She remains mostly intact, but she can no longer function and I doubt the Pilot Elite had time to eject. ...But it took you an awfully long time to defeat her. During the explosion, she sprayed her oxygen and gas in a certain direction."

"Wait...wait a second."

“Was that not enough of a hint? Then how about another one? Where on the earth were you planning to drop her?”

Quenser did not even have it in him to shout “wait”.

Genius Girl Louisiana Honeysuckle placed her index finger on her slender chin and revealed the quiz’s horrific answer.

“You’re dropping a 200 thousand ton weight, so no matter where it ends up hitting, I’m pretty sure it will affect the entire planet.”

Between the Lines 2

The Mother Lady space elevator’s space station had 2008 external experiment modules attached on the outside.

Quenser himself had checked in a few of them.

For example, there had been a plant factory that could be harvested dozens of times a year. There had also been an animal protein factory that quickly produced bugs that ate those crops.

There was a real benefit in those things, which may have been why he had accepted it and moved on.

Louisiana Honeysuckle was undoubtedly a bad person.

She had deceived the people of the Turkana District so she could take their land and build her space elevator without properly explaining the environmental risks. That had led to the verdant land drying out and the existing ecosystem collapsing. Over 80% of the many local plants and animals had died.

But it could all be found here.

Genetic samples for all of those plants and animals could be thawed out at the press of a button.

150 species of wild bird.

178 species of land animal, 599 species of fish, 10,630 species of bug, and 3811 species of plants.

They were all accounted for.

"Then again..."

Earlier, Louisiana Honeysuckle had smiled and spoken to herself.

The space elevator was equipped with all sorts of observation equipment. She already knew what had happened on the surface and who had died.

Braskine Mintfrappe.

She had met that man in college and they had laughed together about the most pointless things, but he was no more.

She had only ever focused on the equations and assumed she could understand everything about the world if she understood them. But that boring worldview had undergone a radical change when she had visited Africa over her summer vacation.

"I no longer have anyone to celebrate with as our dream is realized."

The land had become a wasteland.

She had repaid them in the cruelest possible way.

But even if no one understood her, she could not back down. She had to make this dream come true.

It was her duty now that she had learned the truth.

This may have been the real difference between her and her much older brother.

She was not attempting to reach outer space for herself.

In fact, she had enjoyed talking about space to people who knew nothing about it. If not for this, she might have dreamed of working at a planetarium.

But she had a much bigger task now.

The threat still remained. And now that her brother had lost the competition and left the Capitalist Corporations, it was up to her to solve the problem.

She had no intention of becoming a hero. She was merely driven by the duty she felt after learning the truth. She could not protect anything as things were and she would lose everything if she

ignored it. That impatient feeling had led her to destroy everything within arm's reach.

But that was fine.

The last laugh did not belong to her. The person with whom she had hoped to share that laugh was no longer with her.

But the Turkana District remained.

So it was the residents of her second home there who deserved the last laugh.

She would correct people's mistaken worldview.

She would save the world while all alone.

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