

Chapter 2: Independent Action Taken as Casually as a Convenience Store Donation >> Domination of the North American Central Demilitarized Line

Part 1

"Welcome to Live News Today. In today's top story, the major search engine Michael & Lucifer is being sued over their satellite image service on the grounds that it violates people's privacy by photographing the heads of balding men and revealing those photographs to the world. The plaintiff demands to have the images of the corresponding region fully deleted as well as \$2 million dollars in damages, but M&L's PR division is declining to comment as the official complaint has yet to reach them."

"We always get these direct mail attacks and last-minute lawsuits toward the end of the year, so the year really feels like it's coming to a close once they start up. ...Hm, so it's only two months until Christmas, is it?"

"Michael & Lucifer's own user policy says anyone can send in a request for the right to be forgotten if an image shows an identifiable person's private parts or the source of a bodily complex, but will that apply in this case?"

"It's going to be difficult. If this goes through, satellite imagery will never work. I mean, 10% of the world's men are balding and that number reaches 30-40% in a superpower that consumes lots of meat and beer. Eliminate all of them from the map and you might have an entire country turn into a giant black box."

"I see. If it's 10% of the world, it isn't that rare, is it? That would explain why you have such an obvious toupee, Mr. Flake."

"Don't take my male hormones lightly. Do I need to fuck you on the live broadcast to prove it, you slutty anchorwoman? ...Ahem. Anyway, Thanks to a past case about some women's underwear hanging out to dry, there is precedent for this sort of suit failing. I am sure their corporate lawyers are..."

A radio broadcast played over a civilian frequency.

Quenser started poking at the top of his head.

"Ehh? That gets to 10% of the guys in the world? Now that's some scary Russian roulette. No one can just ignore this, but how exactly am I supposed to look after my head?"

However, he was berated over the radio for getting distracted.

And of course, he was not about to get that kind of targeted reward from the anchorwoman who had joined the station solely so she could be around famous celebrities and athletes.

"You still haven't gotten those strategic support parallel processing machines back up!? How much longer until those geeks from the electronic simulation division stop getting paid from the people's tax money just for raising their hands!?"

"Oh, shut up. How about saying 'sir', Miss Boobs! I've been stuck in this minus-twenty-degree refrigerated storage for four hours now! And I'm hand-applying solder to thin silicone chips which we should really be using an electron microscope for, so we've kind of lost this war already!!"

"We shut off the refrigeration and kept the door open, didn't we?"

"Say that again after you've been in this energy-saving thermos from hell! Your boobs'll be even more unnaturally stiff than if they were stuffed with silicon!"

Computers were lined up like gravestones in a frigid hell where you could hammer a nail with tofu, but Quenser was not doing battle with the actual simulation machines there. He was trying to fix the hub that increased the number of data lines. To oversimplify, it was a necessary piece for connecting all the machines in parallel. However, there were a lot of places he had to check with so many devices to connect together. He had to determine which insulated wires were broken, locate which devices had their wiring messed up, and then fix it all. ...It all sounded very annoying, but at the most basic level it was the same as a game system's AC adapter. He had to locate which cord or pin had a bad connection and fix it so electricity could get through. That was all.

The problem was the extreme number of them.

Plus, he was stuck in a room as cold as a snowy mountain during a blizzard while doing work on the level of a watchmaker with a loupe and tweezers.

The actual members of the electronic simulation division were not looking after their own machines, but that was because they had zapped themselves too many times and nearly blown off their precious fingers. They had listed off a number of supposed reasons, but it seemed to come down to needing their dominant hand's fingers to get through their lonely nights. The main power source was off, but some of the circuit board capacitors still held a more powerful current than a stun gun, so he had to be careful. It felt a lot like disarming a bomb.

But why he was once more caught in the midpoint between the harsh battlefield and engineering hell?

"Have you already forgotten what happened in the Mekong District? You abandoned your duties, did the dirty work of an enemy nation, and then revealed the location of a secret Legitimacy Kingdom base that had spent five years infiltrating the area, forcing everyone there to withdraw."

"I'm never going to escape this hell, am I? There's only one way to make life worth living now: think of the battlefield and all-night work as twin grim reaper girls in nothing but capes so I can imagine having their boobs pressing in on me from either side... Wait, grim reapers? Oh, yeah. I wonder if little Wraithy, the Stopgap Grim Reaper, managed to follow through on that issue..."

The LED on the boxy device in Quenser's hands changed from red to green. It looked a lot like a small radio, but it was a tester that checked for an electric current.

"Frolaytia, I've got it connected again. At the very least, it can carry a signal now. ...Tell the nerds from the electronic simulation division to take care of the rest!! Wait, #29 and #31 aren't in order. That's a reverse connection! No wonder this job never seemed to end! Why did I have to spend two sleepless nights searching for someone else's screw up!?"

"Hmm? I have no idea what that means, Quenser, but are you as much of a nerd as-..."

"I'm nothing like those depressing people from the electronic simulation division! I'm cheerful, easy to get along with, popular, and stylish! I'm racing down the path toward being a clever IT expert!!"

"(Well, nerds never can seem to get along. Those freaks and geeks always claim they're different from each other and never stop attacking each other.)"

"Did you say something?"

He was alone, but he still glared into empty space while walking toward the exit in a heavy coat. To think of it like roadwork, he had only fixed main street and the side streets still needed work, but at minus twenty degrees, he could not even leave an energy drink in there with him. Even for a military punishment, it was a hellish work environment where he was only allowed out in order to consume caffeine.

Quenser walked through two thick metal doors set up like a submarine airlock and then stepped outside.

Heated air immediately hit him like a solid wall.

"...Ugh," he groaned as the coat flapped around him.

The boy was not standing in a military base rooted to the ground. He was atop a giant vehicle which was as tall as a two-story apartment building. Each one distributed its great weight across dozens of tires taller than he was and those special vehicles were combined to create the mobile maintenance base he was used to seeing.

More than a hundred of those vehicles were on the move with the Baby Magnum in the lead.

But where were they?

The scene before his eyes was not quite a complete desert of fine sand, but it was still a wasteland of dried earth and stone that would suck all the moisture out of anything living.

They were in the southern part of the North American continent.

Just like in a Western, the scenery was full of cactuses and giant afro-like things blowing in the wind.

"38 degrees... This isn't quite the same thing as climbing under a heated blanket with the AC on full blast."

"Do you realize what you're saying? Maybe you finally have broken."

"What about you? Why are you skipping out on your work?"

Quenser gave a suspicious look to Frolaytia because she had given into the heat and stripped of her military uniform. In fact, she wore a cow-print bikini top, denim shorts that showed off every bit of her thighs, and a cowboy hat. She was clearly meant to be a strange sort of cowgirl. "Yes, please" seemed like the only appropriate words.

But Frolaytia feigned ignorance as she answered him.

"This is part of some charity work for the local children. Simply put, we're giving money to the peddlers who gather around. I had wanted a normal swimsuit, but this was all they had."

"No fair!! When we tried to go into town to shop, you kicked our asses!!"

"If military personnel invade their territory, we're violating the agreement. But there's nothing we can do about them coming to us. And after we said our base was off limits, too."

"Didn't you say this was charity? God, you're so full of it!"

"Yes. To be honest, I don't really like that excuse. It makes me feel like my brother."

"That stuff on your skin isn't just sun oil, is it? It smells minty, so does it have a refreshing agent that keeps your body temperature down!? No fair again!"

"Why are you dressed so heavily?"

"Hot, hot, hot, oh it's so damn hot!! I can't stand it!!"

His skin seemed to finally remember the temperature because sweat poured from every pore on his body. Quenser quickly tore off the thick coat and Frolaytia (the major in a cow-print bikini who had sweat dripping down her cleavage) held out two drinks from a cooler.

"Would you prefer a nutrient drink in a small brown bottle or an energy drink in an aluminum can?"

"Please, can't I use their active ingredients to decide? ...But my stomach has been rebelling ever since I drank one of those expensive ones in a small bottle earlier, so could I have the can? Something more like a soda might help distract me."

"The small bottle it is."

"I knew you were going to say that, dammit!!"

She tossed him the something-or-other Empress Juice from the Island Nation and he twisted the metal cap to open it.

"...Now that's what I call a view. This is known as the tinderbox of humanity, isn't it?"

"Are you talking about my chest, Quenser?"

"If you're aware how it looks, then put on your uniform, Miss Popping-Out-Of-Her-Top! I'm still gonna stare, though!! Anyway, the Capitalist Corporations home country is to the west and the Information Alliance home country is to the east, right?"

Just as Europe was the spark area for the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization, North America was the most important point for those two world powers.

Frolaytia needlessly held out her chest atop the vehicle traveling south to north.

"This is the Greater Canyon, the absolute demilitarized line dividing a former military superpower between west and east. This would be the greatest scar left by the collapse of the UN. Enough firepower to destroy the world a hundred times over is staring each other down across this line."

The center of the Capitalist Corporations was Los Angeles.

The center of the Information Alliance was New York.

...Just looking at this made the diagram seem incredibly simple, but one could not let their imagination get the better of them. The only way to know what had happened was to ask a living witness like the old maintenance lady.

"It doesn't look that way from what I can see here."

"That's because biological resources tend to recover much faster when human hands can't

intervene. It's called a line, but it's actually more than 150km across from east to west, and both world powers have a forbidden desert that extends for 200km beyond that. The delicate balance of power prevents either of them from entering the Greater Canyon, so it's actually quite peaceful here. There's a reason it's known as the world's largest blank area."

"And that's why there are cities dotting that line from south to north and why outsiders like us can enjoy a calm tour of the area?"

"The situation is undeniably insane, but apparently the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance are actually thankful. Well, this is sort of like a yearly event we take turns with."

"?"

"Our transportation mission is only for show. An Object from a 'shared enemy' - that would be us this time - passes through and yet nothing happens. That sense of relief is apparently used to relax the tension of the people around the world. Image is everything for the Capitalist Corporations' Hollywood movies and the Information Alliance's subscription video sites, so this kind of thing must be important."

It was a very "safe country" sort of idea, but that was unavoidable when the highest members of the military were royals or corporate presidents. Hurrah for civilian control. If battlefield country ideas began ruling safe cities, then the world truly was done for.

"So this year, our 37th was tasked with hosting the party?"

"(Our turn wouldn't have come around so soon if a certain two idiots didn't keep causing trouble all over the world. Like in the Mekong District, or in the Mekong District, or maybe in that legendary Mekong District where those idiots were head-over-heels for a blonde girl in a black uniform with a connection to the Information Alliance.)"

"Okay, okay!! I'm the root of all evil! You can call me Quen-Satan!!"

"Quensa-tan?"

"Why does it sound so much cuter like that???"

"That said, it is true we have twenty cutting-edge Second Generations watching our every move from both the east and the west. Do not forget to prepare for the unexpected."

"Can we get back to talking about cute things? And they're over the horizon, so I can't even study them! I'll die for nothing!!"

"The ones we most have to worry about are the support Objects."

Quenser wrinkled his brow as he listened to his bikini cowgirl commander and took a sip of the bitter drink that may have been some kind of traditional Chinese medicine or Chinese alchemy.

"Eww, it tastes like tree roots or dark soil. Um, are you talking about the ones that carry high-capacity amps and giant radars to improve the performance of other Objects? I thought they couldn't do much on their own."

"The Capitalist Corporations has the Weather Girl which uses meteorological radar and a simulator to improve targeting accuracy. The Information Alliance has the Shield Bash which stabs a bunch of

shields and wire barriers into the ground to create obstacles in an enemy Object's path. That might not sound like much, but we can expect a long battle if they're working with another Object and their presence increases the odds of a group battle on a scale never seen in a battlefield country. If the snowball keeps rolling, it could develop into an unstoppable catastrophe. To the point that the existing idea of clean wars would no longer apply."

Just then, someone contacted Frolaytia's radio.

"Heivia to everyone. This train will soon arrive in the next silo city: Giant Pizza. Take a look at that large city silhouette visible to the north. Choo choo. We are right on schedule."

"I see. Fun fact: the more needless chatter included in your reports, the more will be docked from your pay."

"Are you serious!?"

"And that right there applies too."

It really was the worst environment.

Seeing someone else reminded Quenser just what kind of nightmare he was living in, so he cut in.

"Heivia, where are you and what are you doing? I'm about to die after a hellish night of work..."

"What about you!? Where the hell have you been slacking off, you rotten indoor bastard! I'm standing on the front line searching for treasure with a detector that looks like a maid's mop! This is a real death march!! You wanna know how amazing the Greater Canyon is? This thing won't stop beeping and there's hexavalent chromium everywhere around here! And we're really short-handed, so get your ass down here!!"

"I'm busy with a bathtub full of hot girls, so I'll have to pass."

"I see you've got the brain chemicals pumping too. I'm not going to ask what happened."

That meant they had both been through hell, but Heivia's unilateral pity irritated Quenser enough to mix some truth in with the lies.

"Even if Frolaytia is here dressed as a bikini cowgirl?"

"Wait, Quenser!" protested Frolaytia. "These transmissions are recorded!"

"Hold on! That one's real!? What exactly are you two-...kssshhh!!!!!!?"

He must have gotten distracted because the radio fell silent after some awful static.

Quenser and Frolaytia exchanged a puzzled glance.

"...Did he step on a mine?"

"We might have lost someone unfortunate."

Part 2

After a while...

"Hi, Tia-chan. Can you speak right now?"

While the base vehicles were in transit, the wind washed over Frolaytia's hair and skin on the flat top of a structure the same height as a two-story apartment building. The young man addressing her from her laptop screen with a gratuitous Island Nation honorific had longish silver hair and wore a black tailcoat fit for a Halloween party. He would have looked perfect playing the piano or violin, but Frolaytia knew his hands were unimaginably rough when he removed his white gloves.

There was a simple reason for this: the sheathed katana supported between his neck and shoulder instead of a brass instrument.

Frolaytia narrowed her eyes in slight exasperation.

"We are in the middle of a military operation. I cannot afford any delays to the timetable."

"Oh? But I thought you were in a blank area instead of a battlefield country. Does that mean that the world is a dangerous place wherever you go? I do hear that you can find suspicious commandos hidden in safe countries too."

"How did you learn what the 37th is doing? Not even a noble should have access to that information."

"Ah hah hah. It's nothing like that. You know how much I dislike dangerous military matters. I don't need to get involved in any of that because I can just ask my friends around the world."

"..."

That silver-haired man seemed to be stating the ideal for humanity, but Frolaytia knew from experience that those ideals never won out when some power was added into the equation.

This man was a Legitimacy Kingdom noble, but he was also extremely obsessed with charity work. He had never once really felt the value of money, so he would spread around stacks of cash like he was tossing a bit of spare change into the donation box next to a convenience store register. He would feed hungry children, develop a vaccine for an epidemic spreading across the battlefield, and give a chance at employment for youths who were once a part of a criminal organization and had nowhere to go. It all sounded nice, but the amount of money he invested was often so large that the power balance of that region would entirely collapse.

It was like sending out a bomber and airdropping containers stuffed full of cash.

It was a unilateral attack from safe countries to battlefield countries.

The worst part was his utter lack of a long-term view. He would decide everything with a single click made after happening across a banner ad.

But the busty and silver-haired commander's troubles did not end there.

"By the way, I am actually in North America for some fun right now. The Greater Canyon sure is amazing. They've turned the old underground missile silos into geofront cities. It's been so long since we last met, so how about we get something to eat together? I've actually been resisting getting one of those famous gigantic burgers for that."

"Wait."

"Hah hah hah. I can hardly wait and I would love to have a long chat with you, Tia-chan, but I won't be listening to a lecture. The Greater Canyon is only a blank area, so there is nothing at all wrong with a civilian group visiting for some sightseeing and trade."

"How many private troops are you parading around with as a Legitimacy Kingdom noble? You might have more people than the 37th, but I haven't heard a word about this!"

"Oh? I wasn't trying to hide it, but perhaps someone down the line thought it would be best to keep things quiet. A butler or maid maybe. ...I teach them to follow the beloved Island Nation's rules by figuring out what they should do before being asked, but I seem to have found a downside to that."

"..."

"Now, now. This isn't that bad, is it? You weren't sent out here to wage war, Tia-chan. You're just crossing the Greater Canyon to show the safe countries how strong the equilibrium between the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance is."

This should not have been acceptable, but whether the country followed monarchy, parliamentarism, capitalism, or socialism, the military was never structured by the book. The unreasonable aspects of a human-made system always snuck in. But even if it was someone three levels higher than Frolaytia who had done something, it was she who would have to wrinkle her brow over it.

"If no one follows the rules, then the system we call war will come along to fill the holes in society. And it's not going to ask nicely."

"Oh? Such profound words for a cowgirl major in a cow-print bikini and a cowboy hat."

Frolaytia tensed and looked back down at how she was dressed.

She was just thankful she had not been smoking her kiseru.

"Ah hah hah! You always look so glum criticizing my charity work, but it would seem you're giving back to the local people too, Tia-chan. Could you not shake the peddler children from your uniform's sleeve? Yes, yes. We must ensure the world is filled with kindness, not shellfire."

"~ ~ ~"

Part 3

"So did Heivia die or what?"

"No, he fell into the canyon while talking on the radio, but I think he's still alive," replied the Princess. "Distracted walking really is dangerous, isn't it?"

It was an entirely casual conversation.

A long river flowed through the large canyon likely created by the river's erosion and there were shelf-like ledges along the sides, creating several levels.

The Baby Magnum and its 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion generally disliked height differences, so they were moving north alongside that dry brick-colored line.

(This is pretty incredible...)

Vehicles the size of two-story apartment buildings were driving along a cracked and bumpy wasteland, but (even if they had slowed down some) it was a very smooth ride. That was necessary when they carried delicate equipment like the largescale computers and ammunition.

(Instead of the tires, it's the hydraulic cylinders and springs attached to the axles that are supporting them, right? The old maintenance lady said it would be simplest to look at a toy RC car for comparison, but these things weigh more than 100 tons, don't they?)

And it was not just the Legitimacy Kingdom military adding an abnormal element to the scenery.

They were on their way to one of the cities dotting the Greater Canyon.

They were a lot like truck bases with a gas station in the center and several supermarkets, motels, and the like gathered around.

However, that was only the tip of the iceberg.

"Silo cities, huh?"

Quenser spoke without thinking on the second-story platform circling the outside of one giant vehicle as it passed by. The Princess must have been bored on this transport mission because she spoke to him over the radio from the Baby Magnum.

"They apparently turned the old missile silos into cities. Weird, aren't they?"

"Well, the temperature difference between day and night is pretty harsh in the desert, so you don't gain much by staying out on the surface. And those missile silos are really roomy. I hear the entrance elevator alone can hold an entire large tractor-trailer."

"They couldn't have gotten the missiles inside otherwise."

Most people thought of missile silos as giant holes in the ground, but there was more to them than that. There were guidance pathways to allow the launch smoke to escape, an armory to store more missiles, three-dimensional pathways that connected the main silo with the service entrance, a command input center, a large computer room, and facilities for security, power, barracks, and supplies. A real silo would place all that underground so its presence was not visible via satellite, so they were already like a sort of geofront city. It was on the same scale as the floating cities known as aircraft carriers.

The facilities were no longer needed in this age of clean wars brought about by the collapse of the UN and the end of the nuclear age, but even after the strategic weapons were removed, the underground space remained. Then civilians began living there and building homes until they had something like a giant ant colony that contained tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people.

"The safest form of nuke-proof city, hm?" commented the Princess.

"I doubt it's just pure durability. I mean, those places have to have deteriorated a lot with time. And no one will be running durability tests anymore. The bedrock that supposedly makes them nuke-proof could collapse and bury them all deep underground. Makes me shudder just thinking about it."

"Powering through it with durability makes them sound a lot like Objects."

"Princess, have you never heard the legend of the Liquid Brain which had its cockpit elevator malfunction, trapping the Elite inside for three months? Toward the end of that survival experience, she apparently saw the beans in her own crap begin to sprout and she had to seriously debate whether or not to eat those sprouts."

"Hard cover books are too much effort. I wish they would go ahead and make it into a movie."

"Not a chance. It'd hurt the image of their holy knight girl."

However, they could not visit the actual silo cities.

They were only passing by at low speed, so the most they could do was buy souvenirs from the peddler boys and girls. And they still could not let their guard down because one of them might be a disguised child soldier carrying a rocket launcher. They could not exactly buy anything edible, but they had relaxed somewhat after making it this far without incident.

But things were a little different this time.

There was a radio transmission from another one of the vehicles just as they were finishing passing by the silo city.

"Command to Baby Magnum."

"Frolaytia?"

"We have an Object approaching from the north. Based on the footage from the drone we sent ahead, it appears to be the Faith Organization's Generation Two Jack in the Box. It has apparently been frequently patrolling back and forth between the silo cities in this area."

"Are they distributing emergency food as usual?"

"Or hiring people for simple military work to spread money throughout the region and gather support. Either way, they're trying to spread their faith like always. You should be detecting it with your Object's cameras and radar soon, so be on your guard."

"Understood."

"I'm sure you understand, but the second you actually fire a shot, it's game over. Don't forget that this is the Greater Canyon located between the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance home countries. Again, they've gone around providing food and employment, so we can't expect the locals to give an impartial witness account."

(Hold on, wait. Are all three other world powers working together to crush us here?)

Quenser gulped as he looked over toward the great cloud of dust that appeared before the 50m Object was visible. It was clearly taller than the base zone vehicle's second-story platform. It looked like a filthy cumulonimbus cloud and it seemed to symbolize fearsome horsepower.

Tricky camouflage was not needed.

If it could not brute force its way through any obstacle, it could not be called an Object.

"So we'll lock onto each other and remain as cautious as possible while passing by without firing a single shot," said the Princess.

"Exactly right," replied Frolaytia.

Quenser felt a change in movement from the two-story apartment building of a vehicle he sat on. All of the vehicles moved over to the right as if clearing the way.

"Talk about dangerous. A stray shot could fly right into the silo city at this range."

"I won't shoot, so that shouldn't be a problem."

"It's that shouldn't that scares me!!"

Meanwhile, the base of the cumulonimbus cloud came into view.

It was the Faith Organization's Second Generation Jack in the Box.

(A jack in the box, huh?)

The 50m spherical main body was supported by static electricity using four floats arranged into a wide-open V-shape and a narrowly closed V-shape. It had a single main cannon on the very front. However, it was not a low-stability plasma cannon, a laser beam, a rapid-fire beam cannon, a coilgun, a railgun, or any of the other usual varieties.

Quenser checked the shape with binoculars and saw its main cannon was structured like a collapsible parabolic antenna or an auto-open umbrella. A single main pillar stuck out forward and eight arms were attached alongside that. And the sides of the main pillar were covered in something like gear teeth.

"The main cannon uses a powerful spring to launch a metal shell. One made of lead," explained Frolaytia.

"A spring, huh?"

"That's where its name comes from. The Faith Organization had a pretty bad accidental explosion with a railgun capacitor three years ago, and this Object was built from that trauma."

"And did the metal industry use that mood of self-restraint to encroach on the electronics industry's turf? One person's misfortune is another person's opportunity, I guess. ...Then again, their factories are all state managed, so they're cut off from all that business stuff."

"Oh, you sound calm. Did hearing it uses a spring make it sound like a child's toy? Keep in mind what it is in earthquake countermeasures that supports super high-rise buildings that weight tens of thousands of tons. Then you should understand just what kind of power that thing contains."

Frolaytia rattled off that comparison so quickly that Quenser had to imagine she had had a difficult time when writing up a report for the safe country councilmembers.

"And we even have some weapons that use springs as their primary source of power."

"Yeah, those landmines that spring straight up and scatter a bunch of metal balls, right?"

"For a more direct example, there is also an anti-tank weapon that uses a thick spring in a portable launch tube to fire a warhead instead of an old-fashioned rocket propelled by explosives. They can hit a tank 500m away."

...Quenser decided to stay silent when he sensitively picked up on the fact that she wanted to make use of the otherwise pointless information she had spent all night learning for an entirely pointless meeting.

He sat there and listened to the much-appreciated radio lecture from Female Teacher Frolaytia who was desperately searching for a way to release the feelings pent up inside her.

"The simple structure makes the equations easier, so they can combine vectors to multiply the output force all they want. This might become more of a threat in the future when we hit an upper limit in the power of railguns and coilguns. Each of the eight arms contains an extremely powerful coil spring made of chromium steel and that power is made to gather in the main pillar and fire the ring-shaped shell. And don't take it lightly because it's so primitive. This is cutting-edge tech that was on the table as a possible non-linear motor mass driver."

"But that was never completed, was it?" pointed out the Princess.

"You can be scary at times like this, Princess," said Quenser. "So what does it have other than the main cannon?"

"The whole thing is a crystallization of elastic alloys," explained Frolaytia. "The suspension uses physical-sensor inverted pendulums and it has a quick-dash tail on the back."

"A tail???"

"Guiderrails are located along the back 180 degrees of the spherical main body and a giant cylinder can freely move along that. Think of it like a giant pile bunker. It fires that in the opposite direction to negate the main cannon's recoil and it also stabs it into the ground to make quick dashes without using its static electricity system. The power it uses to move left and right can't be ignored. Its evasion accuracy is really quite good."

"Four legs, a main cannon that can open and close, and a tail."

"The Faith Organization apparently calls it Fenrir. So it's a giant wolf."

"Their leader is called the Venerable Elder, right? Can they not sleep at night if they don't give everything cool names???"

Meanwhile, the moment of tension was fast approaching.

A transmission arrived from Heivia who was apparently searching for landmines on the front line (and had supposedly fallen into the canyon while not paying attention).

"I've got visual confirmation of the bastard. Their maintenance base seems to be vehicle-based as well, but they use treads. The round bastard is approaching with that convoy surrounding him."

"Treads are probably a huge pain to fix when they break."

"Worst of all, I bet they shake so much your pelvis just about breaks when you're seated inside."

"Everyone, review the ROE," said Frolaytia. "We'll be passing them on the right, so get behind the nearest cover and keep your firearm at the ready. But don't put your finger on the trigger. This is a yearly event, so let's get through it peacefully but with extreme caution."

Quenser had not been issued a firearm, but even he could feel his fingertips itching for a trigger.

"This is strange... The Faith Organization is too close. We moved out of the way, but they aren't moving to their right too. Who do they think they are? They're just cutting straight down the center!"

"Don't take it negatively. It's a terrain issue. I bet they don't want to get too close to the cliff's edge. Listen, what we have to do doesn't change. We pass them by without doing anything. The Faith Organization is also just completing a yearly event here, so they have no reason to start a pointless battle."

The wind whirled around.

The vehicles were the size of two-story apartment or school buildings and some of them passed by only a few meters away. Before even thinking about their assault rifle bullets, they were close enough to jump to the enemy vehicle if they took a running start. It was not often they had time to stare at Faith Organization uniforms from so close up.

They wore skin-tight uniforms despite being in a blazing hot wasteland.

But instead of being highly disciplined, it seemed more like they were mocking the Legitimacy Kingdom troops for their rough appearance while passing by so close.

Shielded autocannons creaked on their rotating turrets with a metallic sound like a park swing set. The weapons slowly turned to match their relative speed and keep their sights on the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers' chests. Those things had enough firepower to destroy a reinforced concrete statue like it was styrofoam. He knew nothing was going to happen, but his throat still grew dry at the sight.

(But is it really safe?)

Some very unpleasant doubts crept into Quenser's mind on the second-story platform.

(The Paper Bikini we ran into in the Mekong District was a Faith Organization Second Generation too, wasn't it? That isn't going to pull the trigger on a conflict despite what the calculations say, will it?)

He turned his gaze toward the Baby magnum up front.

The two Objects were also passing by at only a few dozen meters apart.

And that was when it happened.

The Faith Organization Object suddenly fired its main cannon and the Legitimacy Kingdom Object dodged to the side with all its might.

A metal shell was fired with unbelievable force using the combined power of eight arms concentrated on a single point.

The Princess dodged like swinging her torso away from a boxer's straight right. That extremely swift footwork was unbelievable for a 200,000 ton mass of metal.

But this was no time to be staring in awe.

He did not even have enough time to do anything as admirable as get down on the floor. When the shockwave hit the two-story apartment building of a vehicle, it pitched forward and rose from the

ground, causing Quenser to fall on his butt and roll along the steel surface.

Next, the Jack in the Box sprayed liquefied lead from something like a water pipe near the point of the floats at its feet. The lead collided with the base of the main cannon pillar. Only the base area spun around, rapidly cooled and hardened, and created a ringed shell shaped a lot like a baumkuchen. The next shell had been loaded.

“Bh!? Frolaytia, emergency!!”

“You idiots!!!!!!”

“Who is...that lovely comment directed at!?”

Now that they had been fired on, they could not just stand around. The Baby Magnum began dodging left and right, but it had yet to return fire even once.

“Frolaytia, what are my orders?” asked the Princess.

“~ ~ ~”

“What am I supposed to do, Frolaytia!?”

Quenser thought he could hear her grinding her teeth even from here.

If they did nothing, the enemy would maintain the advantage. The base vehicles might be directly targeted and the nearby silo city might be caught in the middle as well. The city was deep underground and protected by the thick bedrock in order to resist a nuclear explosion, but there were more than 10,000 people on the surface. They could not sacrifice those people.

The busty, silver-haired commander summed it all up for them.

“Ohhh, honestly!! Everyone, here are your orders: make sure every last one of you survives!!!!!!”

The fact that she did not directly tell them to kill the enemy was a sign of her maiden-like bashfulness.

Non-Object gunfire began to ring out all around. Grenades were thrown back and forth across the gap of a few meters. When some Faith Organization guard soldiers tried to jump across like old-fashioned pirates, the Legitimacy Kingdom hit them with their assault rifle stocks and knocked them down between the vehicles. And that was a canyon of death where the ground was constantly being torn up by treads and tires taller than a person.

Quenser heard the creaking of a park swing set from quite nearby.

It was a shielded autocannon.

If that was fired, he would have a fist-sized hole blown in him even if he was hiding behind a bulletproof door.

“Dammit!! Is these violent bunch really going around doing heroic volunteer work!?”

It was time to make up his mind.

He prepared some Hand Axe plastic explosive he carried in his backpack and threw it a few meters

ahead. The gunner was mostly protected by the thick shield and he could not even see their face, but that did not matter with an explosive. He could blast the entire autocannon to pieces at the press of a button.

There was only one problem.

(I didn't have time to put a fuse in it!!)

"Okay...uh, kaboom!!!!!"

He had no choice but to shout it at the top of his lungs. When he did, the gunner jumped so much their head poked above the shield and then they rolled on out. They seemed to think they really were caught in an explosion. When he realized the tearful gunner – whose legs had given out and who was about to pee herself – was a 13-year-old girl with twintails, Quenser – a true man and a dandy with a discerning eye (for the difference between 12-year-olds and 13-year-olds) – gave a silent salute. He was glad he had not blown her up.

Meanwhile, the large vehicles passed each other by and the movable range of the autocannon prevented it from targeting him anymore.

However, it was too soon to breathe a sigh of relief.

100 vehicles on each side were passing by, so another one would be coming along soon enough.

But...

There was an explosion like a volcanic eruption.

The shock was so great that a Faith Organization special vehicle was torn to pieces and even Quenser was knocked from his feet.

"Bfhh!? Whah uh eh...!?"

Quenser's jaw was not working properly as he held his head in his hands and yelled something unintelligible.

(Old-fashioned artillery!? That didn't seem to be an Object...)

He felt like a solid mass of sound had taken up residence deep in his ears, but he could still hear something like a high-pitched whistle slicing through the air. And the noise was getting closer. It was an extra-large shell that had been fired up to the stratosphere in a parabolic arc so gravity would give it frightening acceleration as it fell.

More and more of the Faith Organization's giant vehicles were enveloped by explosions. Each time, the two-story apartment buildings of metal were badly twisted and tossed straight upwards.

They were receiving unexpected artillery support, but Quenser could not just celebrate given the close quarters of the battlefield. Modern artillery shells apparently had wings attached and could be freely guided using GPS, but nothing in the world was perfect. And even if their aim was accurate, the blast propelled razor-sharp shrapnel and a ground-level fireworks show began as the machinegun ammo belts, artillery shells, and missiles caught fire.

"Tia-chaaan."

Then a radio transmission arrived with the kind of encryption that looked like an amateur had given it a good try. So of course their military grade equipment could decrypt it just fine.

"You seem to be having difficulties, so I'll be helping out. I was worried we weren't going to get to use this railway gun anyway."

"You idiot!!"

Frolaytia must have decided something properly encrypted would not reach him because she used something that would be more at home on a café's free wi-fi.

"We don't need your help! And what is a civilian doing here anyway!?"

"Wellll, nobles like us have a policy known as nobles oblige, do we not? That expands the definition of justified self-defense to include the entire city we happened across. The Greater Canyon is a blank zone, so I too am free to engage in combat if I deem the residents of this non-militarized region are in danger."

"That is no more than a custom! It isn't officially defined in military law! And it's even more of a problem outside of Legitimacy Kingdom territory!!"

Incidentally, that crystallization of romance known as a railway gun was a gun so gigantic it could only be moved via train. But here...

(Did they go to the effort of laying rail or is it meaninglessly loaded on a truck? And how many people do you need to run a single railway gun if you include the surrounding guards? Then again, they might have automated a lot of it these days...)

"I'm on my way there, so do your best to survive until then."

"Everyone," announced Frolaytia. "Escape this threat before that idiot arrives!!"

Only that last transmission used proper military encryption.

And they could not just sit around listening forever.

In order to avoid the burning remains of the destroyed ones, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization's monstrous vehicles moved even closer together.

Quenser saw some people in Faith Organization uniforms make a crouching start and begin running to jump over to his vehicle while he was knocked down.

This time it was two busty blondes wearing gasmasks. Since their hair color and heights were about the same, were they a pair of upperclassmen twins?

His life, or his moe spirit?

It was time for that true man to make the ultimate decision.

"Ah, ah, awah!!!???"

The idiot grabbed and raised a maintenance wrench about the size of a wooden sword, but he could not work up much motivation and was weak in the knees. Thus, the useless idiot simply stood on the front line in the spot the enemy planned to land and the gas mask girls ultimately collided with him

and they fell to the second-story platform's floor in a heap.

While being supplied with the softness of boobs all over his face, Quenser heard a voice from their radios.

"Enemy radar lock confirmed! Repeat, the Legitimacy Kingdom was the first to make a radar lock! That means we have no choice but to fight you to stop your irrational unit's rampage!!"

"Mghfgh, is your Pilot Elite making excuses to their allies while they fight!? If you feel that guilty about it, then don't do it!!"

Quenser was answered with a pair of brutal sounds.

His sommelier's judgement determined them to be a D or an E. His vision was blocked by those lovely-smelling boobs, but he was pretty sure he knew what those sounds were: the gas mask girls had decided their assault rifles would be difficult to use in this situation, so they had drawn large knives from the sheaths at their ankles.

While his brain was filled with a bizarre mixture of adrenaline and endorphins, Quenser dizzily shouted at the top of his lungs.

"So are you cute, or not!? Don't think you can get away with being ugly after all this!!!!!"

Still boob-blinded, Quenser swung his giant wrench around in the hopes of at least seeing their faces. He felt a solid sensation as the bottom of the giant wrench hit the filter can that looked like an octopus mouth. The mask did not come off since it was fixed in place with several rubber straps, but it was enough to shake whichever twin was on top.

That was a miracle.

He could not rely on it, so he had to escape.

Just as Quenser tried to crawl away, either Gasmask L or Gasmask R did something odd. They were about two meters apart. That was too far away to swing a knife and hit him, but she stayed down on one knee, held her right arm straight out, and pointed the knife tip at him.

To him, it looked a lot like she was holding the blade like a handgun.

He had a very bad feeling about this.

Now, a question: what was the Jack in the Box known for?

"Oh, no! Is that thing spring-loa..."

He heard a dull sound much like a blade stabbing through the center of a thick and fully-extended rubber band. A silver flash flew out. A thick coil spring had been loaded in the grip. Quenser did not have time to even think about dodging. He just sat there as he felt an impact in his left chest like someone was placing their full weight on him in high heels. Then he collapsed backwards and writhed in pain.

"Bhoh!? Ghah!!"

The 20cm chromium steel tip had been launched into his chest with the power of a spring, but Quenser was writhing with far more energy than one would expect.

The gasmask twins tilted their heads and reached for their firearms once more.

They must have wanted to execute him with the muzzle to his head because the identical sisters slowly approached. The Legitimacy Kingdom scum looked up at them with a blank look in his eyes.

“Ugh...wait...at least let me show off what saved my life! Oh, thank goodness I bought this bargain double-length issue of a pinup magazine behind my commander’s back and had it hidden in my uniform to help me get through all that harsh and lonely work...!!”

Quenser had entered an odd high as the fear, elation, fighting spirit, and lingering sensation of boobs kept rolling around in his head one after another.

And that may have been why he overlooked it.

Even if they were freaks who walked around in gasmasks, girls were generally less than pleased to have a sexy Halloween magazine waved in their faces. (And the seal to prevent instore browsing of adult material acted as the limit breaker.) Plus, this was the Faith Organization military, so all of their soldiers had to be pure holy knights and pure warrior maidens.

The situation was hopeless, but as he lay on his back, Quenser saw something behind the approaching gasmask girls of unknown attractiveness.

Someone slowly stepped out from behind cover on this second-story platform. It was Myonri, a short girl from the Legitimacy Kingdom. And the weapon she held at her hip was a submachinegun that fired handgun bullets.

Quenser instantly understood the situation.

That girl did not understand moe.

“Wait, no!! Cute girls are one of the world’s most important resources!!”

With a merciless spray of gunfire, the twins were mowed down without their killer knowing why it was so important that they came as a set. The shock knocked a certain someone back down and his vision was blocked once more. This time, it was dead boobs that covered Quenser’s face. The idiot could not stop the tears, but then he realized that he could still feel a pulse in those boobs.

Myonri explained after shoving the gasmask girls aside with her boot.

“Bulletproof jackets. Those black-hearted people are bound to be wearing carbon or spider silk ones.”

“Oh, thank god. Thank all of their gods, Myonri...”

“Hm? You were actually scared to tears and snot???”

It was not the fear, but he had his reasons.

“Anyway, let’s tie them up and use them as human shields.”

“Hold on, I don’t like the sound of that! Myonri, I’m afraid of what would happen if I left them with you, so I’ll tie up those girls!!”

In the distance, the Jack in the Box had apparently been firing lead shells on the Princess the entire

time, but their “skirmish” seemed to be over. The most frightening part was the skill displayed by the Princess in dodging every shot without returning fire even once.

The two sets of 100 vehicles had finished passing by at the giants’ feet.

But that did not mean it was over.

After they had used zip ties to bind the gasmask twins’ hands behind their backs, Frolaytia contacted them over the radio.

“Everyone, we will now construct our maintenance base zone. Prepare for the next clash. Split between a base construction team and a combat preparation team. We will hold a pre-mission briefing for those headed to the front line, so they need to gather separately.”

“Frolaytia, do you think they’re going to make a U-turn to attack again?”

“If that was only a provocation or spontaneous battle, I would say it was over, but if they had a planned reason for breaking our implicit understanding, then they will be back. While we only travel down this way once a year, the Faith Organization frequently moves back and forth providing food and employment as a way to spread their faith. Since we can’t tell what the enemy is going to do, we have to prepare for the worst. ...If they plan to fight in this area, it’s sure to come down to speed. We have to settle this while the heads of the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance in their safe countries are still too afraid of all-out war to do anything.” She paused for a beat. “Also, if the Faith Organization does make a U-turn and attacks again, that silo city will be caught in the middle of it all. There is only one way to keep tens of thousands of lives from being trampled in that dance of giants: evacuate them ahead of time. Whatever the case, we have no time. If you understand that, then quit wasting time with pointless questions and get to work!!”

Part 4

The 100 giant vehicles were being connected together into a maintenance base zone at an accelerated rate, but they did not have time to wait for the main conference room to be completed.

Thus, Frolaytia (who had changed back into her usual uniform) had gathered the fieldwork soldiers out on the scorching wasteland.

“Due to an unexpected accident, the electronic simulation division is not at its best, so we cannot put together as tight an operation as usual. Prepare yourself for this mission to be more dangerous than normal. Do not miss a word I say here.”

Next to Quenser, Heivia was already raising his hand.

“Just to check up front, we can start things next time, right? We can be the ones to fire first?”

“The uniformed officers in Paris aren’t going to like it, but protecting the civilians of the silo city will just barely make us look better. This is technically a blank zone and the people living here have no connection to the Capitalist Corporations or Information Alliance. If there is a pressing need to protect innocent people from the flames of war, we are to reach out a helping hand. ...The clean war framework comes in handy here.”

It was a lot like an outside classroom. Frolaytia stood in front of a whiteboard that had been dragged out of storage and a few paper printouts were attached to it. They were primarily photographs taken by a drone or the Baby Magnum.

"The enemy is the Faith Organization's Second Generation Jack in the Box. The Object is full of elastic alloy tech. In other words, it uses springs. The primary two problems are the metal shell main cannon and the tail it fires into the ground for a quick dash."

"So what's your feel of the situation, Princess? I mean, it looked like you were dodging its main cannon pretty handily."

When Quenser asked, everyone's eyes gathered on the Princess who was cooling down with a small handheld fan hooked up to a smartphone quick charger using a USB cable. For some reason, she was not wearing her usual blue special suit and instead wore a baggy T-shirt that left her legs entirely bare. Plus, she was outside. Since cooling sheets were visible along with glimpses of her bright armpits and thighs, the glasses doctor woman may have ordered her to perform an emergency cooldown. However...

"I think I only managed that because of the close range. For them, it may have been like swinging around a flyswatter while peering through a telescope."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Wh-what?"

After finally noticing everyone's focus on her, the Princess shrank down a bit, but that did not change anything. She fidgeted under the pressure of everyone's gazes and she finally found a sanctuary.

"Nyah...Quenser..."

"That's it. Once this is over, let's drag that kitten-tamer out back."

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"That's it. Once this is over, let's drag that kitten-tamer out back."

While all the male soldiers agreed on a plan, the Princess blushed a little while firmly but softly using Quenser's back as a shield.

The guys would slam shut the door to their heart if someone said anything to them here, so Frolaytia asked a careful question.

"So it wouldn't be that easy if they could keep the proper distance while they fought?"

"Hey, Princess. Which felt like more of a threat, the main cannon or the tail?"

The fidgeting Princess clung to him all the more and Quenser thanked his past self for taking off his backpack. That left nothing to impede the soft sensations he could feel here and there.

He had arrived in a wonderful bubble where a warm breath reached his ear if the Princess so much as opened her mouth. This paradise was sure to burst at some point, but that moment was not now!

"They were both a threat, but if I had to say, the main cannon, I guess. I think that quick dash is too

fast, so the Jack in the Box can't fully control it."

"Can you tell me more?"

"Okay, Quenser. But keep in mind this is all just based on my impression... I don't think it can accurately lock on and fire its main cannon while performing a quick dash. It can only switch between two modes: attack and evade."

The Princess clung tightly to Quenser's back and viewed the potatoes over the boy's shoulder.

"I can predict which way it will dash based on the direction the tail is pointing. It would be a problem if it could dash back and forth in a lightning bolt zigzag, but since it can't attack while doing that, I would actually just have more time to aim. Looking at it that way, only the main cannon really has any chance of doing real damage."

"Let's go with that plan." Frolaytia snapped her fingers. "We will assume the Jack in the Box's greatest threat is the spring-loaded main cannon that uses its simple structure to combine the vectors of the eight arms. On the assumption that the Princess can keep up with its speed head-on, the rest of you morons will focus on a support operation to destroy its main cannon."

"How!? Are we supposed to mess with the main cannon attached to a Second Generation that has a standard speed of 500kph and a max speed of more than 700kph!? That's like jumping onto a linear motor train moving at full speed! The instant we touch it, we'll be blown away! It's suicide!!"

"Listen through to the end, Chief Moron."

Frolaytia breathed out the sweet smoke inhaled from her kiseru.

"There's no need to actually touch the main cannon itself. As Quenser explained earlier, the Jack in the Box uses its tail for more than just extreme high speed dashes. It also swings the tail in the opposite direction of the main cannon and drives the thick stake into empty air to negate the recoil. ...That means it can't support that metal shell cannon all on its own. Wouldn't the 200,000 ton Object flip right over without the tail?"

Quenser and the others had nothing against the Jack in the Box, but defeating it would solve everything. In that case, it was enough to render it unusable without actually destroying it. Whether to kill or spare the helpless fool was a decision for the Princess whose warm pulse reached the back she clung to.

"Do we have an image? I want to know the exact process the tail uses to fire."

"What materials do we have to work with?"

"About that baumkuchen shell made from liquid lead..."

"This is so tight in the chest and butt... Why does this uniform feel like it needs to show off my body?"

They must have wanted to avoid thinking about the approaching threat of death because the idiots got to work like someone pulling out a manga volume in the middle of cleaning their room. There was also a gal talking about something else entirely, but letting that distract you meant you had lost. Fail to prepare properly and only death awaited you. It was seriously a life-or-death issue!!

The worker ants' thoughts went into overdrive as they grew weirdly overclocked in their fight against impure thoughts. It was looking like you could not expect much even if those potatoes drew out all their wisdom, but...

(Eight arms, springs, liquid lead baumkuchen shells, combined vectors, recoil control, force negation, a main column covered with gear teeth, and the main cannon and tail have to remain in constant balance. In that case, it's all about moving its weight and both combining and negating vectors, so we don't even need to touch the tail itself, do we?)

"Quenser, did you have an idea?"

"Eh? No, not really!?"

"You have no right to withhold information. You are obligated to report even the smallest thing."

"Y-you're overestimating me. I really don't have any ideas. None at all. Or none that aren't terrible, terrible ideas..."

Frolaytia silently raised her lit kiseru.

"Explain. Now."

"Eek!! O-oh, come on! Why did I have to think up something like this!? I'm so stupid!!"

Quenser clicked his tongue in utter displeasure before raising his hands and coming clean. He was pretty sure he felt his shoulder blades touch some kind of soft mounds when they moved, but that was a secret.

"Ad...adhesive."

"Meaning? I bear full responsibility as the commander, so judging a plan good or bad is not your duty. You know about the Faith Organization's actions and the hexavalent chromium, don't you? This is an urgent issue either way, so out with it."

"Umm, dammit...do I really have to say it?"

Quenser hesitated on and on while shaking his head.

He then gave a hypothetical as if shaking free of something.

"This entire area is a parched wasteland, so clouds of sand form pretty easily. The Object created something like a cumulonimbus cloud when it approached, for example. We could use a vaporizer to mix in microscopic adhesive and let that float through the air. The Jack in the Box's tail is about 25 meters long and it grows to twice that when the spike inside is fired. And it used its extra-large springs and weights to kick at the air. Which means..."

"You want to change the viscosity of the air itself?"

"Air is a fluid too, so its response will change depending on the viscosity. The Jack in the Box's kick will be more powerful than expected and it will be knocked upwards and lose control. Add that unexpected turn of events to the great recoil of firing the main cannon and it should flip right over."

Someone in the crowd whistled and the Princess clung even tighter to Quenser's uniformed back, but Frolaytia's expression remained grim.

Yes, a theory alone was meaningless.

This was not over until the Faith Organization's Second Generation had actually toppled over.

"Any ideas on a specific adhesive to use?"

"A polymer of dihydric phenol and epichlorohydrin, commonly known as epoxy resin. We should be able to use the filler for gaps in the base zone's walls, so we'll have plenty of it."

"And the vaporizer?"

"Unlike wood or instant glue, this stuff hardens in reaction to heat, so you don't have to worry too much about maintaining a vacuum inside the container. And it shouldn't get clogged up during such a short mission. Let's take apart a few air-conditioning units and use their large fans."

"Hm," thought the busty and silver-haired commander with her narrow kiseru in her mouth.

And then she spoke.

"So what's the problem?"

"Umm, there's a problem on the health front. This will be spread across the area as a fine mist and carelessly breathing it in could harm your trachea and lungs."

"And?"

When she asked further, Quenser repeatedly poked his index fingers together and confessed.

"Since it reacts to heat and we need all the adhesive to react, we'll have to fry all the air in the combat area. Wh-which means the conflagration might just reach the surface part of the silo city if the wind direction doesn't cooperate..."

Part 5

"Hey, it's the sheriff!"

"It's the sheriff who's gotten all fat without any work to do!"

After buying the usual donut and coffee set at the usual place, he heard the children teasing him. His stomach had gotten quite fat and his fingers had swollen too much to wear his old ring. That was why he instead wore it on a thin chain as a necklace. When he glared their way, the children vanished into the alley, but he did not have time to worry about them.

Thomas Goldenclipper did not dislike the atmosphere of this city.

This silo city was called Giant Pizza.

Focusing just at the surface, it looked like a truck base made up of a large gas station surrounded by supermarkets and lodging facilities. But that did not lead to stable income because they had to rely on the caravans traveling north or south across North America. There was a huge difference between the good times and the bad times and it was the Faith Organization's food and temporary employment that saved them during those desperate bad times. In addition to paying them, the Faith Organization would select people as a technician or factory chief if they picked up the proper skills, so everyone was focused on them. The position of authority must have come with a heavy burden

because anyone who stuck with it too much tended to get sick, but the Faith Organization had apparently built a hospital to care for those who worked themselves too hard and grew ill. It was a disaster for the people affected, but as long as they survived, they could laugh it off as a long vacation eventually.

This place was built on the Faith Organization's good will.

The deeper underground you were, the greater your status in this city.

On the surface, you could not protect yourself from the intense sunlight or sand clouds, yet you still had to give your all to your work and smile pleasantly for the drivers who arrived from elsewhere. And yet Thomas felt more at home on the surface than with those of high enough status to ignore the seasons and even whether it was day or night. He preferred the terrain up here and he also preferred the type of people up here. This city was made of people who had gathered at an old missile silo when they had nowhere left to go, so what meaning was there in building their own hierarchy and looking down on others? The muscular macho men who had been chosen as temporary Faith Organization factory workers were eating burgers larger than their heads at a diner, a waitress was smiling as she watched them, housewives and a souvenir stand owner were setting aside business and enjoying a conversation, and children were running around and playing wherever they could find a small space and a ball.

He saw something here far more worth protecting than those high-status people who had slimy skin like some kind of nocturnal reptile.

That was why Thomas Goldenclipper kept to the surface as a sheriff and went around watching everyone live their lives. And he much preferred not having anything to do.

But reality was cruel.

If he had been a little denser, he might have entirely overlooked the oddity.

"...?"

He grew curious about an asphalt-paved area larger than a soccer field.

It was a drive-in theater. It must have been too old-fashioned even when the city's primary customers were truck drivers because it did not get much business and the screen, which looked like a giant blank billboard, had grown stained from all the sand and direct sunlight.

People had actually gathered at that forgotten entertainment facility.

In fact, the drive-in theater was outdoor and could not project a movie until night fell. There was no good reason to gather a bunch of rough four-wheel-drive vehicles there under the hot sun.

Thomas thought this was an ultra-rare case of illegal parking. In a desert city, not many drivers would risk having their ride taken from them.

Since he tilted his head and approached, his antenna's sensitivity was apparently one level too weak. Even when he saw the blatant khaki-covered paint jobs, a certain possibility did not occur to him.

And just as he prepared to call out to them, he felt someone grab his shoulder from behind. Then he felt a shock on the back of his right knee. From there, he had no idea what happened. His vision spun around, his back slammed into something, and both his surprised lungs forgot what their job

was supposed to be.

Only after struggling to breathe for a bit did he realize he had been thrown to the ground.

Some boys in military uniforms he did not recognize were peering down at him. They had looks of complete and utter annoyance.

"...What do we do with him?"

"The city doesn't have much time left. It's done for if we don't solve all its problems with the Faith Organization and the hexavalent chromium. We have to save everyone even if that means being a bit rough with some of them."

"What was it we needed again? The police station, the traffic control center, the broadcast station, the telephone switching station..."

When he heard the list of facilities, Thomas forgot all about his trouble breathing and widened his eyes. He had a feeling this was very bad indeed. The list sounded very dangerous to him.

They were not with the Faith Organization. Those were Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms!

And they had one more thing to say.

"This is a disaster on all sides, but don't worry because we're not obligated to sympathize with you. We've got to occupy those facilities and gain control of the city's functions. Sorry, but we'll be getting a bit of help from you."

Part 6

Quenser, Heivia, and the other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were not exactly enthusiastic while listening to the energetic calls for customers and the cheers of children chasing after a ball.

But no matter how much they wanted to deny it, the Jack in the Box was coming. After targeting them, it would never let the Baby Magnum leave the combat zone. It was sure to be scrambled the instant they made any obvious attempt to go elsewhere.

...This city would soon be a battlefield.

First and foremost, it was impossible to evacuate the silo city's hundreds of thousands of people in such a short period of time. Not even the ten thousand on the surface would be able to descend to the nuke-resistant area deep underground in time. The battalion only had enough vehicles for their own personnel of less than a thousand and not even all the city's personal cars and transport vehicles could carry them all. Plus, even if they had enough vehicles, sending them all out at once would only cause a giant traffic jam before even arriving in the wasteland. The Faith Organization was sure to act before they got out.

So as the base commander, Major Frolaytia Capistrano turned that basic idea on its head.

Quenser, Heivia, and the others repeated their orders.

"We need to build a maintenance base zone here as quickly as possible! Once we do that, international treaties allow us to protect the city from the Jack in the Box's shellfire!!"

They were to place the mobile maintenance base right on top of the silo city.

The traditional clean wars began and ended with a clash between Objects, so it was difficult to end up with the maintenance base zone's soldiers fighting each other. Some battles had of course gotten out of hand and the maintenance base had been directly targeted, but this would make it much more difficult to target the base zone than if they just left it alone. It also increased the people's odds of survival.

"It doesn't matter if we can't evacuate everyone before the battle begins," agreed Quenser. "We just have to keep the evacuation going during the battle and continue getting the surface people down underground. The area below the bedrock is built to resist a nuke, so it should hold up for a bit while that thing is rampaging around."

The Legitimacy Kingdom was not exactly a pure and innocent hero either. To defeat the Jack in the Box, they had to turn a toxic adhesive into mist, spread it all around, and then get it to react by frying the air. If the winds were just wrong, their sea of flames could reach the city's surface area.

They had to succeed here and remove the threat.

And the soldiers would act as meat cushions to buy enough time for that.

That was all they could do.

Heivia spoke while knocking down and restraining a middle-aged man who seemed to be a local policeman...no, a sheriff.

"Let's ask him for some information. Top priority is the cargo entrance to the underground area. We can't just wander around warning people with megaphone, right?"

"Yeah, that would cause a major panic. In the worst case, we would have a riot and looting on our hands. Our timetable would fall apart and there would be no stopping the Jack in the Box."

That was why they could not just spread the necessary data online and leave the rest to the local police. If they did not know how the information would spread, everyone would be slaughtered for sure.

Onsite "cooperation" was absolutely vital.

After all, there were more than ten thousand people on the surface. Even if they could protect them from the Jack in the Box by setting up their maintenance base zone right on top of the silo city's location on the map, they did not have time to deal with extra chaos.

They had to take control of the police station and other peace keeping agencies, explain the situation to the authorities, and convince them to cooperate. Fleeing outside the city would only put one in more danger, so they could abandon vehicles on the main roads to create a traffic jam and prevent anyone from rushing off in their private cars. Information from the traffic control center and help from the TV and radio broadcast stations were crucial to get the people to evacuate underground.

Their enemy was time. The fuse had already been lit.

So they did not have time for arguing. If it came to it, they would "convince" people with the muzzle of a gun. Every second or hour wasted could mean game over and the Jack in the Box would turn everything to ash.

"Being a hero ain't easy..."

"I could never trust some idiot who introduces themselves as a hero in full-body tights who's perfect and above reproach. I can only assume they've gone around killing everyone who had a problem with them."

The tied-up sheriff was pale and trembling, but he managed to force out a voice.

"I-I won't talk! I'm not going to help some Legitimacy Kingdom berserkers. Even if the Faith Organization helps us out with food and temporary factory work, we're still a civilian-ruled pacifist city!!"

"Now this guy is a true ally of the people. But how are we supposed to convince him, Heivia? Without violence, I mean."

"It violates military regulations, but showing him all the photos of the Jack in the Box would probably be fastest. Or maybe tell him about the hexavalent chromium or what the mine detector kept picking up. Let's bet on how many photos before he has a change of heart."

"I'll go with 10. Loser takes the winner's next toilet-cleaning duty."

"You sure believe in his pacifist conscience. I was thinking it would only take 5."

The sheriff must have thought they were going to show him a pile of scorched corpses because he grew as white as a sheet. Heivia lifted him by the collar and sighed.

"Hey, old man. You mentioned temporary factory work, right?"

"...I won't talk."

"Then shut up and listen. The Faith Organization has set up giant circus-like tents for the local people to work in temporary factories. It's simple work that creates Object parts. Yes, they have you making those gigantically huge springs."

"..."

The sheriff looked on the verge of tears as he turned toward Quenser this time.

Quenser too shook his head.

"Just listen. Steel's properties change based on the impurities mixed in. For example, chromium. Get the ratio just right and you have stainless steel, but the Faith Organization is using hexavalent chromium. We've found it in the soil around here, so there's no doubting it."

"Wh-what does...what does that matter...?"

"You didn't know? No, you probably weren't told."

Quenser spat the words out toward someone who was not here. He wrinkled his brow like he had a headache as he continued.

"Hexavalent chromium causes serious damage to the environment. Most safe countries have emissions limits on it. That's why they're making their parts out here where it doesn't count. And polluting your bodies all the while."

The fat sheriff's throat caught, but no voice came out.

His face was soaked with sweat. No, was that even sweat by his eyes?

“Have any of the people working in the factories suddenly disappeared?”

The nightmarish revelation continued.

“I don’t know how they’ve been explaining that away for you, but the truth is simple: when someone’s body gets too polluted, they collapse.”

“That can’t be true...”

“Unfortunately, our metal detectors won’t stop going off. I don’t know if it’s pocket change or wristwatches, but it’s definitely not mines or empty cans. We didn’t like driving over them, so we tried to avoid the areas where the bodies were buried as much as we could.”

“You’re lying!!”

The sheriff cut in with a sudden shout. He grabbed something at his neck and clenched his teeth. What was this wounded animal of a man wearing there? Quenser remembered.

It was a necklace made from a ring on a thin chain.

Something like that would produce a metal reaction. So could it be...?

“That can’t be. That can’t be, that can’t be, that can’t be!! I mean...that’s...this city is built on the Faith Organization’s good will...she was...and the technicians...and the factory chiefs...they’re only at the hospital...that’s why they aren’t here...uuh...I’ll see her again soon...she’ll be all better any day now...ahhh...waaaaahhhh!!”

He was so confused that he could not even produce intelligible language toward the end.

Too many examples may have come to mind. But if he accepted it, something would break inside him, so he was struggling to deny it with all his might.

“Hey, is this really the right thing to do, Quenser?”

“It is. It’s right, but it isn’t anything more than that.”

The teenage boys had a complex look in their eyes as they watched a man more than twice their age have a complete breakdown. They had done and seen something they should not have. That was how it felt to them.

But they could not place a hand on those trembling shoulders.

Because something else happened first.

A deafening explosion erupted in one corner of the city and unhealthy-looking black smoke stained the sky.

It was not that far away. Only two or three buildings from them. The noise hit them like a solid wall, so Quenser was nearly knocked from his feet and clung to the side of a nearby truck.

A high-pitched monotone sound rang in his ears as Heivia opened the bulletproof truck’s door, used it as a shield, and moved his mouth. Quenser could not hear his voice, but based on his lip

movements, he seemed to be asking what idiot had done that.

“That was from the hangar market. And it would’ve been full of housewives at this time.”

When sound returned to him, the first voice Quenser heard was the fat sheriff who should have still been on the ground.

“Oh, right. The Faith Organization will know. They’ll know the secret behind the hexavalent chromium and the factories!!”

“Ah, you dumbass!!”

Heivia reached out his hand, but he just barely missed the man’s shoulder. With a mysterious burst of energy, the civilian slipped away and ran toward the explosion. The ring swayed as it hung from his neck like dog tags.

Did he want to learn the truth, or to deny it?

“Oh, hell. What do we-...argh, stop already, dammit!!”

Quenser’s awful friend aimed his assault rifle at the man, but the threat was powerless against someone who was throwing their life away. Holding up someone who you could not afford to kill had no effect whatsoever.

Heivia clicked his tongue and glanced over at the four-wheel-drive truck, but then Quenser took off running after the middle-aged man.

He was not exactly confident in his athletic ability, so it was mostly his lack of a driver’s license that helped make up his mind.

“C’mon, Heivia! That guy might be stupid, but he hasn’t done anything wrong!! Not one thing!!”

“Okay, fine!!”

Heivia reluctantly gave up on the truck and ran after the sheriff.

He may have decided running full speed was faster than turning the key to start the engine for a distance of only two or three buildings.

“But what was that explosion!? Did someone from our 37th go berserk!?”

“It didn’t sound like our equipment!!”

So was it the Faith Organization? Or had someone acquired weapons from them?

A voice amplified by a megaphone reached them from beyond the buildings.

“Beloved lost sheep!! Our hateful enemy, the Legitimacy Kingdom, has arrived! Your parents and your children, your lovers and your families, your friends and your teachers!! If you wish to protect all that you hold dear, take a weapon and protect those threatened lives!!”

“Did the bastards fake an attack to stir up hostility against us!?”

“Even if it doesn’t wholly succeed, it might create a gray zone where no one knows which side did it.

In that case, any riots could be directed at us too. We have to do something and soon!"

All the surrounding houses shut their doors and windows.

A cellphone fell from overhead when someone dropped it while shutting a second-story window. It was vibrating in silent mode and, when they grabbed it to check the small screen, they saw an emergency email from the Faith Organization.

"This could hardly get worse..."

"We don't have time to complain. We just have to solve one thing at a time. Starting with that sheriff!!"

The silo city had been developed down into the depths, so tall buildings did not seem to act as a status symbol. They pursued the sheriff while surrounded by small buildings that stood only three or four stories tall. Meanwhile, they heard more explosions and what sounded an awful lot like gunfire.

"It's the Legitimacy Kingdom! The Legitimacy Kingdom is attacking!! Get the women and children indoors!! I repeat, make sure you get the women and children indoors!! You never know what they'll do!!"

"They have some nerve saying that when they're lying to the people's faces and polluting them with hexavalent chromium...!"

An armored truck covered with speakers (presumably for proselytizing) drove by, so Quenser and Heivia quickly hid behind cover. The fat man was nearby, gasping for breath and trying to chase down the mass of steel.

"Has that idiot completely lost it? He's trying to stop an armored truck all on his own!! Is he not afraid of a heavy machinegun or grenades!?"

"I think he still wants to trust the Faith Organization. He's afraid of reality catching up to him. He thinks everything will fall apart if he feels fear here."

"If we don't catch him soon, he really will end up as mincemeat! Why do I have to chase after some sweaty fatass and tackle him to the ground when it's so damn hot!? This is the worst!!"

"We're the ones that made him feel so cornered, so we can't let him die."

The source of the black smoke turned out to be a large shopping mall. The boxy building appeared to be two or three stories tall and it may have had as large an area as a domed stadium. And that meant it had a large parking lot with nothing to use as cover. There was only one word for this situation where they could be targeted from any direction: shitty.

"A-ahhh, ahhh, ahhh!! He's running right down the middle of the parking lot! Is he trying to get himself killed!?"

"No, wait. There's something el..."

Quenser was cut off by the sound of thick tires digging into the ground. A Legitimacy Kingdom military truck screeched to a halt right in front of the two idiots. The khaki-colored mass had a thick heavy machinegun on the roof and small Myonri sat in the driver's seat.

That star member of the 37th gestured upwards and shouted to them.

"Use this as a shield to get closer! We've sent some drones out, so we can draw the enemy fire until the aerial footage has marked the enemy's location!!"

But Heivia did not listen at all and climbed up the wall to the machinegun on the roof. He sprayed armor-piercing rounds toward the armored truck trying to turn around in the parking lot and it was torn apart like a plastic toy.

But that was as far as he got.

The bastard kicked the driver's seat headrest through the opening in the roof and yelled a warning to Myonri.

"Get out!!"

Quenser simply stood there throughout. Myonri rushed out of the door and Heivia jumped down from the roof.

Immediately afterwards, the armored military truck was blown to smithereens.

The close-range blast really did knock Quenser from his feet this time. He saw the burning scrap metal bounce once and then roll, so he did not have time to choke. He half-crawled half-rolled to move as far along the scorching asphalt as possible to avoid being flattened.

It was lucky he had been breathing out. If he had been breathing in when the explosive flames swelled out, his trachea and lungs would have been fried.

"Oh...gh..."

But what had that been? It had come from a different direction than the armored truck turning around in the parking lot.

His fingertips were almost convulsing as he reached out his hand, but Heivia grabbed that hand and pulled him to his feet.

"We need to hurry behind that exhibitionist of a nude statue! We have to use that concrete pedestal to shield us from the second blast! Hurry!!"

"Wha-?"

Quenser was still confused after being practically dragged behind cover, so sooty Heivia shouted an explanation.

"That was an elastic grenade launcher! Those are anti-tank weapons that use a thick coil spring inside a launch tube! It's just a spring, but they can still launch a grenade 500 meters. And since they don't use an explosive to launch it, there isn't any sound or smoke. They have their downsides, such as an unstable ballistic path and a reload time of more than two minutes, but nothing could be a bigger pain in the ass for a surprise attack!!"

The spring weapon reminded Quenser of something.

"So it really is the Faith Organization!?"

"More importantly, what do we do? If we're pinned here, the sheriff and the others are done for..."

Myonri's question reminded him of something else.

"About that. Isn't there way too little blood for a civilian city being hit by military might?"

"...Huh?"

Confused, Myonri observed the large parking lot once more. Sure enough, some cars had caught on fire, but there was no sign of any bodies. Housewives and employees were fleeing the shopping mall which was large enough to contain a school building or gym, but none of them were shot in the back as they ran around the open space of the parking lot.

Quenser looked back to the exhibitionist statue's pedestal. It had a metal plate bearing the words "Wide Area Wartime Shelter".

"The Faith Organization is guiding the people too. The gunfire and explosions are only meant to scare them."

"But what for!?"

"To ensure the people are worried about their basic necessities instead of starting a riot! To take back the hearts of the people! A wide area wartime shelter should have plenty of food, water, blankets, and tents, so if they take over this shopping mall, they can control at least the ten thousand people on the silo city's surface!"

"So they're destroying everything themselves and then handing out supplies? Will that really work?"

"Didn't you know that most war reconstruction is funded by the winner? No matter how unreasonable the situation, people will accept it if they can get back to their normal lives. So we have to stop this no matter what. If that sheriff keeps asking about his ring and the truth behind the hexavalent chromium, he might be treated like an irregularity. In other words, they'll pull the trigger and silence him with a bang."

"Yeah, but how do we get across this parking lot that's larger than a soccer field!? You saw that elastic grenade launcher blast! Even a full-body combat cyborg would be blown to bits!!"

"Heivia, where do you think the Faith Organization is firing from?"

"Huh? Since there are burning cars scattered around the parking lot, wouldn't it be from the flat roof of that shopping mall? Not that we can see them from down here."

"Myonri, you said you sent some drones out, didn't you? You were planning to work with the operator to locate the enemy, but can you still contact them?"

"Y-yes. With the parallel processing machines out of order, the electronic simulation division was fighting over the control panel like at an arcade."

"Then have all the drones drop straight down. Onto the shopping mall's flat roof." Quenser quickly made up his mind. "It doesn't matter if you hit them or not. We'll run across while the Faith Organization is looking up into the air in fear of an attack. We can run 50m in seven seconds with full gear, right?"

The attack began.

Sturdy crane flies two sizes bigger than the ones sold at electronics stores and online stores grew

visible as they dropped down one after another.

Quenser clicked his tongue as he ran out from behind cover.

"Tch, you could've put more of a time delay between them! That alone would've extended this distraction!!"

"Wait, are we seriously doing this!?"

The sudden start left Heivia initially cautious, but this was their only chance. Screw it up and they would be forever pinned behind the exhibitionist statue's pedestal.

The enemy must not have been all that frightened because short bursts of gunfire continued even while they were panicking. Orange sparks burst from the asphalt nearby, but they could not stop now that they had started running. They could not risk anyone being hit by a stray bullet, so they avoided the glass door letting people out and instead ran toward the nearest section of the shopping mall's wall even though there was no entrance there.

Heivia had started running after Quenser, but he easily passed the other boy.

"Elastic grenade launcher!!"

A man in a military uniform leaned out from the edge of the flat roof and supported something like a rocket launcher on his shoulder. Even if he missed by a bit, they would be caught in the blast. And leaping away from the blast would not be enough to avoid it.

However, a drone fell straight on top of him.

Even if it was lightweight, it still had a military-grade aluminum frame. And when falling from high enough, even a pinball could become a deadly weapon. The Faith Organization soldier was hit by the drone's sports car-like frame, his helmet and skull split open, and the explosive was launched in a harmless direction.

Quenser's group had finally reached the mall's wall, but they did not stop there. The wall was made of glass and an industrial wrapping sheet had been placed over that to keep the light out. They tackled the glass, broke through, and rolled into the shop.

Among a row of registers, Heivia ran over to a shocked Faith Organization soldier who was surprisingly close by. He swept the enemy's feet out from under him and fired his assault rifle at point blank range.

"Goddammit, do we have to fight an indoor battle against who-even-knows how many people!?"

"?"

That was when Quenser heard something crinkle underfoot.

He moved his boot and found a scrap of paper with a bloody footprint on it.

"Warning from the Venerable Elder: The final battle with the Legitimacy Kingdom devils draws nigh."

"You're kidding, right? Are they still spreading their faith during all this!?"

"Honestly, wasn't that what they were after the whole time?"

They could still hear the megaphone voice outside, but it was echoing too much to understand anything it said anymore.

Heivia had to groan.

"The value of god tends to skyrocket when you're faced with a threat you can't handle yourself. That's why they've created their own catastrophe so the teachings of god will sink in more easily. It's easier to spread your faith in unstable times than in times of peace."

That was also why they had started a battle between Objects right in the middle of the tense standoff between the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance.

That created enough tension to feel like the end of the world was approaching.

But they also made sure the threat was just small enough to avoid the actual destruction.

"B-but," asked Myonri. "Will these people really be swayed by their claims if they're only saving the people from the weapons they themselves fired???"

"What you see as the truth relies a lot on your point of view. They're claiming the Legitimacy Kingdom is causing all the trouble and the Faith Organization is going out of their way to do the dirty work needed to evacuate everyone to safety. And they'll probably explain away their insurgents violently taking over the mall by calling it a planned redistribution of personnel. In emergencies, the people with guns will grow bolder and the people without guns will want to rely on them. They might just be able to remake themselves from conquerors to dark heroes."

Anyone could figure out which side was telling the truth if they compared all the data and rationally analyzed it, but the people caught in the middle had essentially been thrown into a giant three-dimensional maze. Only people like Quenser's group who had military connections could prepare the kind of environment needed to find the answer.

"This is not going to be fun... Once they pass a certain point, they might create a sort of 'atmosphere'. Enough people will be saying it's true to silence those with doubts and everyone will just go along with it."

"B-but this is a silo city of hundreds of thousands of people if you count the underground portion."

"There's only about ten thousand on the surface and they're something like a small village society cut off from the rest of the world. I just hope this doesn't get as out of hand as the Salem witch trials."

Just then, they saw someone running by the home carpentry shelves while giving no thought to lines of fire or cover. He had already broken the rules, but he seemed to seriously believe no bullet would hit him.

"It's that panicked sheriff!"

"We can talk later! We need to restrain him first!"

Quenser shoved a nearby shopping cart into empty space so the eyes and guns on the first floor and the atrium's second floor would focus on it. Heivia and Myonri fired on the unnatural movements

that produced while they also charged from the register area to the home carpentry section.

"From this, I'm guessing they haven't taken over the security room and gotten control of the security cameras."

"More importantly, that fatso. Damn, why couldn't it be a revolver-worshipping cute gunman girl in tight shorts? This is really affecting my motivation!!"

Heivia's hands finally reached the sheriff.

He grabbed the man's shoulders, spun him around, and prepared to slam him to the floor again, but Myonri held her small submachinegun out toward a shelf of power tools.

There was a burst of gunfire, but she did not stop moving. Before Quenser could voice his confusion, the shelf collapsed toward them. By the time he realized it had been tackled from the other side, Heivia and the sheriff were trapped beneath it.

Quenser fell on his butt and just barely avoided the same fate because Myonri pulled him back with her empty hand. She then faced the Faith Organization soldier who had walked up the diagonally-collapsed shelf and was preparing to fire his assault rifle. She fired a 9mm bullet from her submachinegun onehanded.

But this was no time to adore that scene of a surprisingly active girl.

After breathing a sigh of relief and looking back, Quenser saw another Faith Organization uniform.

"Ah, ah, awahhh!?"

His mind went almost entirely blank and he slapped on Myonri's calf, but the stubbly middle-aged man aimed his military shotgun before the boy could finish communicating the threat.

Just before everyone was turned to mincemeat, the shotgun man tripped and fell backwards. Spray paint cans had apparently tumbled out of the fallen shelf and the man had stepped on one.

This was his only chance.

Quenser tearfully leaped toward the fallen soldier. Quenser was on top, but the man used just his arm strength to punch the boy in the bridge of the nose and the boy's vision grew white. Instead of looking for a weapon, his searching hands were looking for some kind of support to keep him from collapsing backwards, but they happened across a rough device. And instead of a unit for sale, this was apparently a display unit used for instore demonstrations.

It was a chainsaw meant for chopping down trees.

"Ah."

Already, the Faith Organization man was slipping out from under Quenser and pulling a handgun from the holster at his hip. It would take less than three seconds to flick off the safety with his thumb and take aim. Quenser needed to go all out if he was to survive. Even a moment's hesitation would mean death. At any rate, he had no time. And unfortunately, his opponent was not a cute and sickly little sister. It was just some macho man.

He had his answer: His own life took precedence here!

[illegible]

The roaring sound effect was one heard more often in comical splatter films these days than in serious horror films. Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage tearfully learned just how difficult the device he held was to keep under control and just how much blood and whatnot splattered back onto him.

The details will be skipped, so here is the pure result: Sliced vertically in two.

“Gyahhh!!”

There was a scream and the sheriff took off running again after seeing Quenser covered in blood. (That was just blood, wasn't it?) He apparently was not the type to have his legs give out when it really mattered. And Heivia sounded utterly exasperated.

"I can't really blame the guy. No one would think someone so soaked in red was here to spread love and justice."

At any rate, they had to rescue that sheriff. If he had fled, they had to give pursuit.

That was when they heard some muffled gunfire overhead.

Heivia seemed to understand just from the sound.

“...Those aren’t our guns.”

“The Faith Organization then.” Bloody Catastrophe Quenser looked up to the ceiling. “But what are they firing at now?”

Quenser, Heivia, and Myonri walked cautiously across the first floor and found the stairs up to the second floor.

Someone waved at them there.

They had found another group in Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms who had apparently entered through a different route. Surprisingly, Base Commander Frolaytia was with them, handgun drawn.

“(What are you doing here? You’re the commander, aren’t you!)”

“(You pawns didn’t do your job, so the king was caught in the firefight. And Quenser, what happened with you? Did you get caught in some kind of ritual!?)”

The gunfire continued.

In fact, it seemed to be intensifying.

“(Be on your guard, everyone.)”

On Frolaytia's instructions, the two teams climbed the gently curving stairs. This seemed to be a section for children's toys. But that meant things like plastic trains and train tracks, not video games.

They heard some kind of argument.

One side seemed to be that sheriff. But who was the other side?

"What is this about hexavalent chromium? Why do metal detectors go off in the ground around here!? You're with the Faith Organization, so you have to know the answer!!"

"Shut up! Can't you tell we have more important matters to deal with!?"

"More important matters!? Do our lives mean nothing to you!?"

"So it didn't take root in you. Then I'll show you what happened to those people...by doing the same to you!!"

Heivia and Frolaytia clicked their tongues and started forward.

Just as they entered the children's toy section, they came to a stop.

A colorful world awaited them there.

Being a fancy toy section was not necessarily a good thing.

Couldn't a cute mascot look creepy depending on where it was located? For example, seeing the head of a mascot costume at an abandoned amusement park, seeing a mascot sign for a pharmacy or cake shop in the garbage dump, or seeing a stuffed animal floating in a muddy river.

This was an extreme version of that.

The Faith Organization soldiers were sliced despite their bulletproof jackets and they collapsed with blood erupting from their wounds.

And the smiling dress-up dolls and mascots had all that red liquid dumped over them.

This death was not brought by bullets or bombs.

Some were stabbed and others were sliced diagonally.

The battle still raged on.

On one side was the Faith Organization armed with short-barrel carbines and grenade launchers. On the other side was a mysterious group carrying assault rifles that decorated cutting-edge weapons with old-fashioned wooden stocks and bayonets.

However, neither of those were the crux of the issue.

"...What the hell...?"

Heivia observed through his assault rifle's sight and his fingertips seemed frozen in place. That was how much difficulty his brain was having processing the sight.

It was a katana.

That single silver blade was taking life after life.

At the center of the mysterious group was a silver-haired man wielding an Island Nation sword. He

wore a glossy black tailcoat that looked better fit for a stage magician than the host of an evening party and most certainly did not suit a wasteland of dried stone and cactuses. The hands holding the hilt were even covered by white gloves.

Normally thinking, a sword had no way of defeating guns. But when this man danced, the Faith Organization soldiers equipped with the latest gear were cut down with bizarre ease. When one soldier tried to put together a spring-powered anti-tank weapon, the warhead was sliced in two. Others were decapitated when their necks were horizontally slashed since they tended to have little to no bulletproof gear there.

Quenser was overwhelmed by that storm of blood, but Heivia noticed something and frowned.

“Wait...it isn't that this katana guy is super skilled. The bayonet group is using their bullets to move the Faith Organization into range of his blade. They're like hunting dogs driving the prey out of the bushes.”

That meant this was a stage prepared for the tailcoat man to enjoy hitting an enemy whenever he swung his sword. He got to live out his knightly fantasy of a sword defeating guns.

Which side were they supposed to target first?

There was no time to hesitate. The last Faith Organization soldier kicked away the sheriff clinging to him, tried to hide behind cover, and was pinned in place by bullets. Then he was cut down as the store shelf he was using as cover was sliced diagonally through by the katana.

That was a frightening demonstration of skill, but it was also an opportunity.

When you grasped victory, were freed from the tension, and breathed a sigh of relief was exactly when the grim reaper would smile your way on the battlefield.

“(Split up, fire on them from two directions, and drive them to the window. But don't hit the sheriff on the floor there. If we don't give them freedom to move, we can manage...)”

Heivia tried to communicate with the others using hand signals, but then Frolaytia raised a hand. The military was a vertically structured society. If their commanding officer intervened, they had to obey no matter what.

“O...”

Frolaytia was the one who finally spoke.

The sadistic, busty, and silver-haired commander sounded confused as she spoke to the tailcoat young man who took an almost transparently thin piece of Island Nation paper from one of the bayonet soldiers who apparently worked for him, folded the paper in two over the back of the katana blade, and wiped off the blood and fat.

“Onii-chan, what are you doing here???”

That had done it.

All the rules governing humanity had collapsed.

Everything was blown from the idiots' minds: that they were in the Greater Canyon where the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance stared each other down, that the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization were in conflict, that the silo city was in danger, and even that an old-fashioned blade had defeated rifle bullets and anti-tank weapons.

Onii-chan.

Had that busty old woman really used that cutesy Island Nation term!???

"Why!? There's something wrong with this! You can't just suddenly claim you're a little sister character when you look like that! Even if every cute twintail girl will eventually grow up into a wrinkly old hag!!"

"I won't accept this! I refuse to let anyone with an F-cup or higher call herself a little sister!! Mine's pretty bad too, but what are you!? A bamboo shoot that grew too much and turned into full-on bamboo!?"

"What was that you slipped in there about 'mine'!? Wait, were you bragging!?"

"She doesn't count as a little sister!!"

While the two idiots argued and fought over this unfair world and while even a worrier like Myonri stopped paying any attention to them, Frolaytia looked as awkward as a child who had seen her parent during parent day at school.

But then someone provided a verbal finishing blow.

One of his bodyguards - a woman who looked like a maid or a tutor - held out a handkerchief, so the gentleman wiped the sweat from his face as he spoke.

"Hello, hello. Nice to meet you. I am Bloodrics Capistrano. From the look of things, can I assume you have been looking after my cute little sister?"

"Onii-chan."

The young man smiled cheerfully while surrounded by sliced corpses.

The bodyguards around him seemed to be maids and tutors, but he had likely selected them on a different basis than a perverted old man with too much money would. Some were gray-haired women and others were young children, so he must have selected them based purely on skills ranging from housework to combat instead of looks or age.

His black tailcoat was exactly the sort of out-of-touch outfit one would expect of a noble and he returned the cleaned white blade to its sheath with practiced hand.

"The Capistrano family has been male for generations, so a girl like Tia-chan is quite rare. All of her brothers were always fighting over her, so we ended up quite knowledgeable in fighting etiquette. Although I am sure I made a fool of myself in front of professionals like you."

"Tia-chan? Did he say Tia-chan!?"

A stir ran through the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers and Quenser blankly muttered a comment.

"Your sibling fights were always on this level...???"

"I never want to have a noble's duel with them. They're sure to have their maids tackle me beforehand so I have to face them with a sprained ankle..."

When Frolaytia blushed and cleared her throat, the surrounding soldiers finally began searching the surrounding area. But as they had kind of expected, there were no Faith Organization soldiers left.

"Onii-...ahem...Bloodrics's hobby is charity work. He has a bad habit of cutting a family check as casually as someone tossing change into the donation box next to a convenience store register. It was only a safe country issue, but his actions once brought Barcelona a step away from independence."

"He takes independent action on a whim? What a pain in the ass!"

"D-don't say that. This is the kind of rich person you really don't want to make mad."

Quenser and Myonri said something, but Bloodrics himself did not seem to mind at all.

"By the way, Tia-chan, what is this odd smell in your hair? It's somewhat sweet but somewhat bitter."

"(Gulp!?)"

"That's right! Listen to this, Frolaytia's brother! She doesn't play fair at all! She won't let anyone else have any personal items, but she has her pi..."

"Reward kick!!!!!"

Seeing Heivia lifted 15cm from the ground thanks to a kick to the balls from behind, Quenser decided not to say anything like a reporter succumbing to powerful pressure.

"Ho...ho ho ho. The military can be so old-fashioned, so there are a lot of troublesome officers who smoke right in front of their subordinates. Maybe some of the smell got on me during the meeting we had earlier."

Frolaytia poked her index fingers together in front of her ample chest, gave her brother an upturned look, and fidgeted (while one of her men lay at her feet holding his crotch and looking as lifeless as a cicada shell).

"If you've left the safety of Paris to come to this chaotic place, I assume it's your usual disease. Onii-chan, didn't I tell you not to leave the safe countries!?"

"Hah hah hah. It is true I wanted to see my cute little sister at work, but that is not why I am here today. Did you know, Tia-chan, that there are children out there who do not have clean water to drink?"

"How many times have I told you that more than 60% of those silly banner ads are from scammers!? Not to mention that you give them so much money that they stand out too much in the underworld and are eventually destroyed over it!!"

"What are you talking about, Tia-chan? That means the remaining 40% are actually from people in need. Instead of worrying over the result of each individual one, you need to think about how you're bound to help someone eventually."

As a commoner, Quenser started staring into the distance. This was someone who had never had to

put in an honest day's work in his life. The amount of money involved was too great for scammers to handle, so he might as well have been dropping bombs made from stacks of cash.

Then Frolaytia's men found something while searching the area.

Since this was the toy section for small children, there was a large multi-use bathroom nearby which could be used for changing diapers. Three blonde girls were escorted out of there.

Their hairstyles were different, but their facial features were startlingly similar. They were probably triplets.

"Oh. Those three are the managers of the charity site operating in this silo city. This is Rica, Alisa, and Orsia. Um...but which was which again???"

Bloodrics tried to introduce them yet ended up confused, but the trio did not seem to mind. They were wearing matching red tank tops and miniskirts that made them look like a cheerleader-style dance team, so they may have been accustomed to being mistaken for each other.

"I had no real plans here. This was just an offline meeting."

"An offline meeting? Is that why you're wearing that party outfit, you out-of-touch idiot? And this isn't a café or a karaoke box; it's the Greater Canyon trapped between the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance home countries..."

"Everywhere is the same, Tia-chan. For the earth is round!!"

"Oh, shut up!!"

It was neat seeing this new side to Frolaytia, but this was not something they could just ignore. It was clear now that Bloodrics really was the older brother and Frolaytia really was the younger sister. Compared side by side, the busty silver-haired commander looked downright sensible.

And a few phrases had caught Quenser's attention, so he hesitantly raised a hand.

"If Frolaytia's brother was having an offline meeting here, does that mean this silo city was preparing to declare independence?"

"Well, this was already a blank zone, so it didn't belong to any of the world powers in the first place. But they were actually rather reliant on the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance. And the people of this city seem to think they have grown independent by doing support work for the Faith Organization, but that is not true either. So I thought opening a proper air hole here and giving them true independence from external influence would help both the world and the people here."

"Was it those girls there who planted this information in my stupid brother's head!? How much money did you take from our bank account!?"

"Hmm," groaned Quenser as he looked up at the ceiling (and ignored Major Capistrano's desperation).

And he got right to the point.

"Wouldn't that get in the way of the Faith Organization's disposable personnel acquisition scheme they're using to make their springs out of toxic hexavalent chromium?"

Part 8

Once he finally recovered from the intense pain, Heivia rejoined the conversation.

They still did not know what the Faith Organization was hoping to accomplish with all this violence, but aside from the hexavalent chromium factories, it had been suggested that they could spread their faith more easily if they created the perfect amount of tension to lead people to cling to a god.

"If the Jack in the Box's unit is moving north to south along the Greater Canyon while taking over the silo cities and dyeing them in their own colors...wouldn't they be directly opposed to what Bloodrics's group is trying to do?"

If the people could gain independence through something other than faith, they would stop gathering at the Faith Organization factories. Then the Faith Organization would lose their means of constructing powerful weaponized springs out of hexavalent chromium.

They were trying to (quite forcibly) take control of the shopping mall that had been designated a wide area wartime shelter, but controlling the people's hearts with various supplies was only the means. A lot was still unknown about the actual objective they were hoping to accomplish with that.

What if they had some other plans there?

"What if their intelligence agency learned about that offline meeting between Bloodrics and...those triplets? Couldn't they have stirred up all this chaos to cause a panic and rid themselves of that nuisance???"

"..."

When Frolaytia put her hands on her hips and started glaring at him, the katana-wielding brother in a tailcoat grew flustered at the sudden reversal of positions.

"I-I am relieved to see you have such skilled people at your disposal, Tia-chan."

"Is that all you have to say for yourself?"

"But what was I supposed to do!? I'm a civilian! I connect a commercial computer up to a router from the ISP and protect myself by updating the OS and security software. What else could I do!?"

"If you can only protect your data like that, you shouldn't be getting involved in dangerous battlefield countries full of professionals!!"

"Oh, but I did set up a...was it called a proxy server? You see, Rica and Orsia helped me out online and Arisa used a remote server to set up this confusing password for it all."

"Okay, okay. I get it, so shut up and let me punch you!!"

No one could quite figure out which part of this to comment on first, but they had to keep the conversation moving.

"But why is the Faith Organization so fixated on the silo cities?" asked Myonri with a tilt of the head.

"I mean, I know they want those springs made from hexavalent chromium, but is that really all?"

"Mhu hu hu."

She was answered by a strange laugh.

They looked over to see one of the triplets in red cheerleader-style tank tops and miniskirts...but which one was this? The ample curves barely contained by the tank top meant it was Rica or Arisa who was laughing with her hand over her mouth.

The three of them pressed their cheeks together as they spoke.

"It might be that new faith we've heard about"

"New...what???"

Quenser sounded skeptical, so the trio took turns moving their lovely lips.

"We have heard rumors of the hard labor used for the hexavalent chromium."

"But the Faith Organization apparently hasn't really been manipulating any information to twist how the people of the city explain away the people who collapse and disappear."

"The people invent their own stories about the technicians and factory chiefs. The Faith Organization might be monitoring how people come to terms with the mysterious things occurring before their eyes. They see how the people protect the 'myth of safety' that they don't want to fall apart."

It may not have mattered which was which.

The three of them formed a single whole that provided opinions aimed in the same direction.

"So it did not matter to the Faith Organization if the truth came to light."

"They wanted to see whether or not the present relationship would fall apart afterwards."

"Yes, the people might say the workers' noble sacrifices placed their souls in the Object's main cannon so they could unleash their power to defeat their hated enemy. The Faith Organization wanted to see if that faith would take root in them."

The triplets giggled as they explained just how horrific the Faith Organization was.

...But even if this was not confirmed, did it sound more in line with the Faith Organization's way of doing things than the simple benefit of the springs?

The Faith Organization was in the extremely dangerous Greater Canyon where the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance stared each other down and they had risked pulling the trigger on the end of the world in order to take over these silo cities. Why? ...People's souls reside in springs. It sounded absurd in isolation like that, but they had wanted to see if it would develop into a proper faith. And if need be, they would protect that faith...just not the people who held it.

This was a delicate time when the faith had yet to fully take root and it could go either way. It was possible the bubble could burst. The Faith Organization felt like a mother bird incubating its precious egg, so they would make sure they got the result they wanted even if it took some desperate measures.

"I can't believe this..." Heivia scratched his head. "This goes way deeper than I thought."

"This doesn't change what we need to do. We can bring this all to a close if we construct our maintenance base over the silo city and buy enough time to crush the Faith Organization's Jack in the Box."

Part 9

He had been left behind.

Sheriff Thomas Goldenclipper had been left behind by the rapid series of events.

It was true this was too much for him to handle.

A military clash between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization was not something he could solve with a six-shot revolver he had not fired since training. On a sheriff's paltry salary, he could not hope to match that rich noble who bombed people with checks or the triplet managers of a charity site.

What was the truth behind the Faith Organization's smiles?

Or the temporary factories that supported everyone's lives?

Or the hexavalent chromium?

Or the whereabouts of the ring that formed a pair with his?

The closer he approached the truth, the harder it was to bear. There was no hope to be found anywhere. If it was this painful, it might have been easier to stop and curl up in a ball. He truly, truly, truly thought that. He believed he was only putting up a meaningless struggle that would not benefit him in the slightest.

But.

Even so...

"...Shut up..."

His voice was barely audible.

His knees were shaking while speaking to boys and girls who were not even half his age and could only be called children. Heat built up deep in his head and his tear ducts threatened to open.

But he said it.

He managed to say it. And once the first words left his mouth, he could see no reason to hold back.

"The Faith Organization's factories? The truth of the hexavalent chromium? They're waiting for us to start believing those are noble sacrifices and those people's souls live on in the Object? I don't know what you're talking about!! ...I won't be swayed so easily! I won't just obey you! Sure, the Faith Organization has done some bad things, but that doesn't mean I'm going to side with the Legitimacy Kingdom!! Dammit, don't screw with us! We are human beings! Don't screw around with our lives!!"

The rule of law tended to be slow to act in blank zones not ruled by any of the four world powers. People's emotions tended to take precedence over explicit rules, so it was fairly common for people to take revenge after their lover was killed or the rich robbed them blind.

Idealism was useless here.

He knew that. He knew that all too well.

And yet...

"Listen!! No matter how painful it is - even if it feels like walking barefoot down a path of shattered glass - I will not stop!! Because it's my duty to protect the people of this city!! Laugh if you want! Hold your sides and have a nice guffaw about how powerless, fragile, and unrealistic I am!! But I still carry that duty! I'm a sheriff who carries the pride of this city's people with this badge on my chest! So I will look this head-on no matter how painful it is. I will not look away! You hear me!? I will not!!!!!"

He had decided he would be a sheriff.

That reason might seem pathetic to people who had to think about the fate of the world, but he had still decided to take this path. He could not fire a gun very well and his belly had grown fat from so much coffee and donuts, but he had decided to make this a peaceful city and he had worked to that end until this very day.

How could he throw that out now?

If he could not be idealistic, who in this city could?

If a volcano erupted or a hurricane of unprecedented size blew in, there was no way for a sheriff to stop it. But could he abandon his duty just because there was nothing he could do? He still had to climb into his dented police car that had been fixed up until it was just barely presentable, he had to drive around, and he had to search for anyone who had failed to evacuate or anyone taking advantage of the situation to loot or steal.

"...This is our city."

How could he abandon his duty?

Someone important to him may have been poisoned to the marrow by a toxic substance and then buried in the wasteland as an expendable pawn. The more he thought about it, the more horrifying it was, but he still could not abandon his duty.

Who would collect their bones?

Who could search out the truth?

That obviously was not a job for some outsider soldiers.

It had to be the police or sheriffs with roots in that city.

"I don't care about the fate of the world or friction between the world powers!! Silo City - Giant Pizza is a peaceful city that promises its law-abiding residents a happy life! Listen, I won't let some outsider soldiers trample over the truth. I won't let you move this to war!! I will preserve the crime scene, reveal the truth, and arrest the perp. Because that's my job!!!!!"

His opinion may have been wholly unrealistic.

He may have only been stopping the series of events around him.

For one thing, there was no guarantee of the usual rules applying when the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization had arrived with such extraordinary power. If someone here drew their gun and fired a shot between the foolish sheriff's eyes, it would likely end with no one being held responsible.

...He might die here.

He only now realized that, but he would not take back what he had said.

"I see. I can only assume you're prepared to back up those words with action."

The woman with long silver hair, who seemed to be the leader of these soldiers, turned a bit toward him.

And then something unexpected happened.

She brought her heels together, straightened her spine, and silently raised her right hand.

Someone who lived in an entirely different world saluted the fat sheriff with an entirely serious look on her face.

"We do not have time to prepare the official paperwork, so I can unfortunately only make a verbal agreement. Nevertheless, the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion will now place full authority of evacuating Silo City - Giant Pizza with the local police."

"Eh? Ah?"

"Here are the documents on the state of the city based on satellite and drone footage. And here are the documents on the population needing evacuation. I assume the local police would know this land better than us, but they might make useful reference material."

Thomas was utterly taken aback by this turn of events and the silver-haired commander winked at him while still saluting.

And with the slightly sweet aroma of smoke, her bewitching lips formed a smile.

"If you want to have your way, then keep at it to the end. If you think you can evacuate ten thousand people underground without any help from the military, then get to it. You can use that to get the better of us."

With that said, she turned around.

She gestured for her soldiers to leave with her and she grabbed her brother's ear as he watched on like he had played no part in this. Then she really did leave, dragging her brother along with her.

"..."

For a while, the sheriff forgot to even try to grasp what had just happened.

But he could not stand around forever.

This was a battle. It was a crucial battle over whether or not the people of this silo city could live proudly and without bowing down to anyone.

He had to preserve his dignity so they would not laugh and say "I told you so".

"I-I don't think I've ever been this busy!!"

Part 10

While following after their major (who was pulling on her brother's ear), Quenser and Heivia caused something of a commotion.

"Can you really just make that decision!? If the military isn't intervening in the silo city, then we can't place the maintenance base on top of it to fortify its defenses, can we!?"

"It's true this makes the silo city untouchable. But I said nothing about the area around it. We just have to surround it with our vehicles to form something like a fried egg. That still makes the place difficult to target for the Jack in the Box."

"...Are you serious? So we finally really are" acting as meat cushions..."

"Onii-ch-...Bloodrics, you have your personal troops draw back into the city. Their classification only allows them to engage in battle for self defense and they're civilians, but they're equipped well enough that the enemy probably can't tell them apart from the 37th's normal troops from a distance. That is our only way of keeping our promise with that sheriff and also placing the maintenance base zone on top of the silo city."

"Ehh? Then who's going to manage traffic on site!?"

It was said the military had formats and standards for everything, but things were not actually that tightly-controlled on site. Having the timetable fall to pieces due to a superior's independent decision or prejudice was as much a problem for civil servants as it was for workers at an exploitative business.

But no matter what reason the higher ups had and even if you were to blame, no one wanted to make up for the resultant delay.

Despite saying she would not interfere with civilian matters, Frolaytia stuffed her brother into a truck and gave a harsh order to the subordinates she trusted to have her back.

"Figure out how to make this work."

"How much must you exploit us!!!!?"

"Don't forget that your life is on the line too, you busty commander!"

Incidentally, the charity site manager triplets did not stick with Bloodrics and seemed intent on following the sheriff's instructions to evacuate. This seemed to be the end of their offline meeting.

With the sheriff and Bloodrics's "civilian" troops looking after the silo city, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes boarded their military vehicles. Quenser and Heivia were separated from Myonri.

"This is the worst! I thought having that cutie around would help soothe the pain!! And if that busty commander is going to work us to death, she could at least wear a bikini while she does it!!"

"...Huh? Was that why she was dressed as a cow bikini cowgirl? Am I more loved than I thought???"

"Okay, I've heard enough. It's time to die, Quenser!!!!!!"

Their struggle led to the truck swerving, crashing into a telephone pole, and denting its bumper, so the two idiots calmed down quite quickly.

The repentant wise men spoke once more.

"How about we take this war seriously?"

"Yes, let's bring peace to the world, shall we?"

In a way, the idiots were in their most dangerous state as they left the city and entered the battlefield.

It truly was a wasteland.

Specifically, they were to the south of Giant Pizza. Their formation there was meant to stop the attacking Faith Organization unit.

A green land had failed to become a desert covered in fine sand, so it had instead become a scorching wasteland covered in cracked earth and stones with the color of brick. In places, a long river had deeply eroded the earth, creating different shelf-like levels of land.

As they drove their trucks through a land with only cactuses and unfamiliar weeds growing on it, their radios received a transmission.

"Baby Magnum to all. My movement seems to have drawn in the Faith Organization. I have confirmed the Jack in the Box's presence. The rest will be a race against time."

"Let's settle this by sunset and get out of the base tonight. I mean, the city's called Giant Pizza, so I've gotta have at least a slice before leaving here."

"I'm eating an eight inch olive and anchovy one right now."

"Already!? And isn't that a little big for a girl to eat on her own!?"

"Try playing a chess master while being shaken by extreme inertial Gs. Then you'll understand. Your mind and body both need carbs."

While holding that conversation, Quenser mentally sorted through what they had to do.

Their job here was to support the Baby Magnum.

The enemy Jack in the Box was an Object that used powerful springs and its main cannon was a metal shell cannon that concentrated the combined force of eight arms on a single point, just like a collapsible parabolic antenna or an umbrella frame. Instead of storing shells in a magazine or cartridges, liquid lead was released from the tip of the floats and wrapped around the base of the main cannon until it had the proper thickness in a baumkuchen-like shape.

It had incredible power, but it had a separate tail-like unit to negate the recoil of firing. The tail could move freely along a guiderail placed along the back 180 degrees of the spherical main body and it used a powerful spring to fire a giant stake. The stake was either fired in the opposite direction of the main cannon to negate the recoil or it was fired into the ground for a quick dash that would have been impossible for its static electricity propulsion system.

In other words, the Jack in the Box could not withstand its main cannon's recoil without that tail.

If they prevented the tail pile bunker from functioning properly, it would be unable to control the force it created itself and it would roll over.

"Now that a lot of the wasteland's sand is up in the air, we have to mix in some vaporized epoxy adhesive to change the viscosity of the air, right?"

"If we change the force of the tail pile bunker's kick, it can't keep its balance when it fires its main cannon. If a stronger kick than expected causes it to topple over, then we win."

Keeping something as large as an Object afloat was an impressive feat in and of itself, but a static electricity system like the Baby Magnum's was a worse match than an aircushion system that directly blew out air. To ensure this worked, they had thick chains hanging out the back of the trucks to drag along the ground as they drove.

"Wow, it's like we're in the middle of a sandstorm. It's gotten so dark."

"I guess it's time to get the adhesive mixed into all that sand."

"This is all based on the ideal outcome, right? Will this really stop the Object?"

"You can complain after seeing for yourself."

Just as they were discussing that, something happened.

Something massive tore through the air and instantly blew away that thick wall of sand.

"The main...cannon!?"

"Quenser, you idiot! You'll bite your tongue!!"

They did not have time to just sit around watching.

It did not matter how skillfully Heivia operated the steering wheel when all four of the truck's wheels left the ground. It fell on its side and then rolled a total of fourteen times.

Their view was now upside down and they could hear a transmission from the Baby Magnum, the one part of their force that had survived.

"Contact with Jack in the Box confirmed. Engaging."

"Dammit..."

Heivia kicked open the driver's side door and got out.

There was no cloud of dust or adhesive. They had lost the curtain that should have obscured their vision as the 50m Object and its simple main cannon stirred up the air. They also had no way of setting up that situation themselves. They could tell the eight arms were gathering strength in their springs and the sprayers at the tip of the floats were releasing liquid lead to form the baumkuchen-shaped shell at the base of the main cannon column.

"Get the hell out here too, you idiot! Quenser!! I've seen for myself, so it's time for me to complain! You really are the worst, you know that!?"

"Th-that's odd. I thought the electronic simulation division had calculated everything out..."

"Their computers are still on the fritz, so they've been doing it all pen-and-paper. That probably introduced some kind of error."

Quenser was the one who had not completely fixed the hub for the parallel machines, so in a roundabout way, he could not even complain to anyone else about it.

The very first move had betrayed their expectations.

The two Objects were firing back and forth at a distance of two or three kilometers, which was close range for an Object battle, but if they let the hectically-changing flow of time leave them behind, their lives were undoubtedly over. If they wanted to live, they had to come up with another plan.

Quenser grabbed his radio.

"Epoxy Team!! Are your sprayers made from air-conditioning units still working? If so, get them ready!!"

"This is Myonri. Um, our truck's tires were blown, but the device itself should still work."

"We'll meet up with you, so tell us where you are."

Heivia's eyes widened as he listened in.

"Are you continuing with that failed plan!? There's no way to get all the dust up in the air!!"

"That's not what I'm doing." Quenser was breathing heavily even while sitting on the ground. "That static electricity propulsion device has to be spreading a repellant ahead of it. Creating an electric repulsive force between the ground and the Object is how both the Baby Magnum and the Jack in the Box stay afloat."

"Why does that matt...you crazy son of a bitch."

"We spread the adhesive spray near the ground to clog up their sprayer. And once it's stopped, the Princess can blow it away with her main cannons!"

They did not have to stop the Jack in the Box as fully as a car with blown tires or a stalled engine. As long as it had trouble for just a few seconds, the Princess's straight right could accurately break the macho man's jaw.

"The surface is too risky. The ground is full of thick cracks, like a cookie someone dropped on the floor. Let's climb in there to make our way along."

"When the shaking of each cannon blast causes them to close up? We'd meet a worse fate than a worker caught in an industrial press!"

The two idiots complained as they crouched low and ran along the wasteland where two colossal weapons were duking it out. Myonri was waiting for them at her damaged truck. It did not matter if she was not as busty as Frolaytia or as beautiful as the Princess. A short, cute, and well-behaved girl was more than enough! Those Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes came preinstalled with an extremely high-level homing function that would hunt down anywhere with nice-smelling girls, no matter where that might be!!

"Hey, are you still alive!? Here are some reinforcements to reward you for clenching your teeth and sticking it out this long!!"

“I don’t care if it’s just Myonri! There’s something missing in my life if I don’t have someone firmly stepping on me!”

But after working up a sweat with fear squeezing at their hearts, those guys only found an empty and broken truck with a canopy over the back. Stones were scattered around from a cannon blast that must have scored a direct hit to the front. The windshield had shattered and the bumper was unbelievably dented. There was a simple winch on the front that made use of the truck's horsepower, but it too had been crushed and the finger-thick wire had been partially expelled.

And a hastily scratched-out note had been left on the side of the military truck.

"This is looking really bad, so we're getting out of here. Take care of the rest."

Their oasis had dried up.

The adventurers fell tearfully to their knees.

[illegible][illegible]

It was unclear when exactly they had crossed over to another world, but screaming seemed to have released the limiters in their heads like a hammer throw contestant. It was best not to point out that the dam had burst long before this.

With plenty of chemicals pumping through his brain thanks to extreme exhaustion and his own scream, Quenser clung to the side of the khaki-colored truck, which was diagonally tilted due to the partially-removed tires, and crawled up on shaky legs.

"W-we have to win this... We have to win and survive..."

"Eh heh heh. Ah ha ha. Yes, I'll collect the legendary Echidna and make out with her all day long..."

The other boy had overclocked his brain to the point that he seemed stuck in a parallel world, but they had to keep moving if they were to win this.

The back of the canopy-covered truck contained a few devices made by taking apart the air-conditioning units at the maintenance base zone. Their intended use was to have their fans spread the particulate spray of adhesive into the air.

"I hate this world... I hate every last part of this world and its dearth of girls!!"

“Don’t be silly. I mean, this virgin world is populated by nothing but pure girls and I was summoned here from earth as the one and only guy. Didn’t you hear the explanation? Eh heh heh heh heh.”

The Jack in the Box was not at all to blame for their complaints, but the two idiots continued preparing for battle based on a misguided fighting spirit.

And one of them shouted into his radio.

“Quenser to all. This isn’t how we planned it, but I’m about to spread the adhesive!! Pay attention to

the wind direction and wear your masks even if you aren't in the designated area! This might get your hair all dried-out, so run away if you care about your roots! Here we go!!"

"Ah!? ...H-huh? I feel like I was just having the most wonderful dream. Why can't I stop crying...?"

After twisting the hose nozzles attached to the drums and powering on the giant fans, Quenser left the area with the boy who had made a miraculous return.

The Baby Magnum and the Jack in the Box were moving back and forth with MMA-like footwork, which made it extremely difficult to predict their paths, but that did not mean it was completely impossible.

Yes, the Jack in the Box would drive a thick stake into the ground with its tail-like unit to make quick dashes faster than its static electricity system would allow.

(For one thing, it shouldn't get much of a repulsive force from driving that stake into fragile ground. This wasteland is especially fragile, so it should want to avoid anywhere with large cracks.)

Whether it was offensively messing with the enemy Object or defensively making an emergency evasion, the Jack in the Box's quick dashes were indispensable. If it failed just once there, it would grind to a halt, greatly increasing the threat of an attack from the Princess.

And while an Object was a collection of military secrets, the fragility of the ground below its feet could be judged by the naked eye.

All they had to do was keep an eye on the Jack in the Box's movement and surreptitiously spread the adhesive spray along the tougher areas it was likely to travel through.

The Object used a static electricity system.

If they could clog up the repellant sprayers, they could keep the Faith Organization from moving. It did not have to be permanent. Even a few seconds would be enough.

Quenser held his radio to his mouth.

"I'm beginning distribution of the epoxy resin. The more solid areas the Jack in the Box prefers are marked on your map, right? Don't go there and get yourself destroyed, okay!?"

"Just give me the signal."

"Prepare a laser beam secondary cannon. If it moves to anywhere from D4 to F2, fire at its feet! The heat-hardening adhesive will react and clog up its repellant sprayers!!"

"Wait! Hold on, Quens-..."

Heivia seemed to realize something and quickly tried to stop him, but Quenser had already given the signal.

The two idiots' visions were filled with a flash hundreds of times brighter than welding light.

The laser beam itself could not be seen.

But when it scorched the ground, the secondary light and noise pushed up at them from below.

“Gwaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Quenser held his eyes and writhed in pain. He could tell someone else was screaming nearby, but he never would have imagined it was Heivia trying to grab his collar, failing, throwing out his fist in frustration, and happening to hit a giant cactus.

(Damn. But that had to have worked! If the adhesive below the Jack in the Box reacted, then...!!)

He may have been lucky the laser beam had been a secondary cannon and not a main one. Quenser did not have to worry about going blind and his vision started to return after he rubbed his eyes for a few seconds. His vision was blurry, like it was covered in tears, but he could just barely make out the image.

(What happened to the Jack in the Box? Did the Princess manage to finish it off...???)

He was not even 200 meters away from the monster.

Since it could no longer spread its repellant, it must have lost the ability to keep its 200,000 ton mass afloat with static electricity. The Jack in the Box dug up a giant cloud of sand as its floats scraped at the ground and it was desperately trying to recover its balance after pitching forward. The tail that could freely move along the rear 180 degrees was sliding back and forth. It almost looked like a person on the edge of a building rooftop swinging their arms and legs around to regain their center of gravity.

Quenser knew it was working.

They had succeeded.

The Jack in the Box had been stopped. If the Princess fired one of her main cannons now, she could blast right through the spherical main body. This would end it. The Baby Magnum circled around the enemy Object, moved its seven arms, and prepared to fire low-stability plasma cannons to end this.

A moment later, the Jack in the Box stabbed its tail into the ground and leaped to the side.

It weighed as much as two old-fashioned nuclear aircraft carriers. But despite weighing more than 200,000 tons, it nimbly evaded.

It slipped through the gaps in the seven bluish-white lines of the Princess's low-stability plasma cannons.

Quenser, Heivia, and even the nearby cactuses and the destroyed military truck were lifted from the ground. It was almost like the entire ground had become a trampoline, but the forces were simply too great. Around the point the tail had struck, incredible cracks ran out like a window pierced by the tip of an umbrella.

After falling back to the ground, Quenser was nearly crushed by the rolling truck, but he did not have time to scream about something so trivial.

After skillfully dodging, where exactly had the Jack in the Box flown?

It was coming.

It was coming here!?

"Oh, no!! Heivia, run away!! We'll be caught in the middle!!"

“When the hell did you learn the Island Nation’s sexy kunoichi replacement techni-...wahhh!? What the hell is that, goddammit!?”

If that 200,000-ton mass reached them, they would be turned to mincemeat. The two idiots must have thought that being on the ground was too dangerous or that they had to avoid becoming bowling pins when someone threw a strike. They climbed up onto the rolled-over truck and then tried to climb onto the dried brick-colored rocks it was leaning against.

There was no way they could have made it up in time.

By the time they got on the truck, the Jack in the Box arrived.

“...!!!”

“...!?”

Either they did not have time to scream or they were screaming until their throats tore but their brains forgot to process the sound.

One of the Jack in the Box's four floats sent the truck flying and knocked down the rocks they had been trying to climb onto. After just barely scrambling onto the truck, the two idiots were left in the air like the Island Nation Daruma Otoshi game. The truck vanished from below them, they swam through the air with an odd sensation of floating, and then they fell straight back down.

“Agwosh!?”

An indecipherable word left Quenser's mouth and he finally realized his circumstances here.

He was on top of it.

He had ended up right on top of one of the static electricity floats!?

"Heiv-...he's not here!? Did that bastard manage to escape danger all on his own!?"

Failing that game of Daruma Otoshi meant he might have been turned to mincemeat below the float, but the thought did not seem to occur to Quenser. In a variation on a bizarre weather event where frogs rained from the sky, various parts of the truck fell all around: screws, bolts, destroyed tires, bent wheels, etc. Meanwhile, the Jack in the Box began to swing its tail around with a creaking noise.

(What!? Is it going to keep fighting using its pile bunker tail dashes!?)

It was time to make a decision.

Would he remain on the float and be thrown high in the sky, or would he jump down and be crushed by the explosive winds produced by that 200,000 ton mass. After thinking about it, that idiot who probably had an erection year-round definitely felt his balls shriveling up. He was going to die. No matter what he did, there was no saving him!!

“Gyahh! Gyahh!!

Gyaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!

And an indecisive guy always met the same fate: time up.

The Jack in the Box fired its giant stake into the ground once more and leaped toward the other side with flustered Quenser still onboard.

But he did not suddenly lose his footing and fly into the sky like a human homerun.

Something dug painfully into his right hand.

He hesitantly opened his eyes to check and saw a metal wire as thick as his little finger tangled around his hand.

It was a piece of the simple winch attached to the front of Myonri's abandoned truck. The other end of the wire was apparently tangled around one of the many secondary cannons sticking out of the spherical main body like an urchin or chestnut burr.

I'm saved, he thought, just before another thought came to mind.

(Huh? If it lands like this and all the force is concentrated on that single point, won't it just sever my right hand? Y'know, like slicing through a boiled egg with piano wire.)

"E-ee-eeeeek!?"

He only had a few seconds until they landed. He did not know what his options were, so he simply swung his left hand over and grabbed at the wire.

The basic idea was the same as a parachute harness. By distributing the force over his entire body, the impact on any one point would be reduced.

He forcibly wrapped it around his torso as the asteroid fell toward the dried brick-colored wasteland.

"Bwohhh!!!!?"

His ribs creaked and he choked at the strange sensation of pressure on his internal organs. He seriously may have broken some bones, but his right hand was intact. It had not been severed.

He understood just how disgusting he was with a strange sweat covering his face and back, but then he realized something.

He was somewhere else than before.

The Jack in the Box had swung him from the long, long winch wire like a pendulum, the wire had gotten tangled around another secondary cannon on the spherical main body, and he was now dangling down from that.

Was that really just a coincidence?

No, the Jack in the Box was not a natural phenomenon. Since it was moving around based on the Elite's decisions, he could control those movements by interfering with the basis behind those decisions.

Which meant...

"Princess! Keep an eye on your location and have the Jack in the Box move in a zigzag!! I'll try to

climb up to the top using this pendulum motion!!”

“I’m pretty sure that would get you killed.”

“I’d be in even more danger if the Jack in the Box moved around less predictably! Please do this before my belly is crushed like an empty milk carton!!”

This was a lot like assisted suicide.

The Princess followed Quenser’s instructions as she moved around and maintained a lock so the Jack in the Box would counterattack with tail dashes to the left and right. With each dash, the idiot dangling from the wire was thrown around on his midair swing. His path sometimes drew out a downward-facing fan shape and other times he gained enough momentum to make a full circle. Like he was tangling a string around the nails in a pachinko machine, Quenser got the wire caught on more and more secondary cannons as he made his way higher and higher.

“I think it will notice the wire when there’s an error in the secondary cannons’ movement,” said the Princess. “It might conclude it’s just a problem caused by the adhesive, but it’s only a matter of time.”

“Urp. The Jack in the Box is screwed if its movement is taken from it. Even if it receives an error message, will it really have time to worry about anything other than the main cannon which can defeat you? Gwehhh...”

“What are you even hoping to accomplish by getting on top of it?”

“Exactly what we initially planned,” said Quenser while he finally clung to the top of the spherical main body. “Take out that goddamn main cannon.”

Part 11

Now that he was at his destination, he no longer needed the wire. In fact, letting it swing him around any longer would take him elsewhere.

The part wrapped around his torso was not so bad, but the part digging into his right hand was a problem. Once he concluded he could not get it off in a hurry, he pulled out a pen-like electric fuse and taped it to the finger-thick wire.

He detonated it without attaching an explosive.

“!!”

There was a bursting sound several times louder than a firecracker and Quenser looked away. But he had managed to burn through the wire and free his hand. He pulled it off of the hand and retied the part on his torso to his backpack’s shoulder straps. Just like a parachute, he could avoid the previous pain as long as the weight was distributed appropriately.

“Quenser, it’s about to move.”

“Hahh!!”

He wrapped the excess wire around a nearby secondary cannon.

Even if it was secondary, it was still more than a meter thick, making it the same as a small,

centuries-old tree.

He just barely finished his preparations before the Jack in the Box jumped again. He clenched his teeth as he felt a strange floating sensation and prepared for the drop.

Immediately after the force that launched him upwards, his body was floating freely.

The idiot thought the wire's knot may have come undone, but that was not the case. The entire loop of wire had risen up and come off the end of the secondary cannon.

"...Ahh..."

He did not have time for sorrow.

With his support gone, the small human flew more than 50 meters from the ground like a fallen leaf in the wind. If he fell to the ground, he would die on impact. No amount of flailing his arms and legs would help.

But he came to a stop once more.

The Object had more than 100 cannons covering its surface like a sea urchin or chestnut burr. After being thrown through the air, Quenser's loop of wire had caught on another cannon.

(I-I can't expect that to happen again...)

In a weird stroke of luck, he had been thrown off the front of the Object.

He was right in front of the Jack in the Box's face.

The main cannon had a silhouette similar to a collapsible parabolic antenna or an auto-open umbrella. The main pillar stuck straight forward and eight jointed arms blossomed out from that like flower petals. Each arm was equipped with the kind of powerful spring used in the earthquake-proofing to support an incredibly tall building that weighed between several hundred to several thousand tons. All eight concentrated their power on the central pillar to fire the lead shell that was shaped like a baumkuchen.

The springs themselves were exposed.

The giant springs could be seen as thick pieces of wrapped metal connecting the two ends of the arms which were bent in a V-shape. When they were extended, the springs would be positioned right alongside the arms.

But why were they exposed like that?

Every part of an Object's design had a purpose, so there had to be something there.

"The size is different, but the springs themselves are normal coil springs. Are they just chromium steel without any kind of trickery? ...But wait. Normal chromium steel...???"

"Quenser, it's about to jump again."

"...!!!???"

As soon as he received the warning, Quenser leaned his body weight backwards while still supported

by the wire. Just as he managed to fix the wire in place by getting it caught in the indentation of the swiveling pedestal at the base of the secondary cannon, the Jack in the Box made a great leap.

He was in a good position now. This would all be for naught if the loop came off and he was either moved to another secondary cannon or slammed to the ground.

While feeling an odd floating sensation, Quenser turned his head to view the main cannon that looked like a metal bridge from this close up.

"I was right. This is weird. If they were just using the hexavalent chromium to make steel springs, this system wouldn't work!!"

"Quenser?"

He felt the impact of landing.

One of his backpack's shoulder straps tore and he was just about tossed out into empty air. This was his only opportunity to act, so he had to make it count.

"No matter how much force they build up, they're still made from normal chromium steel. So when they release their own power, the springs should grow red hot from the excess energy!!"

Recoil was also a type of force. With the space elevators seen in SF movies that dangled a single vertical wire down from space, having that taut wire snap would release such an immense amount of energy that it produced an explosion rivalling a nuclear weapon.

The same was true of the springs and steel panels containing energy on the level of an Object's main cannon.

And if the springs were nothing more than metal...

"If they're constantly exposed to the immense heat they create themselves, the springs wouldn't last. They should lose their elasticity and stop working pretty quick. The Jack in the Box has to have a countermeasure for that. Does it cool them with liquid nitrogen? No, repeatedly heating and cooling them would only wear out the metal faster. So it isn't that. In fact, it would be weird if they were reliant on a single system."

"Get to the point."

"They're swapping out the springs. Frequently, and on the battlefield! The earthquake-proofing of high-rise buildings doesn't support the entire building with a single spring. This would be why they're having the people of the silo cities make so many springs. They make sure they always have extras and its designed so the other springs support it while each one is being replaced!!"

The Jack in the Box jumped again.

No, that was not it. It had released the springs of the eight arms arranged like a parabolic antenna, combined the vectors to direct them all straight forward, and launched an incredibly powerful lead shell.

He did not have time to follow along and see if the Princess had managed to dodge.

He was thrown through the air from an impact on the level of being hit by a light car from behind. He could not control where he flew. And as his arms and legs flailed meaninglessly through the air,

he saw the Jack in the Box actually use its tail pile bunker to jump this time.

“...!!!???”

There was of course no way for him to dodge.

His inertia cancelled out some of the force, but it was still a 200,000-ton mass. It was a bit like being swatted by a giant wall.

He could not breathe.

Something entirely different from spit rose from deep in his throat and clogged his windpipe. Even so, he desperately worked to grasp his situation as he lay sprawled out on some kind of surface.

Not only was he flattened against the flying Jack in the Box almost like a squashed frog, but he was on the main cannon's central pillar now that the arms had folded up like a closed umbrella after firing. The eight arms had folded up alongside the main pillar and he was caught inside one of the grooves that looked a lot like gear teeth or Island Nation naruto before it had been sliced. That was why he had not fallen. His back was stuck to the side of the main cannon while ignoring the common idea that gravity should be directed downward.

He could hear some kind of creaking or straining sound.

He initially thought it was his spine or ribs, but bones did not sound that metallic.

(The main cannon has a repair factory in the center.)

To repeat, the Jack in the Box's main cannon used giant springs and it was structured a lot like the frame of an auto-open umbrella. When aimed, it would open up like a crossbow. When fired, it would close up along the main pillar.

And when closed, the center was not visible from the outside.

During that time, the inner side of the extended arms was positioned right alongside the main pillar. While the two points were in contact, what if metal shutters opened and replaced the heat-weakened springs with new ones?

(...We don't have to destroy the whole thing...)

He pulled all the Hand Axe he had from his backpack. It was 10 kilograms in all. But attaching a fuse and detonating it would not even scratch a nuke-resistant Object.

That was not his intent.

He desperately used his arm strength alone to knead the clay-like Hand Axe and stuck it to the side of a folded arm while doing his best to remain conscious.

(Even the largest clock tower's gears will stop moving if a small pebble gets inside. A warship's rapid-fire gun can malfunction from soot or dust. That shutter opens up, produces a new spring, swaps them out, and closes once more. If I can keep any one step from working...)

The cross section of the main pillar and eight arms looked a lot like a gear, so he shoved the clump of clay into the gap between the main pillar and an arm.

He did not have a specialized spatula, so he used his hands over and over again.

He did not have time to include a fuse.

It was no more than clay like that, but he did not have time to worry about that.

After a few seconds of hang time, the Jack in the Box landed.

Finally, Quenser flew through the air with nothing at all to support him.

He had no plan for how to survive this.

He might die here. He was more than 20 meters up. Those facts blankly filled his mind as he meaninglessly flailed his limbs around during the awfully long hang time.

A tremendous impact struck his entire body.

He thought he had fallen face-first into concrete.

“Gh, bgh...!!!???”

The impact of falling caused his body to sink even further. Something slimy pressed in at him from all directions. He could not process the oddly damp sensation and he started to panic, but then he realized what it was: water.

He had been thrown from the Object and into a river running across the dry land.

“Cough!! Ubwah, bwah!?”

(Damn, it'd be a tragedy if a guy this good looking broke his nose!)

He was fortunate the water was too deep for him to stand in.

The fundamental fear of drowning gripped his heart as he struggled at the water's surface.

The Jack in the Box was still alive.

“Quenser, if you failed, just say so,” said the Princess. “We need to come up with a new plan. The Jack in the Box is approaching the silo city while crashing into the ground, so the entire geofront might cave in.”

“No...just watch.”

After grabbing onto some rocks rising from the center of the river, Quenser gasped for breath and spoke.

“Everything's all set up.”

That was when the Jack in the Box stopped moving.

This was not due to the tail-like pile bunker.

It was due to the main cannon that folded and unfolded like a collapsible parabolic antenna or an auto-open umbrella.

The enemy Object probably did not understand what had happened. It kept doing the same thing, but the main cannon would not cooperate, just like someone repeatedly pulling the trigger after their handgun jammed.

It did not matter if the cannon had actually been destroyed or not.

The shutters moved along rails.

So just like a train being derailed by a pebble on the track, the slightest foreign object could throw the whole thing off.

"Its main cannon has two modes: a firing mode and a spring replacement mode. But the two modes are mutually exclusive. So if you interfere with the process and prevent it from switching between modes, the Jack in the Box can no longer switch its main cannon to firing mode."

"What did you do?"

"The shutters are a series of connected panels running along rails. The structure is the same for a 200,000-ton mass as it is for a small shop downtown. Shove some clay into the gaps in the rail, and it won't be able to move."

No fuse had been necessary.

The ten kilograms of clay he had kneaded together with all his arm strength had been enough.

"Your static electricity propulsion system and the elastic metal shell cannon using your prized springs have both been taken out. If you're willing to keep up the fight with only the tail pile bunker, then I will praise you for having guts."

Quenser snapped his fingers.

"Now say it, Princess. Tell them this is their last chance to send the white flag signal. Because this is checkmate."

Part 12

He was a complete mess.

If the cute medic nurses had not personally rescued him in a rubber boat, he really might have been swept away by the river and become a deserter.

"My...my head won't turn that way..."

"Oh, dear. You really took a beating."

"Please let me rest my head in your lap."

"Oh, dear. Oh, dear."

Quenser was recharging while being pampered by the kind and gentle girls, but that happy time would not last forever.

"Oh, we've finally made it back to base."

"So which doctor am I getting? The high-pressure glasses woman in a white coat, a sweater, a tight skirt, a garter belt, black stockings, and high heels? Or the wrinkled old man? Today, I think I can aim for the jackpot... The goddess has to be smiling on me now!!"

The comparative lengths of the descriptions showed which one he was hoping for, but neither doctor showed up.

Having brought the base's vehicles to the edge of the cliff, Major Frolaytia Capistrano spoke cheerfully to him.

"Quenser, I'm glad to see you're alive. The emergency is over and things are back to normal, so get back in there and fix the electronic simulation division's toys."

"That hellish work is my final battle? Have you entirely forgotten what human rights are!?"

No matter what terrible things were being said to him, sitting up on reflex had been a mistake. That revealed just how uninjured he was, so Frolaytia winked.

"I honestly didn't think you would fall for that one."

"Eh? Oh, uh..."

"If you really couldn't even sit up, I was planning to send you to the medical room, but if you can move, I have no choice. In a military society, we all work for pay taken out of the people's taxes, so no one gets to eat for free, right?"

"You demon!! If you really want to play the demon, then grow horns, a tail, and wings and then wear a bondage miniskirt outfit for a proper Halloween special!!"

The medic nurses must have had no interest in a healthy boy because they returned to the wasteland in search of any injured in need of assistance.

That signaled the end of a temporary harem that was only kind to you while you had a cold.

"Come to think of it, what happened to Heivia? He'd better not be having a better time than me."

"What, he wasn't with you? Well, he's about as tough as a cockroach, so I'm sure he's crawling around here somewhere. I will have to dock his pay for being late to regroup with us, though."

It really was the worst work environment.

All you good kids out there? Don't have any sweet dreams about the military!!

"What about the silo city?"

"Since it's a blank zone, we can't interfere there."

"Even though you essentially placed a donation box next to a convenience store register to encourage someone to take some independent action there?"

"Ahem."

Frolaytia blatantly cleared her throat when the topic seemed to be turning toward her pain-in-the-rear brother. Anyone who could not "take a hint" here would never survive in the military hierarchy.

Quenser tested out the movement of his neck as he stepped out of the rubber boat.

He glanced in a different direction to view the silo city.

"Damn. When will I finally be able to take it easy?"

"As long as you're working for someone else, never. Now, it's time for that work you love so much."

Part 13

In the silo city named Giant Pizza, the people were hesitantly showing up on the surface.

"What, what? It looks like the commotion has died down."

"I'm scared... Are you sure this isn't the lead in to something else?"

"Don't push, don't push! Oh, hell!!"

The explosions and tremors were frightening, but it was also nerve-racking to have them suddenly stop. The air was filled with an anxious tension combined with a strange attraction, like some invisible force was pushing them onward. It was a lot like searching your own name online even though you were afraid what you would find.

But a voice cleared away that atmosphere.

It belonged to a completely ordinary sort of fat sheriff.

"Don't worry." Thomas Goldenclipper squeezed the ring hanging from his neck and spoke his honest thoughts. "I will find out what the current situation is. Who cares if they're the military!? This is our silo city! I will make sure all four world powers treat us the same. So don't worry!!"

The wave of tension crashed against a breakwater.

It was over.

Even if he had no real power, the sheriff's words contained something that had calmed the people.

A few people walked past him.

"...It would seem they managed somehow or other."

One of them was Bloodrics Capistrano, a young man with a katana who wore a black tailcoat even in this scorching wasteland.

He was surrounded by several bodyguards and he had complete control over thousands of troops, putting them on the same level as a maintenance battalion. He was accompanied by the charity site management triplets who wore red tank tops and miniskirts that made them look like cheerleaders. They stared out of the city, but the apocalyptic roar of main cannons had come to an end.

The triplets pressed their soft-looking cheeks together and viewed a small mobile device while looking as delighted as someone whose social network account was being followed by a celebrity.

"Looks like it's over."

"See, look. This is the footage from the drone."

"The signal management is so lax in blank zones, isn't it? In proper battlefield countries, civilian signals tend to be jammed□"

Just as Bloodrics tried to get a look, the footage cut out.

The Legitimacy Kingdom may have been irritated with the civilian interference and shot it down with a handmade slingshot.

The silver-haired young man sighed.

"The Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance will probably send out investigation teams to preserve their management of the Greater Canyon. Then this will be more of a political struggle than a war. Cameras from all over the world will be here, so you should make sure you get word out to people's living rooms about your opportunities to help people."

"Of course."

"I will be returning to Paris for now. If a noble was injured in this racial salad bowl, who knows who would get blamed. I would prefer not to provide the spark that triggers a war between the four world powers."

"Understood. Continue supporting us online, okay?□"

After casually waving goodbye, the triplets exchanged a glance.

And then they spoke to each other.

"...So how'd it go?"

"Hmm, below average, I'd say."

"Ehhh? That it wasn't an outright failure makes that a really annoying result."

Perhaps because they had been released from the fear and tension, restless high spirits filled the silo city and the triplets followed the flow of the crowds as they walked through it.

"Then again, wasn't it a positive that the Faith Organization's intentions didn't get through to the Legitimacy Kingdom?"

"If your gold egg doesn't hatch, it's meaningless."

"Waiting for the truth of the hexavalent chromium to be revealed and become a 'legend' might have made for some good sample data, though."

Who was Rica, which one was Alisa, and what triplet was Orsia? That was not all that important. The triplets did not care as long as their thoughts formed a single opinion that led to the correct answer.

"The souls of the noble sacrifices reside in the main cannon. By monitoring the process by which that was logically disproven, we could have learned how to break down a 'legend' using data."

"If we could create that kind of anti-legend flowchart, we wouldn't have to rely on the persuasiveness of people's words any longer. Just like online customer support contacts are handled

by AI these days, we could complete a religion-destroying program that automatically searches out and points to the contradictions in any myth or legend.”

“Still, religion sure is scary. If secrets of this magnitude are leaking out, just how far have they infiltrated our military?”

The triplets giggled.

Even with so many people around them, they managed to blend into the background and prevent anyone from paying attention to them.

“Yes, it was the Faith Organization that worked its way into our safe countries while disguising it as junk mail from foreign companies. And it was all paid for by that damn old man who thinks he’s some kind of saint. They even made sure to avoid any landmine terms that would be caught by checks on foreign phone calls and mail.”

“We’re supposed to be the ones who use data as a weapon, so this was like suddenly finding a stealth bomber flying overhead.”

“So if we want to strike back, it has to use data, doesn’t it?”

The result was exactly as they had said: below average.

They could use the human mind to find and point to contradictions, but that had been done at ecumenical councils since more than a millennium ago. They wanted to go a step further. Their idea of “victory” was a lot like the anti-air laser systems that automatically shot down all aircraft: a convenient service that would fill in all the holes on its own.

They wanted a social structure that would deny all religions as easily as a readily-downloadable cellphone translation app. You would not need to be a rhetorical genius. They would spread a system that allowed anyone to tear down what had been built up for a millennium just by holding up their mobile device.

That would mean an age of despair for the Faith Organization.

That was why the Venerable Elder would want to destroy the silo city testing ground while he smirked at them from the other side of that thin tent. That was why he would be willing to use the brute force of an Object to do so.

“We don’t know how far it has spread, so should we head underground for the time being?”

“Yes. There aren’t many people we can truly trust.”

“And we certainly can’t tell them that’s exactly what makes them so valuable□”

The girls turned a corner as they discussed the issue.

A nervous-looking young man was standing there and his face lit up when he saw them.

“C-c’mon, let’s get out of here. If word gets out that three officers – from the Martini Series no less – are trespassing in the Greater Canyon, it’ll turn into a war between the two main countries!”

“Sure thing.”

"Okay, driver. Then get our pumpkin carriage ready"

"I want seafood for dinner. I'm sick of all the red meat they eat here."

The corners of the selfish girls' eyes softened as they spoke.

That young man probably did not realize how important he was as someone they could approach without putting on any kind of act.

Alisa Martini Sweet.

Rica Martini Medium.

Orsia Martini Dry.

Those genius girls who had been created by the Information Alliance giggled as they vanished into the underside of history.

The three sisters had moved all their pawns around perfectly, but they had made one miscalculation.

A grim reaper in black stood before them.

"#49?"

"Call me the Stopgap Grim Reaper. The adults gave me my name and number, so I'm not too fond of them."

The blonde girl was accompanied by a young man who was not the three sisters' type.

She took a step toward those three sisters.

"You were aware of everything from the beginning, weren't you?"

"..."

"The Faith Organization was running those temporary factories by failing to explain the risk of hexavalent chromium and driving the workers to death. You knew, but you let it happen and even watched it play out. ...Was that because they weren't Information Alliance citizens? Or would you be able to do the same to your own people?"

"Calm down, little girl. We were acting on orders from above, so you can't exactly blame this on our own..."

"Do you know where the pair to the sheriff's ring is?"

The girl cut them off with ice in her eyes.

And she repeated herself.

"Do you know where it is buried in this vast wasteland?"

No one could say a word.

It did not matter who those triplets were, even if they were unmanageable geniuses who could break out of a max-security prison barehanded. The look in the girl's eyes silenced them.

A light glistened. From a military perspective, this was an entirely meaningless result. The blond girl's black uniform was caked with dried sand and she held a cheap ring in her hand.

"It's a shame this wasn't an issue you should have troubleshot yourselves. If it was, I could have had you shot right here and now. The fact that you actually did the 'proper' thing here just makes the world look so very cruel."

She took another step.

Her small hand tightened around that ring which - cheap though it was - held someone's feelings for someone else. She was now close enough to fatally stab them if she had a blade and Wraith Martini Vermouths spoke quietly to them.

She only gave them one peaceful warning.

But it contained the implication that, if they did this again, she would mercilessly make good on her words.

"You spoiled brats might think yourselves intellectuals, but could you say the same thing if you were poisoned down to the marrow and buried in a hole?"

Between the Lines 2

The silver-haired and brown-skinned female officer named Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito had arrived in Central Park while moving from cover to cover with a handheld, ultra-high resolution CCD camera.

She was disguised with glasses and a lawyer suit instead of her usual military uniform because her target was the top idol girl who was also the Pilot Elite at the core of her unit.

The girl wore cyclewear that included skintight bike shorts and she was riding a bicycle that was a little large because it was rented with a prepaid card. While she took a break by resting one foot on the ground, her disguised commander was completely locked onto her.

"(Kyaaaahh! No matter what she says, that kitty's body craves the greenery of nature! I just love how she insisted she wanted to go to New York, but she's already gotten sick of the crowds. Oh, and she's so defenseless! Her armpits are wide open!! Ah, ah, ah, no! Don't stick that extra-thick hot dog in your mouth right here in the public park! That's too much!! Too wonderfully much!!)"

"Lieutenant Colonel, you have moved too far forward. We can monitor the target with drones and satellites."

"(Shut up. Ruin this moment and I swear I will kill you. How can we rely on a soulless machine to capture the courageous image of that girl pretending to be calm but still arriving 20 minutes early to meet her parents for food!? Besides, footage from overhead would only show the top of her head, which would be entirely pointless! Are you trying to tell her fortune from her hair whorl, operator!? Hm? But isn't that extra-thick thing a bit much before such an important meal? Oh, she just couldn't resist the delicious aroma, could she!? She's just so cute I can't stand it!! Kyah, kyah, kyah!!)"

"Lieutenant Colonel, I have to compliment you on your ability to blend so perfectly into the background despite acting so bizarrely. Do those rumors of a ninja unit have anything to do with you?"

With its green grass and bountiful fruit trees, Central Park was an area of preserved nature measuring more than 4 kilometers from north to south in Manhattan, which was the center of New York. But no matter how much greenery it had and even though it contained a zoo, an art museum, an outdoor theatre, and other facilities, it was still basically a public park. It provided little cover and was only slightly better than a golf course on that front. That made it a challenge for the bodyguards who either wore suits and neckties or who wore sportswear while carrying yoga mats, but Lendy had moved in closer than any of them. A lot of the professionals clicked their tongues at being on a mission and thus unable to look down at their notes while seeing such incredible skill displayed before their eyes.

Lendy knew everything about their target and their target could not see her.

The woman was a concentrated form of the Information Alliance's structure of influence.

"Lieutenant Colonel, we have a warning from Martini Extradry who is in charge of Manhattan security."

Lendy did not seem to care as she snacked on some fried gyoza in a paper container she had bought from a popular junk Chinese food truck.

"I don't like them. They're like mass-produced products with no life in their eyes. They're not cute like an Elite."

"The flow of data shows an unknown approaching our target. I suspect it is a recruiter for an entertainment agency. He seems to be using a cheap pickup technique where he creates an opening for a conversation by sending several unlisted phone calls to her smartphone and bumping into her when she checks her phone."

"Now that is the kind of report I need to hear. I will kill him. That Martini is a good Martini. Tell her our battalion will do her one favor on the battlefield. As long as it does not sully that girl's hands."

"Lieutenant Colonel."

"Not to worry. I really will kill him."

"No, my worries are in the exact opposite direction. You are in charge here, so please come back to your senses."

The media criticized people who looked at their smartphone while walking as much as people who smoked on the roadside, so the way people faked accidents had changed. Anyone would prefer to bump into a soft girl instead of risking their life running out in front of a high-speed deadly weapon. Unlike with bicycles or cars, contact between people did not require intervention from an insurance company, so it was a lot easier to have a one-on-one conversation and various demands could be made in secret.

Had this man thought an amateur pickup artist's trick would work in the realm of fierce professionals?

Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito was in charge of more than just the formal military. As a staff officer from the Vital Wartime Public Relations Strategy Room, she was involved in the overall creation of a top idol, from the stage costumes to the added CG!!

...The fact that such ridiculous oppression was filed away as dull paperwork was a sign of just how

far the Information Alliance's privileged class would go in its drive to rule everything with data.

"Not only is he going to ruin the mood just as she is preparing to make some enjoyable memories with her parents, but he is going to set her up as the one at fault? He really is scum. This is my chance to change the very history of our military..."

"Are you seriously going beyond a simple crime and turning this into a revolution!?"

That dollhouse queen was already making international tours on her own, so if a competing agency made a pass at her, it could easily lead to a legal battle between giant corporations (if not an actual battle between Objects), but the culprit was probably ignorant of what he was walking into here. That was hardly surprising when the public image of the idol was only CG data created from the girl's motion data. She truly was a sinful little devil if she could draw in a pro recruiter with her unrecognizable real face as well. In the age of photo-editing, it was rare for an unmodified face to look like a goddess.

"Okay, time to get to work," said Lendy. "I can use this to improve her opinion of me even more."

"Lieutenant Colonel, this is a covert mission, so you can never brag about it to the target."

"...Oh, that sounds nice too. I really shine when I protect her smile from the shadows and demand nothing in return. Kyaaahh"

In a distant location, the young female operator failed to keep her stress at bay by sipping at a sweet and honey-filled chain store coffee and chowing down on a custom Island Nation-style bagel that had thin-sliced salmon and tofu paste inside. She finally switched off her expensive headset and screamed.

"Do you look at everything in a positive light, you idol-obsessed freak!?"

"...I heard that. Do not underestimate the Information Alliance's privileged class, little girl."

To repeat, she had switched off her headset.

It was like a supernatural phenomenon.

Lendy was probably also aware that the fear had loosened the young operator's bladder a little.

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