

Chapter 3: Welcome to the End of a Stable World >> Defense of the Chesapeake District

Part 1

This was the worst.

The clean wars had never provided any particularly nice experiences for those two idiots, but this time it truly was the worst.

“Hey, Heivia, weren’t we working to bring love and peace to the world not long ago?”

“Don’t talk, you bastard. That’ll use up more of our oxygen.”

They were in a cramped living space no larger than two bathtubs stacked on top of each other.

The capsule-shaped device had thick anti-pressure armor, two thin arms with propellers on the end that could turn in any direction, a powerful light, and a round window.

It was a small submersible that looked like the product of a startup’s hard work. It seemed to show off how handmade it was, like it was meant to demonstrate how its production had breathed new life into a failing downtown factory, but it was surrounded by complete darkness. However, it was not currently nighttime. The hot sun shining on the Atlantic seemed to have forgotten that autumn had arrived, but the sunlight could not reach this depth.

They were more than 200 meters deep.

The water pressure at the depth was not enough to crush the human body like a punctured basketball, but it was too deep for free diving. It was undoubtedly a deadly region of sea.

To intentionally recover the ocean’s oxygen, thin wires had been laid out lengthwise and widthwise and seaweed had been planted along them. However, that oxygen plant had been split apart by a giant mass of steel that had torn a line across the ocean floor.

In place of sunlight, pale ultraviolet lights revealed the identity of the dark mass: an 85m missile submarine.

Heivia grabbed the radio mic which was attached with something like a phone cord.

“Hey, hey, heyyy. We’re as short on time as you are and we’re only going to bother with humanitarian aid while we’re in a good mood. If you don’t want this to end in a fight over invisible oxygen, then obediently follow our instructions, Capitalist Corporations.”

“Unique Publishing to unidentified craft. The hit to our propeller shaft that ruptured our ballast tank was caused by a torn wire from your oxygen plant, Legitimacy Kingdom. That is a serious case of sea route disruption and a violation of international law. If we get back alive, we will see you in court.”

“Could you put someone else on the line? Overly-serious student council presidents and class reps only work when they’re girls. I think coming down here was a complete waste of time.”

“And do the Capitalist Corporations auction off the right to name their weapons? Y’know, like they do with sports stadiums?”

At any rate, they had to get to work.

There were a few different ways of rescuing people from a sunken submarine. For example, they could send out a small submersible, attach its hatch to the submarine's, and ferry the crew to the surface bit by bit. However, that would take time and only worked if the submarine had plenty of oxygen to spare.

But there was another way:

"We'll be going the balloon route on this one. After attaching a few nitrogen-deployment balloons across the submarine to secure some buoyancy, we will use several submersibles to pull it to the surface."

"That could easily fail," replied the submarine. "What if the submarine breaks in two on the way up!?"

"Trust in the sub you guys designed. We're not as greedy as you in the Capitalist Corporations, but we aren't stupid enough to rescue enemy soldiers for free. We're building up experience by testing out an experimental method. Here we go."

With no motivation at all in his voice, Heivia watched as the various submersibles surrounded the submarine. After getting the submarine to float up, they had to do some work alongside it, but it was not actually supported by pillars. If it suddenly tilted, it would crush them underneath it, so they had to see just how stable it was first.

"We're risking our lives here, so you'd better be thoughtful enough to greet us with a crew full of bikini babes."

"Heivia, they can't violate causality. We were sent out only after the sub sank. No matter how thoughtful they are, they couldn't have selected the crew for our benefit."

"We've got a teacher's pet over here too!? How many times do I have to tell you only girls can get away with being that straight-laced!?"

If possible, they wanted to avoid being anywhere near that submarine and all the dangers it presented, but then they would have to ask themselves why they came down here in the first place. So Heivia kept in contact using the short-range radio while they hesitantly took wires attached to large spheres and directly welded the ends of the wires to the submarine's exterior.

"What a strange sight. This isn't going to cause a water vapor explosion, is it?"

"Wait," protested the submarine.

"There's a method to this. Offshore oil rigs are made of metal, so they've developed ways to weld underwater. Not that that's our specialty or anything."

"Can we please play a word game or something?" asked the submarine. "They play classical music even when you're under general anesthetic for surgery, so being stuck here listening to your terrible conversations is going to make my heart burst!!"

This was not a life-risking group date with several girls, so they were not about to play a party game with a bunch of filthy guys. Instead, Heivia and the others moved on to the next stage of work.

Once they had successfully attached the balloons, the submersibles temporarily moved away. After they sent an electronic signal, the spheres of synthetic fiber ruptured from within.

They were balloons, but they were not like airbags.

The large deep-sea lights showed a translucent sludge covering everything.

The gel was lighter than water and detonating several balloons at once had coated the heavy submarine in the gel, giving it buoyancy.

Quenser commented on the unnatural haze floating in the ocean.

"It's like seeing the aftermath of that one kid in the pool who couldn't hold it in and betrayed everyone."

"Please stop surrounding our submarine with your horrific imagination!"

However...

"Crap, some of us were too slow. #7 and #9, watch the portside tilt. Don't get caught by that piece of junk!!"

"We really are going to sue you!!!!!"

"If you're okay with telling the world how you got your own sub sunk and then had to get help from an enemy nation, then go right ahead! If it gets out that you sank the sub plastered with your sponsor's name, won't you have to pay damages!?"

The submarine just about rolled over, but with the eel-like slippery substance surrounding it, it began to float up instead.

The gap of a few centimeters below it was the beginning of a miracle.

Once it began to float, the submarine moved so easily it was hard to believe it had been stuck in place just a moment before. Now that it had buoyancy, it floated so lightly that a push from the hand was enough to move it in any direction.

"Let's grab that thing and drag it up. I can't believe everyone in there has such a stick up their butt."

"Oh, you poor thing. Why are all you Legitimacy Kingdom boys so irritable? Try smiling every now and then□"

"Please don't force that falsetto! It's creepy!! Why is it that hard workers tend to put all their effort into the wrong things!?"

The amount of oxygen in the submarine was a concern, but there was also a danger of the buoyancy-providing sludge coming off during the rapid ascent.

"How long is this going to take?" asked the submarine.

"Think of it like an elevator. 200 meters would be taller than a trendy hotel's observation deck restaurant, wouldn't it? That's not a height you can travel in a flash."

"Gather the best of the Capitalist Corporations and we could create a silent elevator that travels a 1000m building in a minute. And the ride would be so smooth that it would not rouse a sleeping baby."

“Do you die if you don’t brag about something every five minutes!?”

The arguing continued during the careful twenty minute journey to the surface.

Eventually, the scene outside the round window changed.

The surrounding water remembered that sunlight existed. And they saw schools of small fish swimming ever downward as if afraid of something.

As their ascent continued, they could see some larger fish floating around. They were clearly not here of their own free will.

They felt a low rumbling.

It was clearly coming from above.

“Wh-what?” said the submarine. “What is going on???”

“It’s the same as landmine fishing. The fish hit by the shockwaves are knocked out. Honestly, they had even built an oxygen plant to help the bluefin tuna population recover, but that’s all ruined now that some idiot has come to this marine reserve. The conveyer belt sushi chains are going to get a lot of international criticism again.”

“So they’re gonna continue rubbing lard on random deep-sea fish to pretend its tuna, are they? That Island Nation-obsessed busty commander is not going to be happy...”

They had so longed to reach the surface, but they only found gloom as they approached it.

The submersible the size of two bathtubs broke the waves as it floated to the surface.

And they saw the two combatants.

The Baby Magnum and the Nitrogen Mirage.

Those Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance monsters were firing back and forth on this marine battlefield.

While the Princess switched out her seven main cannons to swap out shell type and moved all around on her attached naval floats, her opponent was a Second Generation Object with nitrogen laser main cannons and an aircushion propulsion device specialized for marine combat. It had three main cannons stacked vertically on either side. It seemed to fire the thick bluish-white beams in the wrong direction, but then they suddenly bent in various directions and accurately targeted the Baby Magnum.

“Ultraviolet nitrogen lasers... Those are hundreds of times more harmful than sunlight, so don’t they violate the treaties?”

“According to the electronic simulation division, the reactor is surrounded by several low-temperature conduction power generators that use liquid nitrogen. They use the reactor’s excess energy to generate even more power to throw into the cannons. Either way, a direct hit will vaporize you, so the cancer risk is kind of irrelevant.”

Laser beams were not visible to the naked eye, but they fried and reflected off of the dust and moisture in the air, which left something like an afterimage behind.

The thick ocean water had cut off the signals, so they found a lot of radio chatter once they arrived on the surface.

“Princess!! Update your meteorological data and reference the nitrogen and temperature distributions! That thing alternates between liquid nitrogen and a mixture of iron oxide and aluminum to create extreme temperature differences, those create mirages that disturb the ocean’s surface, and that is used to bend the light!!”

“Understood, Frolaytia.”

“Listen, Princess,” added the old maintenance lady. “The light should change direction as if being drawn from the high temperatures to the low temperatures. Once you understand the rules, you can predict this mirage laser-bending trick.”

Several clouds of white smoke expanded around the Nitrogen Mirage, but the sound was too soft for something meant to kill. It was reminiscent of the fireworks used to indicate the beginning of an athletic festival. There was a plate-like component raised above the spherical main body and container-shaped ejection devices were lined up along its edge. Most likely, they had exposed -195 degree liquid nitrogen to the outside temperature so that it would expand explosively.

Meanwhile, the Princess moved back and forth with MMA-like steps and accurately dodged all of the blue light dancing around her. To reiterate, what Quenser and the others could see was not the laser beams themselves. It was only the bluish-white afterimage left after the lasers passed through and fried the dust and moisture in the air.

The timeframe and world in which she fought was on an entirely different level.

This was a battle at light speed. By the time your senses could catch up, the attack would have already punched through you.

“...Wow. Is it just me or is the color fading from the Princess’s armor?”

“The dense nitrogen and laser heat being scattered around the area is causing a chemical reaction in the onion armor’s surface. It’s called nitrogen iron oxide.”

“What happens if we carelessly breathe in that colorless fog...?”

“Nitrogen itself isn’t toxic, but it drives out the oxygen and creates a state of hypoxia. I don’t know where the invisible minefield is, so we just have to be thankful we’re inside an airtight submersible.”

“The temperature difference is affecting our radio signals!” said Frolaytia. “The thermomagnetic effect is probably being used to produce an extreme electric potential difference in the air. Watch out for any adverse effects on your radar locks!!”

“But when I use visual confirmation, it looks like the thing is floating,” said the Princess.

“Use the meteorological data to calculate back!” said the old maintenance lady. “It’s only using mirages, so it can’t create an image out of thin air! The giant plate-like meteorological radar on its head is proof of that!!”

Quenser could picture the troubled look on the Princess’s face as she received that avalanche of instructions. Worst of all, they were doing it out of concern for her, so she could not ignore them either.

He also heard a voice of surprise from the sludge-covered submarine they were towing.

“H-how did this happen? You never said anything about this! We’ll sue you for guiding us into danger like this!!”

“Is that your catchphrase or something!? If you like, we can always cut the wires and let you sink back to the bottom again!!”

“Why is the Information Alliance interfering in this...?”

“That’s what we’d like to know.” Quenser breathed an exasperated sigh before continuing. “What exactly are you carrying in that submarine?”

Part 2

Frolaytia Capistrano did not look happy.

The civilized convenience of air-conditioning removed the heat of Central and South America from the room while her laptop screen displayed a close up of someone she did not recall adding to her address book.

It was Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

The small girl had long blonde hair and a distinctive black uniform.

“No need to worry. I am not here to discuss an international conflict today.”

“...”

“Or should I have explained this first? I am an Information Alliance citizen, but I am partitioned off from the standard military. After all, I am the troubleshooting specialist known as the Stopgap Grim Reaper. I thought I would give some advice to the swine that position demands I respect, but if you refuse to listen, I will end this call instead. Yes, I would like for you to take a certain action.”

Frolaytia grimaced and said nothing.

Just how many people on the planet could find that reaction to be undeniably delightful?

“Your time is up, but in a useful way. I will take that as acceptance since you did not reject the idea, Major Tortoise.”

“...You goddamn search engine.”

“I will treat anything other than a yes or a no as an invalid response.” Wraith giggled and spun a pen in her hand. “The problem is that submarine the Legitimacy Kingdom picked up. It belongs to the Capitalist Corporations, doesn’t it? As I am sure you know, its cargo will spark a new war.”

“I believe it was your Information Alliance that attacked us.”

“And that is why this call is such a delicate tightrope to walk. Didn’t I say I am partitioned off from the standard military?”

“What are you saying was on that sub?”

"It would be best if you saw for yourself. I could always tell you here, but I doubt you would listen to a word I said after you learned the truth."

"?"

Here alone, Frolaytia wrinkled her brow in honest confusion.

Wraith sighed on the screen.

"You can interpret this however you like, but I will cast pearls of human words before swine here. ...I am on your side for this one. No matter what the Information Alliance chooses to do."

She sounded oddly sincere.

Then something else happened on the screen. The butler-like young man standing behind the small girl bent over and whispered some kind of report into Wraith's ear.

"My apologies, Major. I too have some business to take care of. I know your battalion will take care of this one no matter what I say, so there is no need to say goodbye. Until we meet again on this seemingly vast but surprisingly small battlefield."

That was when something occurred to Frolaytia.

It was mostly just a hunch, but...

"...Where are you right now?"

"Did you think I was simply with an Information Alliance maintenance fleet? Didn't I already say I am partitioned off from the standard military? Yes, that makes the third time. Anyway, you surprisingly birdbrained commander, I will troubleshoot the problems presented to me in my own way. ...And this time, I am on your side. Do not forget that, okay?"

Part 3

They were near the equator in the Atlantic Ocean.

The region of ocean was right between the Information Alliance home country in eastern North America and the Legitimacy Kingdom-controlled South American Amazon District.

The Baby Magnum and the Nitrogen Mirage had not concluded their battle, but a lull had begun when the Information Alliance temporarily withdrew. The Legitimacy Kingdom predicted they had only withdrawn because the submarine had arrived at a dock.

"Welcome to the artificial volcano base known as New Caribbean Island."

The submarine was welcomed by the battalion's busty Major Frolaytia Capistrano who was flanked by bodyguards, but one part of her greeting caught their attention.

The dock had been quickly dug out of the coast with construction equipment, but the coast was not a sandy beach or a rocky cliff. It was a rough ground made of black pebbles hardened together like crunchy chocolate. The surface readily crumbled away just from scraping the sole of your boot against it.

The ground looked like a failed attempt at pavement and like it would be incredibly painful if you

tripped onto it, but it was actually volcanic rock.

After struggling to get out of the goop-covered submarine, the middle-aged man who seemed to be the captain gave a somewhat sulky-looking naval salute.

“Rigas Blackpassion, Navy Captain. Thank you very much for your uncompensated assistance.”

“Don’t screw with us, Capitalist Corporations. You greedy people know better than anyone that there’s no such thing as a free lunch. Do not forget until the day you die that we have an extremely useful diplomatic card to use against you. You have no hope of reaching admiral now, Captain.”

“W-we cannot permit you to have a base here!!”

“Oh, this is just a bluefin tuna breeding base. There is nothing military about it. You see, my foolish brother is as obsessed with the Island Nation as me and he is the most troublesome sort of charity giver.”

“You expect us to believe this is a civilian installation!? When it can maintain an Object!?”

“It took a lot of doing rigging it up like that. It was not designed that way to begin with.”

Now, what was an artificial volcano base?

The rules governing the sea said that the area within 200 nautical miles of a country’s territory could be claimed as that country’s exclusive economic waters. However, that did not apply to manmade things such as megafloats and offshore oil rigs.

But here they had found a loophole.

“I don’t like borrowing a phrase from the Faith Organization, but this was a heavenly blessing. Who would have thought an underwater volcano would erupt and create an entire new island at just the right time?”

“We are well aware the seismographs detected some unnatural shaking. You drilled into the ocean bedrock and filled the hole with explosives, didn’t you!?”

“I’m not about to listen to any accusations made without definitive proof. Go speak with those lawyers you love so much in the Capitalist Corporations. I’m sure they’re just as impotently frustrated as you.”

...That was the explanation.

“(This whole island is a toy made by that Sir Bloodrics guy, right? And he did so as casually as tossing some change in the donation box next to a convenience store register. Nobles scare me.)”

“(That pretentious bastard apparently wants to bring back the bluefin tuna filleting shows. I bet he wants to be served by geisha girls instead of maids and experience the Eastern wonder known as nyotaimori.)”

The rules of the sea were based on where the land was, but what if a brand new island appeared in the middle of the ocean one day? If it was inside a country’s territorial waters or EEZ, it would naturally redraw the lines. And whether they were honest about it or not, modern technology allowed them to trigger a volcanic eruption in a calculated way.

It was the same as how image-editing software had wiped away the fear of ghost photographs. The questions about the island were on the same level as noticing the number of legs did not match up on a group photo at school.

Unlike the Pacific, the Atlantic Ocean had relatively few islands, so this new technology could easily provide a naval transportation breakthrough along the arctic routes that were more accessible thanks to global warming.

Frolaytia continued speaking with a cruel smile.

“If you wish to lodge here, we will need your cooperation. Now, what do you have aboard that submarine? The marine resource of migratory fish is enjoyed evenly by the entire world, so why has the Information Alliance abandoned their stable supply of tuna by sending in an Object?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“To repeat, we are merely borrowing a civilian bluefin tuna breeding base. I can of course withdraw our military forces from here. I would only need to apologize to my foolish brother. Naturally, we would be leaving your broken submarine and its crew here. I’m not sure why, but it seems the Nitrogen Mirage is very interested in getting at you. It should be obvious what will happen once our excellent protector leaves. If we were placing bets on how long you would last, my money is on less than half a day.”

An unpleasant silence followed.

But it did not last long.

There was no need to mention which way the power balance had tilted here.

“Enough. There is no point in hiding it any longer. Tell them everything, Captain.”

It was a graceful voice, but it belonged to a wrinkled old woman.

The middle-aged man frantically looked back in time to see an old woman in a white coat receive support from Quenser and Heivia because the ground was slippery around the submarine.

“Ma'am!!”

“I said enough.”

The way she cut the man off told Frolaytia this woman was not part of a military-style hierarchy.

The old woman’s gray hair had some blonde remaining and she did not even glance in Rigas’s direction.

“And in the worst case, any destination other than the Information Alliance will work. I can always defect to the Legitimacy Kingdom instead.”

“!?”

“I only want one thing: asylum in a free location where the Information Alliance cannot reach me. Now, which group can better protect me: the Capitalist Corporations that failed after making an elementary mistake, or the Legitimacy Kingdom that made up for that mistake?”

This comment made the Captain look like a chained dog, but it also made Frolaytia narrow her eyes in displeasure.

“You seem to be under the impression that you are Cinderella at your age, but we do not even know who you are. And do not think that you are good enough company that we would just accept this kind of trouble.”

“Isn’t your lack of information merely a failing on your part? Oh, excuse me. I can’t seem to shake that Information Alliance mindset, annoyingly enough.”

“Shall I box you up and ship you to New York?”

Even that old woman lightly raised her hands at the busy silver-haired commander’s words.

As had always been the case, the most frightening thing for a political criminal seeking asylum was being sent right back to their original country.

“Katarina Martini.”

She plainly confessed her name in a fairly theatrical way.

She was used to having her name work in her favor. And she maintained that irritating self-importance as she continued.

“Would you understand some of my value if you knew I was the one who created the Martini Series, an Information Alliance genius girl project that implanted talent into thousands of girls?”

Part 4

“Hello, Major. Have you finished checking what that submarine was carrying?”

Wraith seemed to be treating her like an online friend, but Frolaytia could not stop grimacing.

“...If you were within reach, I might have punched you.”

“You said that out loud, you savage with delusions of intelligence. The mother of the Martini Series is attempting to defect from the Information Alliance. Katarina Martini makes for quite the bombshell, doesn’t she? I mean, she will make for a most delicious prize for whoever grants her asylum. She could create a second or third Martini Series that fills a different sort of container, or she could find vulnerabilities in the girls who make up the core of the Information Alliance. Whatever the case, she makes for bait so incredible it could bring one of the world powers crumbling down.”

With a grunt of effort, the footage blurred a bit.

Wraith had apparently taken a quick hop while holding either a smartphone or camera. She was probably hopping from a dock to a cruiser.

She had previously mentioned that she was partitioned off from the Information Alliance’s standard military and was acting separately from them.

“Where are you planning to intervene from this time?” asked an irritated Frolaytia.

“Let’s just say it will be via a third country. You etiquette-obsessed swine are making a mess of New

Caribbean Island, but this is all happening in the Information Alliance's own-...hyah!?"

"?"

Frolaytia had to frown when little Wraithy suddenly jumped.

"I-I am fine. This had nothing to do with anything crawling around at my feet. (Oh, I can't believe this. Knowing fish eat these gross things makes me never want to eat seafood again.)"

Wraith was muttering something, but she had not gone inside the boat. She was lying on a beach chair on the deck. She placed her communication device on the side table and relaxed.

"Now, I assume you are no longer willing to listen to anything I have to say."

"..."

"Yes, when this concerns the mother of the Martini Series and one of her creations contacts you, even a ringlet curl ape with special blood in its veins can tell how dangerous things are. You have to be well aware that the Information Alliance is willing to wage war to preserve their secrets here."

That was exactly right, but Frolaytia could find no logical reason for the girl to contact her. There was no point in giving advance warning of a head-on clash.

"My specialty is troubleshooting. No more, no less. I primarily find a way to deal with our own people's shameful behavior, so I am not all that interested in an outside group like the Legitimacy Kingdom. That means I have nothing against you, but it also means I am not particularly fond of you either."

"Your point?"

"That means the 'true enemy' I have my sights on is not you. So this time alone, I have no real reason to kill you. As I said, I doubt you'll listen, but as a sign of my wonderful good conscience, I will give you one more warning. As an information specialist, I find it fascinating how much the same words must change before someone listens to them."

Wraith grinned and her butler handed her a cold drink in a clear glass with lots of sliced fruit stuck around the edge.

"I am on your side this time. Keep that in mind and you will not regret it."

Part 5

The situation had grown troublesome.

"Hyah, I thought it was supposed to hold off until nightfall."

In her skintight special suit, the Princess splashed through the puddles as she fled below the eaves of the normal barracks. The dark crunchy chocolate of volcanic rock provided poor drainage, so puddles quickly formed when it rained and those soon grew to small ponds or lakes.

What had happened to the scorching sun from earlier in the day?

The sky was covered by thick clouds.

"I guess they get these sudden downpours everywhere in the world," said Quenser with a sigh.

"I wonder if it has anything to do with the nitrogen and whatnot the Nitrogen Mirage was spreading around. You know, like a meteorological weapon that fires a missile into the clouds to make it rain."

"I just hope it doesn't turn into photochemical smog."

They had been planning to lie on the beach chairs and stare at a mobile device. The waterproofed screen showed them what was happening in the interrogation room.

The Information Alliance's Nitrogen Mirage had apparently withdrawn once the Capitalist Corporations submarine had arrived at New Caribbean Island. It was about evenly matched with the Princess, but some line must have been crossed and they felt the need to rework their whole strategy.

So.

They could not deny that the Information Alliance's next strategy might be to blow away the entire bluefin tuna breeding base that Frolaytia had borrowed after begging her "onii-chan".

"Phew..."

The Princess quietly sighed below the eaves with her golden hair wet with rain. Her special suit revealed every contour of her body, so the boy's eyes followed the droplets flowing down her to burn every last curve into his brain.

Not even the strong downpour had cooled the area. It only increased the humidity, like pouring water on the heated stone in a sauna.

"This footage is really grainy."

"According to the electronic simulation division, the wiring is messed up. Frolaytia had the military parts attached onto the existing tuna base, so they were saying something about us exceeding the capacity on the grounding line that runs from the facility and into the ground."

"?"

"They called it electrolytic corrosion. Send too much electricity into the ground and the earth and moisture around the underground cable will work in place of an electrolytic solution. You know what electrolysis is, right?"

"The process that separates water into oxygen and hydrogen?"

"Yes, that. The same process can apparently break down the cable or steel frames. This weird signal noise must be from corrosion to a fiber optic cable somewhere."

Quenser felt like a guy helping out the young woman next door hook up her TV and DVR, but he had to ask.

He pointed at the mobile device's screen as he did so.

"It doesn't really matter, but why are you so interested in this?"

"Well, because the old maintenance lady said she was helping with the interrogation."

Quenser just about asked why, but he found he could make a pretty good guess.

“Does she think the old woman will open up more to someone from her own generation?”

“We will of course have another witness there.”

Meanwhile, the interrogation in question was beginning.

It would all be recorded and every last word and facial expression would be thoroughly analyzed, but Quenser and the Princess leaned forward to experience it live.

The camera must have been near the ceiling because the footage looked down on the two old women from a somewhat diagonal angle. The Legitimacy Kingdom and former Information Alliance women faced each other across a table bolted to the floor.

“It would seem neither one of us survived this long with a clean conscious.”

“Very true. I am jealous of your position since you don’t have to explain what it is you have done.”

“As someone who was done this myself, let me tell you that defection is not as optimistic a choice as you think it is.”

“There are times when you have to choose the lesser of two evils. Surely you understand that as someone who lived through that age.”

With only about a decade and a half of life under their belt, Quenser and the Princess could not imagine how much was hidden behind each of those words.

“The Martini Series is now viewed as living hardware to fill the holes in the Information Alliance’s administrative system. The idea is to make up for the deficiencies in the giant network by using human brains for the parts that computers cannot yet process. ...Well, you could say that relationship between AI and humans is an expanded form of the Object-Elite arrangement that the Information Alliance has developed a few experimental examples of.”

“Based on that, it would seem the project was a success. As someone surrounded by the military in her research, you would have had all the money you could have wanted.”

“True enough. I was too successful.” Katarina gave a weary smile and elaborated as if gently nudging a giant metal ball from the top of a slope. “Personally, I only ever wanted just one member of the Martini Series. All that talk of living hardware to fill the holes in the machine-ruled administrative system was no more than a convenient way of gaining the research funding I needed. And even after they more or less threw cash my way, I never did manage to create a perfect Martini.”

“Was there a specific individual they were modeled after?”

“Cassandra Martini. She was my mother. She lived in that insane age before the four world powers formed, when Objects spent all their time wiping out land, sea, and air forces to prove the title of strongest belonged to them. In that truly lawless age of upheaval, she passed away protecting her young child to the very, very end. She is my personal hero and she is the purest, the original, and the truly perfect Martini.”

“...”

A short silence followed.

A parent protecting her child sounded like a simple thing, but since they had not lived in that time, Quenser and the Princess could not even imagine how difficult that must have been. And it was because that woman succeeded that Katarina Martini was here now.

“So you were driven by a juvenile drive toward womb regression.”

“Yes, the child attempts to create her mother and return to her protective care. The Martini Series was an experiment to take the MRI cross sections of the original, intentionally create the same ‘deviations’ in someone else’s brain, and give them the same balance as that genius. But from the very beginning, my research violated the rules of this world. I would rather not come off sounding like the Faith Organization, but perhaps you could say it was god’s will. As each roll of the dice continued to not come up in my favor, I found I had countless children who had each inherited just one cross section of my mother’s brain.”

The old maintenance lady let out a soft breath after listening this far.

And she did not hesitate to speak.

“So why do you want to defect? If you have an issue with your research environment and were hoping to get a fresh start elsewhere, the Legitimacy Kingdom’s answer is no. We aren’t going to hand you living children for your juvenile game of dress up.”

“Even though you continue to mass-produce Pilot Elites?”

“That might be a necessary evil in this godforsaken world. But what you’re doing is clearly more focused on your own little games.”

“The self-proclaimed sensible side in the Information Alliance said the same thing at first. But when faced with geniuses who were completely off the charts, that alleged sense of theirs was clouded by greed.”

That demon scoffed.

Almost like she had held this same conversation many, many times before.

“...But that is not the crux of the issue. It is true I am displeased with the Martini Series’s failure, but I do not wish to do any of that ever again.”

“What?”

“The Martini Series carries a severe problem, so I am seeking the assistance of a powerful force that can fight them and eliminate them from the Information Alliance’s system.”

“You made these children, but now you’ve deemed them failures and plan to kill them yourself!? Using war and assassinations!?”

“Just hear me out.”

With that, Katarina placed a hand on her own aged chest.

No, that was not quite accurate.

It was unclear when she had picked it up, but she held a Legitimacy Kingdom mobile device just like the one Quenser and the Princess were watching the footage on.

When it emitted a beeping sound, the people in the interrogation room also noticed something was wrong.

But Katarina tossed it onto the table before they could do anything.

"I kept the truly sensitive data embedded in my heart. I placed the files in my pacemaker's unused memory and set it up for contactless extraction, just like the automatic ticket gates at a train station."

"...What...is this?"

"The core of the Martini Series's problem. This is a history of the life my mother, Cassandra Martini, lived under a second handle name."

The old maintenance woman was speechless.

The footage did not let Quenser and the Princess see what she was reading.

But they could tell it was something shocking.

"My mother was a rational killer. ...Although, in that age of insufficient resources, it may have been necessary if she was to support a young child like me."

Katarina was blunt as she discussed the woman she had called her personal hero.

"That was a lawless age of upheaval. That file provides details on 39 incidents or uprisings that can no longer be investigated. These records must have been like a trophy to her. Succeed or fail, she would write out the series of events and add a flowchart leading to the next incident. Unsatisfied with a single coincidental success, my mother used this to refine her skills. Yes, her skills as a professional who systematically plundered from highly secure facilities, both military and civilian."

"So...so this is what you meant?"

"I only learned of this truth after I began the genius girl project in search of my mother. And as a result, I cannot even predict how much of my mother's violence any one of them inherited. The closer to perfection they came, the more willing they will be to kill people as long as it is 'rational'. In the worst case, every last one of them may have reached that threshold."

"Didn't you say the Martini Series numbers in the thousands and has worked its way deep into the Information Alliance administration and military!? If the original's violence has been reproduced in them, they won't just rely on knives or guns. What if they take the great influence they have been given and begin 'prowling around' using it as a weapon!?"

"You should assume the state and military are entirely controlled by the kind of people who would readily kill the elderly or the very young to have fewer mouths to feed during a famine. We might see the onset of an age of joyous malice that makes the oppression and slaughter of the infamous witch hunts pale in comparison. In fact, it may already be starting simultaneously across Information Alliance-controlled territory."

Quenser and the Princess exchanged a glance.

In this case, they could not expect the Information Alliance to purify itself. After all, the budding violence would come from the genius girls who had been positioned to fill the holes in the supercomputer-controlled administration and military. They had been placed in control of a worldwide vulnerability from the beginning, so they could bring the normal system crashing down just by switching off their own duties.

And Katarina would not have chosen to defect without good reason.

She had to have worked to fix the problem from within the Information Alliance. She had only shifted focus to an external attack because those efforts had produced no meaningful results.

Was that because no one around her could sense the danger?

Or had some member of the Martini Series already gone around and made sure nothing could be done?

“This age is supported by the constant conflict between the four world powers. It sounds strange, but that balance will fall apart if one of our enemies truly collapses.”

“...”

“So if the Information Alliance crumbles from within, the table supported by those four legs will fall over. Once that happens, the entire clean war concept will vanish like so much mist.”

For some reason, those words brought Quenser’s childhood friend Monica to his mind. She had been a haughty and sharp-tongued noble girl until her family had collapsed one day. Then she had been pursued by the people of their town and forced to tremble with her family in a commoner family’s small food pantry. The shift to a new age was not always a positive change. No matter what choices someone made, a great power outside their control could decide whether they would have fortune or misfortune. That was a nightmarish idea for a commoner like Quenser who was constantly oppressed and forced to obey the decisions made for him.

And now chaos on that same level - no, on an even greater level - would spread around the entire world.

“We might see a return of that lawless age of upheaval my mother secretly thrived in. I could easily see it happening if they decide to end this fattened age of temporary peace and instead live a life ruled by rationality and efficiency.”

Part 6

“.....”

Frolaytia Capistrano maintained a stony silence with an expression to match.

On her laptop screen, Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had withdrawn into her cruiser where she was casually selecting a swimsuit.

“Hey, Frank, I’ll go with this one. We aren’t on our way to have some fun, so something that covers this much skin would be best. We have to take this seriously.”

The butler-like young man only ever agreed with his arrogant master, so it was up to the busy

silver-haired commander to confront the girl who was blowing up a swim ring despite what she said.

“Hey, brat.” Her voice seemed to rise up from the depths of the earth. “That’s what people call a school swimsuit.”

“Oh, I am well aware. This is a legend from that technological powerhouse of the Island Nation, isn’t it? I can’t seem to figure it out myself, but the incredible knowledge contained within this swimsuit must be ahead of its time. Yes, how could I choose anything else before heading out to the battlefield? This battle costume has a real...I suppose you would call it an aura.”

“I am only contacting you as a form of insurance. I know you people are as hard to kill as a roach infestation, so I’m betting on you not collapsing quite so easily.”

“...”

“From the barbs in your voice, I can only assume you insects have finally heard the truth of the Martini Series.” Wraith laughed and spread the simple swimsuit out between her hands. “The more you learn, the more it traps you. And no further information will bring any peace of mind. It’s like a bog, and is the worst case scenario in information warfare. Do you understand now what it means to take on the Information Alliance?”

“I doubt an actual murder machine would give me an honest answer, but I’ll ask anyway: Are you a murder machine?”

“I would like to say everyone participating in war is one, but no one likes a philosopher on the battlefield. And I guess jokes will only harm your impression of me. ...To be honest, that is the exact question I am trying to answer.”

“Are you afraid of your origins?”

“Very much so. And as something like the early signs of an earthquake, the primary researcher is now attempting to defect to some distant land. Do you see now why I am in such a rush?”

“What good is asking her? If Dr. Frankenstein tells you you aren’t a monster, would you, as her creation, really believe her?”

“...Perhaps not.”

Here alone, Wraith had the look of a weary old woman in her eyes.

The butler-like young man gently supported her shoulders from behind, so the blonde girl shut her eyes and leaned back.

“It’s the dilemma of searching your own name. You know the search isn’t going to turn up anything pleasant, but you can’t relax until you do it anyway. You aren’t hoping to find something good; you’re investigating yourself because you fear there is something bad out there. And you keep doing it over and over.”

“...”

“By the way, Major. Even a fool like you is free to view me hostilely and I cannot stop you there, but I do have one piece of advice. You are of course free to believe me or not.” The girl opened her eyes and the usual intensity had returned to them. “There are thousands of Martinis throughout the

Information Alliance. So I may not be the only monster who was sent to this region of sea.”

“You mean...?”

“Because of my distance from the standard army, it’s difficult for me to determine who exactly it is. ...But, Major, you should consider every possibility right now. Because every last member of the Martini Series holds some kind of emotion for our designer, Katarina Martini. And that emotion could be love or hatred.”

Part 7

A dull thudding sound repeated on and on without end.

Frolaytia had laid her head down on a briefing room table and she was banging her forehead against it with a truly displeased look on her face.

“(Wow, I don’t want to get anywhere near her right now.)”

“Heivia.”

“Why do you have to call me over now of all times!?”

When he heard the low voice slip out from the gap between face and table, Heivia jumped right up into the air. But whatever his reasons were, he had to obey in the military. There was simply no way for a private to outdo a major.

“When did we start having to protect scum that doesn’t even belong to the Legitimacy Kingdom? Answer me.”

“Which mode do you want here? The teacher’s pet or the back alley drunk? ...Well, let’s see. We are a peacekeeping force that attempts to share the common asset of world peace with everyone for the stability and prosperity of the entire international society, so...”

“No one wants that teacher’s pet answer, you dumbass!!”

“Agh, I chose wrong!?”

It was a ridiculous demand, but that was how the military hierarchy worked. If anything did not work out, the higher ups could simply blame it on their subordinates.

(I need to become the head of my family so I can boss these meatheads around.)

“You look like you have something to say, Heivia.”

“What, are you policing my thoughts now too!? What a pain in the ass!!”

Frolaytia finally lifted her head from the table. And it seemed she intended to look him in the eye while continuing the conversation. Realizing he was not going to be released anytime soon, Heivia sat across the table from her.

The Major began speaking with her boobs resting on the table.

“We have a few problems here.”

“Including a busty, silver-haired commander who exploits her workforce. ...Whoa!?”

When the end of the long, narrow kiseru dropped right next to the hand he was resting on the table, Heivia just about jumped straight up along with his chair.

Frolaytia ignored that and continued.

“First, is what this alleged Katarina Martini says really true? Keeping this a secret is working against us. Our intelligence division has been negotiating with their Information Alliance contacts, but the most they’ve managed to do is confirm the name Katarina. They have yet to get a photograph.”

“Yeah, if that part isn’t true, this whole thing falls apart. And weaponizing information to sow confusion is exactly the kind of thing they would do.”

Heivia answered with his eyes glued to the boobs changing shape atop the table, but Frolaytia was apparently too irritated to notice. She lethargically brushed the hair off the side of her face.

“Second, even if that old woman really is Katarina and she is telling the truth, how much does the Information Alliance know? Why was the Nitrogen Mirage sent here? Was it simply to retrieve or kill the defector and prevent an information leak, or was it sent by the Martini Series?”

“Well...that might change what kind of aftertaste this leaves with us, but is it really all that important? It’s an enemy Object either way, so can’t we just have the Princess blow it away?”

He received a blatant tongue click from across the table.

She must not have liked something about that, but Heivia knew asking about it would only bring more trouble, so he simply accepted his reward with a smile.

“Knowing whether our enemy is a Martini or not would tell us how persistent their pursuit will be, but fine. ...Third, if the Martini Series really is carrying this time bomb, what can we do? The Nitrogen Mirage is only the vanguard, so blowing it up isn’t enough to earn a happily-ever-after.”

“What? If we get that old woman to Legitimacy Kingdom territory and send the data she has to the top brass of the Information Alliance...no, wait. That wouldn’t work.”

“The Martini Series has already worked its way deep into their administration and military. Any warning sent like that would just be suppressed.”

The world was like a car supported by four tires and one of those tires was trying to puncture itself. They knew it was happening, but there was nothing they could do. They did not particularly care if the Information Alliance destroyed itself, but they did not want to be caught in the great crash afterwards.

Looking annoyed, Frolaytia once more laid her head on the table.

“...We have so much on our plate here. This would be so much simpler if this alleged Katarina Martini turned out to be lying about everything and the world isn’t in any real danger at all.”

“Wishes can’t alter reality.”

“I know. War would be easy if the bullets avoided you as long as you wished hard enough. And the military needs to assume we’re always a step away from the worst case scenario.”

“Meaning?”

“We need to face the possibility that the Martini Series is near collapse. The real question is what we do about it...”

Part 8

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray stood below the blue sky after taking her fancy cruiser out to sea. The feel of the unfamiliar swimsuit must have bothered her because she reached for her small butt and stuck her index finger below the edge to adjust it.

To allow the bluefin tuna population to grow, fishing boats generally did not cruise through this area. The region of sea was primarily used for the idle rich to enjoy diving or some scenic sex, but now a great many ships were fleeing through it to avoid the naval battle being fought across the horizon. Thanks to that, no one would notice a suspicious radar blip on their sea chart.

“Frank.”

When she called for her subordinate, the tall young man walked over without a word or even a noise. The rocking of the boat did not hinder him at all. He was always like this. He was so perfect, so skilled...and so obedient that he did not truly fill the hole of loneliness in the girl’s heart.

She was a troubleshooting specialist, the Stopgap Grim Reaper.

That role meant she more often targeted her allies’ backs than an external enemy.

That meant a bodyguard whose skills were not up to snuff would be meaningless, so only someone as sharply honed as him could serve her.

The ones who had been great company had died first and this young man was the only one who had survived this long.

The silliness in the Mekong District had reminded Wraith of a forgotten period of her life.

Those were the kind of people who vanished from her workplace.

The grim reaper slowly narrowed her eyes and whispered to her loyal servant.

“...Am I insane?”

She grimaced as soon as she said it.

What good was asking that question to a dog who knew only how to obey? Frank could only coldly do as Wraith said or infer the answer she wanted by viewing her expression. Either way, she could not draw out his honest thoughts. That was hardly surprising after he had seen so many of his colleagues fall to deadly bullets after disobeying one of Wraith’s selfish orders and running off to rescue the unit at the center of a scandal.

He would not rid the girl of her loneliness.

This was like a curse of Wraith’s own making by only allowing the most obedient by her side.

The small blonde girl knew how sick of this she was, so she shook her head. She smiled bitterly at how much she craved disobedience.

She thought of Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell.

And then she looked to Frank who was their polar opposite. Finally, she spat out some words that seemed to stab into her own heart.

"I can't be picky when I set it up this way myself."

Part 9

What were they to do if they assumed the Martini Series was near collapse?

This was their answer:

"Can we really gather information with this thing?"

"Just watch. Besides, we've long since passed the days when actual people are sent in for spy work. Although this was originally a personal project to see if it could help with maintenance inside the Object."

The excitement was occurring in the electronic simulation division's space. Quite a few people were gathered in that filthy room that smelled of dried squid and was known as either the toy box or the junk room.

The chorus pounding on the roof had ceased, so the unexpected downpour must have ended.

But rain or shine, this person was just as talkative. The technician who was introverted but wanted recognition was Lilim Gazette, Age 17 (♀). She was the type who had few inhibitions on her blog but grew much more withdrawn at an offline meeting, so she was fairly flustered from all the attention on her.

"It was lucky this was a bluefin tuna breeding base. To determine the migration route the tuna take, they embed transmitters in a few samples and have them swim around. That means the Information Alliance should just ignore any suspicious signals coming from the ocean. More than that, we can use those transmitters as wireless routers."

"And you attached thumb-sized spy robots on the back of those tuna?"

"Do you have any idea how fast those sushi ingredients swim through the ocean? They're faster than some torpedoes. A toast to Sir Bloodrics and his Island Nation obsession!!"

"Let's see," said Quenser as he pulled out an analog paper sea chart. It seemed out of place in the electronic simulation division that wanted to turn everything into data, but spreading out the sea chart on the table and lining up kid's meal toy ships made it feel more like a simulation game.

"We're on New Caribbean Island which is here. The Information Alliance fleet is holding position 120km north of that. Umm, if I place the tuna migration route on the map..."

"This should work. And if it doesn't, we can always place them on the backs of seabirds that will carry them over."

The Princess seemed somewhat zoned out as she poked at a spy robot sitting on a shelf. It was three or four centimeters long, its shiny silver body was made of a few overlapping panels, and a bunch of tiny legs could be seen when it was flipped over. It may have been based on a pill bug...no, on a wharf roach.

The necessary tuna had been captured and set up in advance. That jewel of the sea had already been released and it was quickly approaching the Information Alliance ships. The indecent LCD screens in here normally only displayed fighting games or swimsuit models, but one of them now showed the giant propeller of a warship from below. Using the tuna had been even more useful than expected because the footage was surprisingly stable. The wharf roach that had hitched a ride both physically and signal-wise was doing perfectly.

“Incredible,” said Heivia as he watched from the side. “If we converted one of those into a tuna torpedo, we could sink them like this.”

“They would learn what to look out for after the first time and we’d be excoriated in an international conference. Those things are still protected ingredients that nobles spend a fortune on.”

Undaunted, Quenser tried to learn as much as he could about this rival technician’s technology.

“But how do you get the spy robot up onto the ship? Tuna don’t jump out of the water like dolphins, do they?”

“Heh heh heh. They’re lighter than water, so if they let go of the tuna’s back, they’ll float right up to the surface. From there, they just have to ride the waves to the side of the ship. They can also kick at the water with their feet when the waves aren’t enough or they need to adjust their direction. No matter how steep a slope it is, these cute little wharf roaches can climb right on up.”

Is that how it works? wondered Quenser and Heivia as they and the other potatoes focused on the screen.

But then an accident occurred.

“Urp, ughh... Th-the footage...is rocking in the waves...”

“Keep at it, Lilim. Don’t let go of that stick that’s been so worn out from playing too many fighting games. This was your idea, wasn’t it?”

About half of the potatoes were hit by the motion sickness, but it was especially bad for Lilim Gazette, Age 17 (←Important), who was leaning forward and focusing more than any of the others. But all Quenser could do for the pale-faced girl was create a double-layer motion sickness bag out a plastic bag and a paper bag.

But after a long and hard battle, she managed to attach the spy robot to the side of the ship by using the long-range remote control system that was hijacking the tuna tracking signal.

“That’s their command ship, the Flagship 019. Let’s see what they’re up to.”

“Wait, isn’t that the ship we saved before!? I knew helping someone was only going to come back to bite us!!”

“That captain was sent elsewhere, so I imagine it’s being run by someone else entirely.”

Once the spy robot had attached to the side of the 200m battlecruiser, the footage did not move around nearly as much. That said, it was still out at sea, so the movement did not vanish entirely.

While undergoing an internal struggle, Lilim used the hijacked signal to send the spy robot further and further up the ship. Some of the potatoes watched on from the side and others had been

defeated and driven to vomit, so it was a dramatic scene of sweat and tears for a variety of reasons. It may have taken a different form than usual, but this was undoubtedly war.

After climbing the steel wall that leaned out further than vertical, the wharf roach arrived on the deck. However, this was where its mission truly began.

“Okay, let’s review, Lilim. Frolaytia wants to know who it is commanding the Nitrogen Mirage. She wants to know if the Martini Series is interfering in any way, so let’s work at figuring that out.”

“While you’re at it, try to find any classified data or blueprints for the Nitrogen Mirage itself,” added the Princess. “It would be great if there was a maintenance manual lying around.”

Just then, something like a giant suspended ceiling of rubber fell down and the screen went dark.

“Eh? Ah!? What, what, what!? The signal just cut off!!”

“Was that...? I really don’t want to accept this, Quenser, but I recognized that zigzag pattern on the falling ceiling...”

““Don’t pass this off to me! And don’t you say it! Don’t say that was the sole of an unsuspecting Information Alliance soldier’s boot!!”

“...”

“What’s wrong, Lilim!? C-c’mon, reaching for that motion sickness bag is like accepting defeat! Ahhh!!”

Something must have snapped inside her when all her effort went to waste, so the 17-year-old gave in quite spectacularly. Their dreams destroyed, Quenser and Heivia could not suppress the tears.

Good camouflage could be a problem in its own way.

But Lilim Gazette seemed to have recovered now that her stomach was emptied out.

“D-don’t worry. A bluefin tuna weighs 350 kilograms. We could fit tons of finger-sized spy robots on that thing, so we’ve got plenty of extra lives!!”

They had apparently scattered a lot of the small robots across the ocean surface like bait. The 17-year-old accessed another one and tried again at this instant-death action game.

“Wait, Lilim. You have to memorize that fat guard’s patrol route!!”

“...”

“Ahh, that’s a rat. You were eaten by a rat!!”

“.....”

“Are you stupid!? How do you fall from the ceiling plumbing and drop right into the toilet!? Waaahh!!”

“Urp... I-I can’t take any more of this!”

She should not have had anything left in her stomach, but Lilim Gazette, Age 17, (who was quickly

acquiring a new defining trait) grabbed the barf bag and began dry heaving. Still, she had made it pretty far. This was their chance to acquire some classified information, so they could not have her give up here.

“Lilim.”

“...(Tremble, tremble)”

“Please, Lilim. Do us a favor and gently grab this thick and curved stick again!!”

“Stop!! Don’t put that dirty stick in my face!!”

...She seemed to have been deeply traumatized. Even the potatoes started feeling sorry for her as they surrounded her and poked hard things against her cheeks that were puffed out to fight the rising urge to vomit.

Plus, Quenser and the others wanted to try their hand at this. However, this instant-death action game was too difficult for just anyone to play. In fact, if even the developer herself could not beat it, a real video game would have received nothing but complaints.

“Does anyone here know how to use joysticks like this?”

“Yes, we need someone with plenty of qualifications, who’s skilled with their hands, and could probably pilot just about anything...”

As Quenser and Heivia listed off the conditions, the potatoes’ gazes all gathered on one person.

The person pushed up to stardom in place of the 17-year-old vomit girl was a pure wildflower and their true jack-of-all-trades: Myonri.

“Eh? Ehhh!?”

“Please, Myonri.”

“Please wait! There’s someone on the floor right over there showing what this does to you! This is a demonic machine that no girl should ever touch!”

“We get that, but please just grab this stick. You can look down and slowly, hesitantly reach out your trembling hand. You can even shut one eye like you’re being handed a water balloon that might burst at any moment.”

Meanwhile, the Princess was adorably and silently puffing out her cheeks at receiving no attention whatsoever despite this being a piloting mission.

And despite how much she complained, Myonri got the hang of it super fast once she got started.

“Hmm. So you don’t move each individual leg. You just tell it front, left, or right and it does the rest for you. It can move forward or turn to the left or right, but it can’t back up. And when it reaches a wall head on, it automatically performs the action to climb up the wall. This is really neat.”

“...I see Myonri’s the type to intentionally let a few of them die to test things out.”

“And that smile on her face as she sends them to their death kind of scares me. Is this what girls are like on the inside...?”

The cute little wharf roach had left the simple floor and was instead crawling along the ceiling as it moved deeper and deeper into the ship. It could not pass through the watertight doors that did not leave any gap at all and the hijacked tuna signal could not reach too far inside, but other than that, it provided a high level of freedom.

“What can this thing do?”

“Umm, it was originally meant for Object maintenance, right? In addition to the standard camera and microphone, it can apparently intercept local signals. That means phone calls and emails too. Of course, it will all still be encrypted, so we’ll need another computer to handle the decryption.”

The spy robot was surprisingly high spec.

It was fun using it themselves, but they did not want to be on the receiving end.

“Zzz...mutter, mutter...”

The Princess must have gotten sick of being ignored because she had gone to sleep in the middle of the mission.

And since she leaned defenselessly against Quenser, the rest of the potatoes’ hostility focused in on him.

“Okay, that’s it. We need to kill him.”

“Okay, that’s it. We need to kill him.”

“Okay, that’s it. We need to kill him.”

“Hey, I thought it was my turn to be the center of attention!” protested Myonri. “I’ll quit on you, dammit!!”

When the less noticeable girl grew tearful, everyone focused back on her.

Everyone faced Myonri like they were looking at someone who had tried to up their popularity on a social network by announcing they were shorting some stock and then got arrested for it.

“Umm, we drew up a diagram of the Flagship 019 before, right? Y’know, when taking measurements for the rescue operation.”

“We wouldn’t know since we were looking after some tanks at the time. But is this it?”

“Hmm... It looks like they won’t let us into the bridge or combat command. And I’m afraid the tuna signal won’t reach very far inside...”

“Wait, Myonri, then where are you headed?”

“The best place to find sensitive information has always been the break room.”

She once more causally revealed the true face of girls. The potatoes’ balls shriveled up and they did not want to direct the conversation any further in that direction, but they were the ones who had put her in control. Quenser focused on the soft sensation of the napping Princess in order to tilt the scales toward his ideal image of girls. He would not have much of a future if he grew disillusioned with teenage girls at his age.

He watched the cute little wharf roach that was infiltrating the ship using a tuna signal.

A lot of girls in white sailor uniforms were gathered there.

“Wow, they’re squatting, wow! And they’re scratching there quite a bit! Ah, ahh!! I don’t want to see this! I don’t want to see any more of this group!!”

“Be quiet. I can’t hear what they’re saying.”

“But all they’re talking about is who slept with who and how someone got promoted so fast by screwing their commander!”

“I said be quiet!! Mhh, this is a big deal...!!”

This seemed to have lit some kind of fire in Myonri.

The potatoes tilted their heads and wondered if the entire mission had gotten sidetracked, but then something happened on the screen.

“Hi, everyone. Mind if I join you?”

“Geh! It’s Little Miss Perfect!”

“The name is Piranirie Martini Smoky. And being a genius girl can actual make it easier to get stiff shoulders. Oh, or is it taboo to mention stiff shoulders when you don’t have any boobs?”

A small girl of about 13 joined that no-rules death match.

Most of the girls wore sailor uniforms because they were in fact sailors, but this new girl with wavy black hair was somewhat different. She wore a blue parade coat with gold stitching on top of her uniform. The sleeves were baggy enough that only her fingertips poked out and the hem dragged along the floor. It actually seemed to accentuate how short she was. And it was blue. That color was used in the Princess’s special suit since it symbolized the Legitimacy Kingdom, but it was best avoided for a naval force. It was well known for making someone harder to find if they fell overboard. Since she had gone out of her way to wear something like that, she must have had the same privilege as a Pilot Elite to overpower a group with her own individual ability.

But she had given some important information for Quenser who had a girl’s head on his shoulder like he was being blessed on the train ride back from school. He looked to that girl who was skillfully spinning a fountain pen with the fingertips poking out of her baggy sleeve.

“One of the Martini Series...? So are they really interfering with this mission?”

He demanded someone quickly check with Katarina, but Heivia only dug out some earwax with a dubious look on his face. Quenser’s message had not reached anyone.

“But do you really need to hold this girls gathering in such a cramped place?” asked the girl on the screen. “You could always go somewhere with more space.”

“...We have our reasons.”

“Heh heh. So you still have enough innocence left to care what the boys think about you.”

“Why you...!!”

“Good, good. You’re so cute. ...Oh, and you can punch me if you want, but leave a bruise anywhere visible and it’s game over for you. In fact, if I just so happened to trip and hit my forehead here, you would never receive another promotion. Never. Ever□”

“...”

“That’s more like it. It has not been easy making all the necessary adjustments with those old men at the top, so let’s be more candid down here. I made sure to leave behind my safety device – that guy who looks after me – so I really was just hoping to relax.”

Piranirie sounded casual enough, but her cheerful tone hid a hint of mockery. She may have been used to this kind of treatment.

She controlled the people around her by taking advantage of how delicately she had to be handled.

Finally, one of the girls in the break room hesitantly opened her mouth.

“Um, does that have anything to do with why we haven’t seen any of the guys recently?”

“Yes. This is what I was trying to convince those old men to do.”

Piranirie Martini Smoky casually confirmed it.

And...

“If we really want to get that defector back, is this any time to be pitting Objects against each other? Save me this clean war nonsense. The only real answer is to put together a team of divers and attack the Legitimacy Kingdom base. I mean, it’s a remote island. Who’s gonna see?□”

Just as a chill ran down all of their backs, the windowless electronic simulation division room’s lights went out and they were surrounded by complete darkness.

Part 10

“Tch. So it’s started. Your test has begun, Legitimacy Kingdom.”

While still bothered by the butt of her black one-piece swimsuit (which was apparently called a school swimsuit in the Island Nation), Wraith Martini Vermouthspray spoke quietly on her cruiser.

“Don’t you die yet, my beloved fools.”

Part 11

They heard an explosion and felt a tremor.

Gunfire followed.

Only now did Quenser realize his mobile device and radio were not functioning. Powerful jamming must have begun at the same time as the blackout.

The enemy had no intention of hiding it any longer.

“Oh, no! This doesn’t sound like the infiltration phase! They’ve already set everything up and are starting the attack phase!!”

“More importantly, what caused them to start shooting? Their target is that old woman named Katarina Martini, right!? I doubt they would be shooting this much before reaching her!!”

The Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes shouted to each other as they swiftly got to work. The sleeping Princess woke up with no need for an alarm clock.

They split into two general groups.

The first was a search team confirming the safety of Katarina Martini. The second was a bodyguard team guiding the Princess to the Baby Magnum where she would be most safe.

“Even with all the insanity at that silo city, the maintenance base still functioned as a shield. But as soon as the Martini Series shows up, we get this!”

“You only realize how much you liked a rule after it’s been broken. The collapse of the Martini Series has arrived. If we don’t stop it here, this will spread to the safe countries around the world.”

The enemy was already breaking the rules, so they would have no way of stopping the violence if they lost their Object. Then they would have no one to stop the Nitrogen Mirage from reaching New Caribbean Island.

They wanted to know more about Piranirie Martini Smoky. They had to see Katarina to approach the core of this, but Quenser and Heivia had chosen to guard the Princess. Without solidifying their footing, they would be unable to advance any further.

Heivia raised his assault rifle as he spoke.

“This is bad... We’ve reached an age of slaughter led by rational killers. I feel bad for the Information Alliance soldiers for being sent out by someone like that...”

“Those arguments are meaningless if we don’t win first.”

“Damn right!”

The gloomy and windowless electronic simulation division room was one thing, but it was a sunny day outside. And yet Heivia groaned as soon as he opened the door.

They could not see.

A pink chemical smokescreen was obscuring their vision. They could not even see the crunchy chocolate volcanic rock below their feet.

“Ugh, cough!! This is the worst. Watch out for enemy attack and friendly fire!!”

“My eyes are watering...” muttered the Princess.

It was all over if he lost sight of her, so Quenser firmly held her hand.

“So what are we supposed to do?” he asked.

“Grab the Princess’s head and have her crouch down. Don’t let that VIP’s head get any higher than our you-know-whats!”

The enemy did not seem to be evenly spread across the island. They could hear gunshots from a

short distance away. And the smokescreen did not seem to have been fired at them in particular. It had only been blown here by the wind.

“This tuna base is basically a noble’s manor, right? And an enemy nation is seriously trespassing and firing guns? If Sir Bloodrics had a short temper, this would trigger an international incident...”

“The war has already begun, you moron! And it sounds like the worst of it is at the detention barracks where we hold POWs. This isn’t random. They know the layout.”

Myonri drove a military truck over from the front of the building.

Even if the smokescreen was only what the wind had blown over, they could barely see anymore. Quenser opened the back door, pushed on the Princess’s small butt to help her inside, and then climbed in after her. Heivia circled around to the passenger side and then clicked his tongue.

“Damn, if I was gonna operate the heavy machinegun on the roof, I should’ve gone to the back!!”

The Princess tilted her head at that.

“I could be the gunner.”

“Quenser, you can grab her this one time! Just stop the Princess! In what world do you stick your VIP up on the roof!?”

“We don’t have time, so I’m leaving with or without you!”

With almost zero visibility, Myonri clenched her teeth together and floored it with a submachinegun in her lap.

Not ten meters into their drive, what could only have been a human silhouette was sent flying by the bumper. Myonri screamed and started to brake, but Heivia slapped her head from the passenger seat.

“That was an Information Alliance uniform, so one down! Keep going!!”

The drive was entirely reliant on luck. All the windows were covered with walls of pink, so it was easy to lose your sense of direction. They had to determine direction from the compass in their hand instead of the sun in the sky.

“But don’t trust that too much, Myonri. This is an artificial island made from volcanic rock, so it’s chock full of metal. That can mess with the geomagnetism, so the needle might change directions.”

“Can someone with two hands free please handle the navigation!?”

“That soldier you just hit was carrying a drum and cables.” Quenser had a knack for not hearing anything he did not want to hear. “They brought combat engineers who specialize in explosives just like me. And New Caribbean Island was made by gathering magma using artificial earthquakes triggered by a ton of explosives, right?”

“Are you kidding me!? If there’s an eruption now, we’ve got nowhere to run!”

The idiot duo’s conversation seemed to have inspired enough fear in Myonri to have a negative sort of awakening.

While driving through the thick smokescreen, she used her instincts to lock onto silhouettes and ran over several enemy soldiers in a row.

The Princess turned her emotionless eyes outside the window which seemed coated with cotton candy and she listened to the gunshots coming from mostly one direction.

"There's no hesitation in their movements... Do they have a drone flying overhead for support?"

"In this smokescreen? They set it up, so how are they telling friend from foe?"

"How should I know?" said Heivia. "Maybe they have IR markers on all their allies. We don't have time to check one of their corpses, though. Getting the Princess onboard her Object comes first!"

A few dull explosions rang out.

It came from their destination.

"The Object hangar is under attack," said the Princess.

"The reactor stays active even when it's on standby, right? If they get inside and mess with the reactor, this entire island could be wiped from the map..."

"That would be terrible, but not even a nuke can destroy the Baby Magnum, so I doubt they can break it open so easily. Let's get in there before we lose our foothold!!"

The smokescreen really was the worst.

Myonri crashed the truck not through the wide-open front door entrance but through a completely normal and entirely unrelated wall.

The engine grill was crushed like an empty can and Quenser's butt rose from his seat and he gave a rather forceful kiss to the driver's seat headrest.

"Bwah!?"

"Quenser, you idiot. You're supposed to act as the Princess's meat cushion at times like this."

Myonri tried shifting into reverse and backing out, but it was no use.

"Dammit. My eyes are stinging again. Prepare yourselves!!"

Heivia placed a hand on her shoulder as a signal and then left through the passenger side door. Quenser grabbed the Princess's slender shoulders and they jumped out of the back seat and onto the rough black ground.

The sound of gunfire pounded at their entire bodies instead of just their eardrums.

"It's close," said the Princess. "That gunfire is coming from inside."

Quenser looked around and moved so nervously it was unclear who was protecting who.

"This is bad. Those are definitely the sounds of war. I could really die here."

"Quenser, why did you even come out to the battlefield countries anyway?" said Heivia.

They choked on the smokescreen, but they had no choice but to keep going.

Quenser, Heivia, and Myonri surrounded the Princess in a single clump as the potatoes moved along the giant hangar wall. They came across a human-sized entrance on one side.

“Armageddon is underway in there. Quenser, you take a gun just in case.”

While pressed against the wall, Heivia tossed over his magnum sidearm, but it was not his awful friend who caught it. The Princess reached over and grabbed it first.

“I’m worried about the old lady,” said the expressionless girl.

Heivia and Myonri were unsure what to do when she immediately started aiming it around, but they had to chase after her regardless.

The aforementioned old lady must have realized reinforcements had arrived because her familiar voice reached them from atop the scaffolding.

“Watch out for 25mm grenades! They fire them in quick succession and they’re smart weapons!!”

“Are you kidding me?” muttered Heivia in shock as they hid behind some spare onion armor stacked up to waist height.

With smart weapons, it was game over once the electronically-controlled sight locked onto them. The grenades would alter their trajectory midflight to accurately hit them. And hiding behind cover would not be enough to escape. If they fled behind any kind of shield, the enemy just had to fire somewhere past the cover so the shrapnel would do lethal damage to everything behind the shield. If they were driven out by those and then shot down with rifle bullets, they would never recover.

But that also told them something.

(How are the launcher and the grenade linked? They’re jamming the place and infrared wouldn’t work well in this heat. And if this chemical smokescreen is blocking out all kinds of light, everything from IR to UV would be suspect. In that case...)

“The grenades are coming! Get down and protect your head!!”

“Kh.”

Just like with hand grenades, the standard was to attack from two places at once.

Even if they took care of one attacker, the other explosion would get them.

While Heivia and Myonri tearfully covered their head with their hands, Quenser alone did something odd. He opened the door to a nearby fire hydrant, pulled out the thick hose, and aimed the nozzle toward the Information Alliance soldiers.

He gave it a somewhat wide-angle spray by rotating the metal ring surrounding the nozzle and he forcibly held the bucking hose in place as the high-pressure water shot out.

That was precisely when the 25mm cylinders flew out in parabolic arcs, but they soon turned in the wrong direction. The explosive noise and shockwaves pounded on their right ears, but Quenser’s group was unharmed.

“Wow...”

“With a wide-angle spray, it’s a lot like a searchlight, so controlling it isn’t hard. More importantly, Heivia, you take over the hose. Don’t move too far forward and get yourself shot, okay?”

“Wait, hold on! What are you gonna do!?”

“I’ll be making some sparks with the circular saw in the work area back there, so cover me.”

“Why!? Are you making some kind of secret weapon!?”

“They aren’t using radio or IR. But the old lady’s voice reached us loud and clear. It’s ultrasound. They’re sending out their signals using sound waves beyond the audible range.”

Heivia looked surprised, so Quenser drove his point home.

“That’s also why they bothered with a blackout in the middle of the day. They wanted to shut off any kind of speaker. But handheld power tools are generally battery-powered. If I make a whole bunch of noise scraping at metal, the smart control of their grenades and their markers preventing friendly fire won’t work anymore!”

They did not have time to hesitate.

Quenser could not use a gun properly, but he ran over to the work bench while Heivia created a barrier against the grenade launchers and rifles using the firehose water and Myonri fired her submachinegun to keep the enemy soldiers behind cover.

Once he pressed the rapidly-rotating blade against a thick metal panel and orange sparks scattered everywhere, things began to change.

The detonation of the grenades was program-controlled, so once that function was lost, the enemy was outnumbered. The firehose was no longer necessary. The potatoes used cover to accurately avoid the line of fire as they surrounded the Information Alliance attackers and mercilessly filled them with lead.

Historically, strategists and tricksters would occasionally have their time in the limelight, but there was one thing they had to watch out for. Their fame was all well and good when they were winning, but their fate would be even more tragic than most when they lost.

“Okay, clear! Watch out for any remaining wires and get the Princess into the cockpit!!”

“Heivia, I found an ultrasonic wave marker on one of the corpses. See that band wrapped around the upper arm? It’s just like the mosquito noise devices hanging under the eaves at a convenience store.”

“Quenser, pass one of those to me,” said the Princess. “Only the Information Alliance is wearing these things, right? I can scan the frequency and take out every last one of them with my anti-personnel laser planetarium.”

(Hmm, the Princess really is a warfighter. I guess she isn’t the type to shriek and cling to my arm in a haunted house.)

Quenser kept that honest opinion to himself as he saw off the cutting-edge warrior girl with a grin. If he said anything to upset the Pilot Elite here, every last one of his allies was sure to punch him later

on.

Once the Generation One was moving, the battle was as good as won.

Unlike the Generation Twos which were specialized for Object battles alone, the Baby Magnum was designed for battles with tanks, aircraft, and even infantry groups. Even inside that smokescreen, she could accurately determine who was an enemy and send a horizontal storm of laser beams their way.

A sizzling sound that could have come from a Chinese restaurant came from outside the hangar.

It was best not to think about what had just been vaporized.

“Oh, looks like the jamming’s gone.”

“The Princess probably blew up a work boat out at sea or an electronic warfare aircraft with a big plate on its back.”

And with the radios functioning again, they received a very welcome message from their commander.

“This is Frolaytia. Listen up, everyone!”

“This is sure to be some kind of hellish work. Quick, get the jamming back up!!”

“If she really wanted us to listen, she should show off those wonderful tits of hers.”

“Things have calmed down, but Katarina Martini is nowhere to be found. She may have already been killed, but begin a search under the assumption she has been recaptured. Check the straight-line path between this artificial volcano island and the Information Alliance maintenance fleet. The Princess has the advantage when it comes to speed, but she isn’t that dexterous. We need infantry to settle things after she’s held them up! And the more the better!!”

“What do we do, Heivia?”

“Nothing. We’ve already done our share of work today. It’s not like we get overtime pay, so I’m taking a dump and getting to sleep.”

“By the way,” continued Frolaytia. “The assembly point is this island and 200 nautical miles around it. If you wish to refuse this mission, please leave that area at once. Otherwise, you might just be stuck here with the rest of us.”

“What are you doing, Quenser!? We need to jump in the ocean immediately!!”

“There’s no way we can swim 200 nautical miles! We’d drown!!”

“Three, two, one, zero. Good, good. I am glad to see I have so many subordinates with such passion hidden in their hearts. Thank you very much! That was the deadline.”

“What the hell was that!? It’s just like a search engine or social network’s notification of a non-negotiable change to their user policy! And our lives are on the line here!!”

“She’s really figured out how to take advantage of us...”

Q. This work environment would never be allowed in a normal company, so why was it allowed here?

A. Because this was not a normal company. That simple answer was the worst part about the military. They could not reject this mission no matter how much they complained, so the idiot duo left the Object maintenance area while listening to Frolaytia's instructions.

The sea breeze was finally sweeping the pink smokescreen away, but the puddles leftover from the earlier rain were now discolored.

"They're polluting the environment."

"This war hasn't gotten so bad we have to crawl around drinking from puddles."

"And who's gonna be breathing in the air after the hot sun evaporates those puddles?"

As they argued, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes arrived at one of the hangars lined up alongside a makeshift runway. Something was being towed out of that large half-cylinder building.

"A Merman? That's a marine rescue helicopter, not a war toy!"

"I really want to chew out whoever it was that named it Merman instead of Mermaid."

Those unproductive idiots only complained no matter what they saw, but busty, silver-haired Frolaytia was waiting for them at the hangar.

"Wherever the enemy is headed, they're a step ahead of us. We need speed to catch up and these are faster than a boat, so fly low and pursue any suspicious readings. If you want a gun emplacement at the side door, attach one DIY-style. You have 600 seconds!"

She clapped her hands in front of her extremely large chest and the potatoes all got to work. This was no time to be staring at those large and jiggly things. Not because they wanted to dutifully fulfill their orders, but because being too slow here would mean ending up on the front line with no protection.

"Outta the way! That .50 caliber heavy machinegun is mine!!"

"You just took twenty rockets, didn't you!?"

"Fools. All those weapons will be useless without any power tools to attach them. Ee hee hee. I'll grab them all for myself and trade them for the best gear..."

The Legitimacy Kingdom clearly had excess energy if they were fighting amongst themselves before heading out to battle. The arguments continued as the marine rescue helicopters of love and peace were covered in deadly weapons.

"Ah, no. I-I want some of that electronic warfare gear..."

"Here, Lilim! Take this motion sickness bag!"

"Oh, no. Has that set in!? Could you stop making that my defining trait!?"

"We'll be traveling through the air, so make sure to bring lots of barf bags!!"

Quenser looked up after attaching a swiveling heavy machinegun that stuck out of the side door.

“Hey, Myonri, do we really need to paint a face on the front of the helicopter?”

“It looked like it could really use some paint.”

They were apparently in the same group again.

Once the promised 600 seconds had passed, Frolaytia clapped once more and Quenser’s group climbed aboard the large helicopter that had a main rotor in the front and back.

It was finally time to head out.

With Myonri at the controls, the Merman held Quenser, Heivia, and six other soldiers in its cargo space. Because it was originally meant for marine rescues, the wall was covered in a variety of equipment like oxygen tanks, masks, underwater work tools, and even medical devices like an AED and packs of saline.

“You can tell this belonged to a rich guy. They have better medical equipment than we do in the military.”

“More importantly, help me drop this wireless sonobuoy, Quenser! There’s something wrong when a commoner is taking it easy and a noble is working up a sweat!!”

Heivia tossed what looked like a long narrow sandbag out the side door and he unfortunately did not possess a spirit of noblesse oblige.

A sonobuoy was like a large float that was dropped into the ocean so it could scatter the kind of active sonar used by submarines and send back data on any dangerous readings it found. If the Information Alliance was using a submarine after capturing Katarina Martini, this would tell them where it was.

“Do you really think we’ll find them? Even if we are on the shortest path between New Caribbean Island and their maintenance fleet.”

“There’s nowhere for them to hide above or below the water. If we watch from above and drop sonobuoys, they’re trapped. If only it wasn’t a black-hearted old woman we were rescuing. But she’s the only one with info on Piranirie, so we have no choice!”

The 50m Baby Magnum passed by directly below the helicopters.

The top speed of a helicopter was said to be between 300 and 400kph, but an Object could easily exceed 500. The sight of the colossal weapon easily passing the aircraft had enough of an impact to feel completely surreal.

A powerful gust of wind shook the helicopter up and down.

“Kyah!?”

“Princess, I know you want to show off, but tone it down a bit!!”

However, the Baby Magnum did not seem to care.

In fact...

“But you would be in trouble if I didn’t move out ahead.”

It slowly dawned on them what she meant by that.

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

“If the Objects on both sides are working, that means the Information Alliance Nitrogen Mirage can join the battle too, doesn’t it? So wouldn’t this area be ruled by its anti-air lasers and their perfect accuracy...?”

“C-curse that busty commander... She stuffed these flying piñatas with as much living meat as she could!”

A bluish-white beam shot right past the large helicopter.

It probably had not been aimed at them. If it had, they would have been vaporized. It was only a warning shot directed at the Baby Magnum.

But a hit from a stray shot would leave them just as dead.

Also, they had to get to work before they really were the enemy’s target.

“Myonri! Move down as close to the ocean as you can manage!!”

“If we move below 50 meters, we might end up in the Baby Magnum’s path,” said Myonri.

“Are you dumb, Quenser?” added Heivia. “This is about to become a boxing match between Objects. If the Princess’s giant ass hits us during her dance, we’ll be sent straight to heaven!!”

Another laser fried the air right next to their helicopter.

But this one did not come from the Nitrogen Mirage.

“Grab whoever said I have a ‘giant ass’ and hang them out the side door. Let’s play a game of William Tell, Heivia.”

“She already knows it was me!?”

But this was no time to be messing around.

Quenser shouted over the roar of the rotors.

“Our options are the Nitrogen Mirage’s anti-air lasers which can shoot us down with perfect accuracy, or an accidental megaton butt slam. Our odds of survival are higher if we stay low. So, Myonri, just take us right down to the ocean!!”

“...Again, Heivia...?” said the Princess.

“Wait, wait, wait! It wasn’t even me this time!”

As Heivia paled, the large Merman quickly dropped down. And just as it began racing forward as if pushing down the waves, a beam of light flashed by overhead.

It was as bright as welding light and nearly blinded them. Another Merman that failed to escape in time was vaporized.

“Dammit, one down!!”

“Its nitrogen laser uses artificial mirages to bend any way it wants... Keeping our head down isn’t enough to avoid it.”

“I won’t give it time to do that.”

The Baby Magnum moved further forward and began a serious shootout with the Nitrogen Mirage.

That bought them some time, but it was not an absolute assurance of safety.

Quenser grabbed at the shaking helicopter’s wall and checked through the marine rescue equipment there.

“What are you doing, Quenser!?”

“It’s creating artificial mirages by producing extreme temperature differences in the air and it’s using those mirages as a prism to bend its ultraviolet nitrogen lasers.” The student found a monstrous container of cooling spray. “But the Nitrogen Mirage isn’t the only one that can do that. We know its trick, so we can create mirages too!!”

He sprayed a white smoke out the open side door like he was using a fire extinguisher.

Immediately afterwards, they saw a bluish-white beams bend every which way, arrive right in front of them, and then bend toward empty air.

“That was close!”

“We can only see the afterimage, right? This is like unwittingly crossing a minefield and only later learning how lucky you were...”

The other helicopters that had escaped to extreme low altitude must have reached the same answer as Quenser because a few of them were trailing what looked like white smoke.

But then a bluish-white laser punched right through one of the helicopters flying alongside them.

“Wait, what!?”

“We aren’t calculating this out using meteorological radars or computers, so we can’t make perfect mirages!!”

The Princess seemed to have the upper hand, but she apparently could not destroy the Nitrogen Mirage right away.

They would be targeted in midair at this rate.

Once the tension in the helicopter changed to fear, they quickly made up their minds.

“Grab oxygen tanks and masks! And check how many underwater motor-controlled aqua scooters there are!!”

Quenser continued to scatter the cooling carbon dioxide out the side door while Heivia tossed a small oxygen tank and mask toward the cockpit.

It was time.

“Jump out!! We’ll be shot down!!”

Heivia grabbed Quenser’s shoulder and jumped out the side door.

Before they even hit the water, a bluish-white laser tore straight through the large marine rescue helicopter.

Part 12

The Nitrogen Mirage’s anti-air lasers were absolute.

Since they would have been slaughtered above water, Quenser and the other survivors fled into the ocean.

However...

(This won’t last forever.)

Quenser added an attachment to his radio, attached the wireless mic to his throat, and covered his mouth with the mask he had been given.

The problem was the size of the oxygen tank.

It was small enough that Heivia had been able to throw it by hand.

(No matter how much we conserve, I doubt this will last even an hour.)

And just as he thought that, Heivia grabbed his shoulder. When he looked in the direction his awful friend pointed, he realized a shelf of the ocean bottom was quite nearby. The depth here was apparently much shallower than where they had picked up that submarine.

But that was not the real problem.

“A sunken ship?”

A giant rusted ship was rolled over on its side. Even from here, they could see it had become a fish reef covered in seaweed and surrounded by hundreds or thousands of small fish.

Radio signals did not travel through the ocean well, but that was not an issue when they were right next to each other.

“No, not that. You see those things attached with wires? Those are Information Alliance luxury cars in the parking lot. Those are their submersibles.”

Something was wrong with the flow of time.

Those “new products” seemed as out of place as something in a doctored ghost photograph and they never would have ended up here for no reason.

“That’s the Information Alliance that fled from New Caribbean Island? Are they holding Katarina Martini there?”

“How did we end up on an ocean mission with no swimsuits and some old woman? After this is over, I’m gonna demand worker’s comp from that busty commander. I’ll have her personally make up for the lack of swimsuits.”

The Nitrogen Mirage may have made an appearance because the diver team had sent out a distress signal when they found themselves pinned below water and unable to move. They had been sitting tight until their Second Generation eliminated the Object and helicopter unit.

“...That leaves one conclusion.”

“They might have enough air in there to wait around for quite a while. Attacking them would be worth it.”

When Heivia gestured with his thumb, Myonri and the others showed their agreement by beginning to move.

As usual, this was a fight over resources.

Swimming was difficult without dedicated flippers or a lead diving belt, but they still managed a gradual approach. Before long, it grew more obvious that the 100m ship on the ocean floor was actually a transport ship. And not a civilian one. The giant communication antenna and crane-like refueling arm suggested it was a military supply transport ship.

The rusted walls appeared to be broken through in several places, so they thought getting in would be easy.

But just as they were within arm’s reach of the brown rusted ship, they heard some odd noises and several straight lines of air bubbles approached them like white spears.

The confusion reached Quenser’s mind before the fear.

“Eh?”

“Watch out!!”

But after Heivia shoved him behind some rocks and those rocks were torn away, the situation finally hit home.

“U-underwater rifles!? They’re shooting at us!!”

There were a few different ways of creating underwater firearms, but based on the rapid-fire speed seen here, these were likely based on assault rifles. The water would sap their momentum and the ballistic path was anything but stable after only 100 meters, but that did not overturn the Information Alliance’s advantage here. Having fireable guns was enough.

“We don’t have any underwater firearms!” said Myonri. “What do we do!?”

“Damn, where are they? I didn’t see any air bubbles from an oxygen tank...”

“Go back to the basics, Quenser. You just have to determine the distance and angle from the bullet holes.”

Heivia pointed to where the gunfire had come from.

4 o'clock and 9 o'clock.

As things were, this could develop into an inescapable crossfire.

"We'll be slaughtered before we can do anything..."

"We just have to wipe them out without firing a single bullet. What do we have at our disposal? Knives, a gas-operated pile driver..."

(The current is...what do you call it with water? Anyway, it's like a tailwind from us to them. And I know I saw seaweed torn like this and a crab shell crushed like this in a documentary. If I can just find something to use for bait...)

As he gave this serious thought, Quenser casually reached a hand toward Myonri's small butt.

"Eek!?"

The maiden jumped straight up because she had been completely focused on the enemy in this tense situation, but all Quenser wanted at the moment was her large combat knife. After rudely swiping it from someone else's sheath, he used the thick blade to pry off the univalves attached to the rocks they were using as a shield.

As the many shells followed the currents and flowed out in every direction, something happened.

The Information Alliance soldiers were gradually taking up position for a crossfire, but then something like a giant blanket dropped down on them from above.

No.

"That's a giant squid!! This is pretty shallow for one of them, but you can still find them around!!"

"You look pretty proud of yourself, but don't think I'm ever forgetting what you did!!" protested Myonri.

When their tentacles were extended from their body, they were more than 15 meters long, making them big enough to capsize a small fishing boat when caught in the boat's net. Once captured by one's countless suckers, human strength was not enough to break free.

With the 4 o'clock group eliminated, the enemy could no longer complete their inescapable crossfire.

"You bastards!!"

Heivia leaned out from the rocks and aimed something at the panicking Information Alliance soldiers to 9 o'clock. It was not a gun, but it looked similar. It was a gas-operated underwater pile driver he must have found in the naval rescue helicopter.

It was meant to drive stainless steel hooks into rock so they could support work wires, so it would not function as a projectile weapon. It was even more doubtful it would reach the enemy soldiers with the great resistance of the water.

But its lethality was fairly irrelevant.

Just like the previous univalves, he just had to fire it in their general direction.

Squids and octopuses tended to chase after shiny things.

And that infinitely increased the value of a light. Holding a light source was dangerous, but having it reflect wildly was even more effective.

"...!?"

"!!"

The merciless ocean did not even allow them to cry out in death. Having spotted a new toy, the giant squid charged toward the soldiers to grab them along with the jewel it wanted to claim as its own.

Flavor, smell, and light could all become life-protecting weapons. Bullets were not everything.

Thanks to that, some of the soldiers were discarded once the giant squid grew tired of them. But...

"What? They're holding their throats and writhing around."

"Since we didn't see any air bubbles from an oxygen tank, they're probably using a caustic soda circulation system. The carbon dioxide from their breath is absorbed so they can reuse that air, but if it gets punctured and water contacts the chemical, it produces toxic gas. ...Then they've built themselves the world's smallest gas chamber. It's a good candidate for one of the worst ways to die."

"Ehh? I thought the worst was the steamroller???"

"You mean getting crushed by your own side's Object in the safe maintenance area? But I've also heard of a Pilot Elite fighting motion sickness during a long mission and ultimately foaming at the mouth from the pathogens coming from their own barf bag."

"Ah ha ha!"

"Wa ha ha!!"

"Uehhh..." groaned well-behaved Myonri as she listened in and grew pale.

Nevertheless, they had a chance now that they had driven the capricious giant squid toward the Information Alliance soldiers. While shining their handheld lights on the distant pieces of metal, Quenser's group left the rocks and approached the rusted supply transport ship.

"Oh, looks like the others on the helicopters spotted this ship."

"...Isn't this way too few to be all of them?"

While praying that everyone else was working toward some other means of survival, Quenser's group dove into a split in the supply transport ship that was as beat-up as an empty can chewed on by a fierce dog.

"This is a waterproof door."

"Opening it won't cause seawater to pour in, will it?"

"It's marked as an airlock. It's meant for marine rescues, so it should be fine."

Quenser turned the round handle in the center of the rusted door to open it. They found a small door

inside. It was of course much darker inside than outside, so they would have to use their lights to continue any further. After entering and closing the door, they used a hand pump to remove the water from the room. Only then did they open the other door leading inside.

“Bwah! Finally, some air. Yes, we were born on earth, weren’t we!?”

“This is a really strange sight, isn’t it?”

They immediately removed their masks to preserve as much oxygen as possible and they made sure to attach them at their hip instead of discarding them. The supply transport ship itself had rolled onto its side, so the position of the long corridor’s walls and floor had greatly changed. The doors lining the wall were now pitfalls, so it felt like wandering into a world of trick art.

And with air surrounding them, they could use their assault rifles and submachineguns again.

“Everyone, make sure you don’t have water in your gun’s combustible gas pathway. After checking on your partner, let’s head on in.”

That was when a dry bursting sound rang out down the corridor.

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance, but they could not see each other’s expression because they immediately shut off their lights.

“...Who was that?”

“It was pretty far away. I don’t think they were shooting at us.”

A second and third gunshot followed. Someone had clearly run across some kind of trouble. Even if this was a conflict between two groups of the cornered Information Alliance soldiers, Katarina Martini was with them. Quenser’s group had to check on the situation immediately.

They switched their lights back on and advanced across the dark and dangerous footing.

“Our feet could easily break through with all this rust, so be careful. Make sure you don’t step on any of the doors.”

“Do you think I’m an id-...hwah!?”

“You klutz!!”

Driven by the sudden fear of falling, Quenser searched for anything at all to grab onto and ended up wrapping his arms around Myonri’s hips, causing her to jump. In the darkness, his face was buried in a fairly scandalous place, but his life really was at risk.

“Phew. That was a close one. We really are at war here, aren’t we?”

“...You have no idea how much I want to ‘accidentally’ shoot you right now...”

Cute Myonri was tearful and trembling. The corridor was difficult to walk down with all the columns and pipes, but the sporadic gunfire came to a stop before long. The gunfire had squeezed their hearts with tension, but its absence brought an eerie sensation crawling up from the darkness.

“I don’t like this smell...”

“...”

“This isn’t all the rust everywhere. It’s similar, but it’s stronger.”

The corridor led to a long, narrow stairway. And with the ship on its side, it was like a right angle turn. Heivia approached while on the lookout for an enemy attack and he peered up it with his light and gun both at the ready.

There was no reaction.

Puzzled by his awful friend’s lack of movement, Quenser approached too.

Then the boy saw the scene past Heivia’s shoulder.

So much red covered everything.

And a blonde girl in a black one-piece swimsuit stood calmly in the center of a pile of corpses.

Time stopped.

Heivia’s light illuminated a group in thick rubber diving suits who lay unmoving with dark red holes in their foreheads or hearts. They were probably the Information Alliance surprise attack unit. Quenser and Heivia had no reason to sympathize with them after that group targeted their maintenance base, but that was not the issue.

What had Katarina Martini, leader of the genius girl project, feared?

The black swimsuit girl accompanied by a butler-like young man may have been the true threat.

She was Wraith Martini Vermouthspray, the Stopgap Grim Reaper.

Driven by fear, that amateur boy raised his voice without thinking.

“You...!!”

“Stop, Frank. There is no need to kill them. Not those honest perverts.”

“...Why a school swimsuit?”

“That’s your first question? This Island Nation legend’s aura is something else indeed.”

The young man took a step forward, but Wraith stopped him with a quick command.

What would have happened if she had not done that? It was not that she killed because she had a reason to. She did not spare them because she had no reason to. That was evident enough from the twenty-odd slaughtered soldiers.

But that was exactly why a question occurred to Quenser.

“...This isn’t...an indiscriminate...killing mode...?”

In her special black one-piece swimsuit, Wraith gave an exasperated snort and snapped her fingers, so the young man pulled something out of the pile of red corpses. No, someone who was desperately trying to blend in with the dead bodies.

It was Katarina Martini.

The instinct to immediately join the dead on the ground may have come from her experience surviving a harsher age.

"I don't know what this cowardly defector was telling you, but, well, she's the one we have business-kyah!?"

Then something strange happened.

Cool and composed Wraith suddenly stopped speaking and jumped in shock. Then she frantically grabbed a nearby sleeve.

She may have thought it belonged to the butler young man, but by some twist of fate it actually belonged to Quenser Barbotage.

"Wh-what is it!? Is the enemy targeting us from somewhere!?"

"Ahem. I-it's nothing. There is no need to make such a big deal about-..."

"Heivia, Myonri, be on your guard! This was enough for Wraith to scream and jump. Something horrific must be lurking in the shadows!!"

"...wharf...on the..."

"What, what? Since this is the Information Alliance we're talking about, is it an amphibious attack drone? You've gotta be kidding me. Their weapons can keep moving around after all the soldiers were killed?"

"I was afraid of a wharf roach crawling in the wall!!!!!"

Swimsuit Wraith could not bear it any long and raised her voice.

He did not understand.

"...After you created this sea of blood and mountain of corpses?"

"Alive or dead, humans are humans. But they're different."

Wraith blushed but refused to let go of Quenser's sleeve as she got back on topic. Her eyes turned toward her objective.

That person was the only one the grim reaper had allowed to continue breathing in this red-stained world of stopped time.

"Katarina Martini."

"..."

"You must have had a reason to request asylum now. What and how much do you know about the X Day our Information Alliance is facing?"

While supported by the young man, the elegant old woman remained seated and maintained her silence.

Wraith seemed to know more than Quenser and the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom. In fact, she was looking at it differently.

“What? She must have had a reason to request asylum now?”

“There has to be something that only Katarina can see. Let me ask you this instead: What would you think if an earthquake prediction expert suddenly abandoned their job and left on a trip?”

“Wait a second...”

“And what if that disaster was an artificial earthquake that could be reproduced by human hands? That would seem like more than just abandoning their duties, don’t you think?” Wraith did not even look back at Quenser. “I don’t know if you did it intentionally or if you discovered it by accident, but you know the exact date of X Day, don’t you? That’s why you frantically contacted the Capitalist Corporations, and then the Legitimacy Kingdom after that submarine screwed up. It was all so you could avoid the bog the Information Alliance is being thrown into.”

“...”

Katarina had yet to provide any kind of response.

Was she bound by direct fear, leaving her mind blank? Or was she afraid she would say something to hurt her case if she opened her mouth?

Either way, there was something to this. Something that only Katarina could see.

“What did you embed inside the Martini Series? What is the true identity of these ‘deviations’ in our heads?”

If necessary, she was willing to use special weapons and drugs.

And with those options on the table, Wraith’s raised voice may have been relatively calm and gentlemanly.

“Answer me, Katarina Martini! Why are the other Martinis plotting an attack on the center of the Information Alliance at Manhattan, New York!?”

Quenser thought he was choking.

He flapped his mouth for a bit before realizing that no sound was coming out.

“Man...hattan?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the Information Alliance home country! The very center of the Chesapeake District! If it falls to a military attack...!!!”

“Yes!! One of the four legs supporting the table will break. Clean wars? The age of Objects? The other world powers won’t have time to take advantage of the chaos and rise to the top!! The world will collapse and enter an age engulfed in flames!!”

Quenser thought of Lady Monica who had lost her home after her family “collapsed”. Arriving at a new age did not necessarily mean a change for the better.

"I don't understand it." Wraith Martini Vermouthspray clenched her teeth. "It can't be explained with any kind of economic advantage, but could we really produce enough hatred to want humanity to burn to the ground? After we've become partially embedded in the AI network administration system? What kind of bug remains in the Martini Series? And is it eating away at my own mind as well!? You created me, so tell me!!"

There was no response from the old woman.

Before she could give one, an electronic tone sounded from the radio on one of the corpses.

A radio signal could not reach this deep underwater, so the Information Alliance had likely placed a wired antenna buoy or something on the ocean surface. The communication infrastructure lived on even if its users did not.

"Ah, ah, ahh□ Master 00 to Slave 21. The Legitimacy Kingdom helicopter unit has been destroyed. Their Generation One is persistent, but the Laser Beam 069 is falling back to draw it to another region of sea. How's your oxygen supply? It'll take a while longer to put together a recovery team, so preserve as much as possible with a proper breathing rhythm□"

It was a young girl's voice.

It contained something that gave away her youth, but Quenser and his group had also cheated. They had already heard this voice through the wharf roach spy robot they sent to the Flagship 019.

However, someone else spoke softly before the boy could.

It was Katarina, the old woman who had created all of them.

"That is Piranirie Martini Smoky. She is #7. Her administrative role is to smoothly restart work on the warfront when things have stalled due to the restrictions of various treaties, power balances, habitats of protected species, and so on. In other words, she oils the rusted gears and reignites any wars that have spontaneously come to a stop."

"..."

This girl was from the same generation as Wraith.

Knowing that was enough to put a sharp look in the Martini girl's eyes.

"Oh? No response. Hey!! ...Did they run out of air and kick the bucket earlier than expected?"

In her school swimsuit, Wraith grabbed the radio in her small hand, took a breath, and started to speak.

"Slave 21 to Master 00. There is nothing to report here."

"Ah ha ha. You're missing the code word, whoever that is. But if you managed to get inside the sunken ship now, I've gotta praise your precision. Are you perhaps one of us?"

"This wasn't as impressive as you make it out to be. A separate group made it here as well."

"It doesn't matter either way. You're a step behind. In fact, I would say you're about three days behind me. There's nothing you can do to catch up now."

“Why are you so intent on bringing ruin?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. That doesn’t follow at all. If you really are part of the Martini Series, you should know what this is: I’m not doing this because I have a reason to. I’m not sparing them because I have no reason to. That’s how we work, isn’t it?”

“Did you think you could pull this off by corrupting a local fleet out here? That’s an impressive level of foolishness. Do you have any idea how many cutting-edge Objects are protecting Manhattan!?”

“Nya ha ha ha ha!! ...It’s that way of thinking that tells me you’re a step behind.”

That was when a dull tremor assaulted the sunken ship.

It had originally been a supply transport ship rolled on its side and it was just sitting there on the unstable ocean floor. It was entirely possible something had coincidentally caused it to collapse and roll, but it was more likely this was no coincidence.

This was something much more ominous.

As Quenser’s group shined their lights around, Piranirie’s mockery slipped into their ears.

“There were some things I was hoping to discuss with Old Lady Katarina, but, well, if the alternative is having her taken in by the Legitimacy Kingdom or Capitalist Corporations, I should probably send her to oblivion even if it means losing a piece of the truth. What do you think, old lady?”

“What are you-?”

“Nowww, a question: How was the Legitimacy Kingdom’s New Caribbean Island created? And are they the only ones capable of messing with submarine volcanoes???”

Another disconcerting tremor reached them.

“This is an artificial eruption!!” exclaimed Quenser. “They’re using explosives or an Object’s cannon to stimulate the buildup of magma on the ocean floor. At this rate, we’ll be engulfed by the lava erupting up from below!!”

“Piranirie learned a great variety of techniques for restarting wars that had fallen to a standstill for any number of reasons. She must have learned how to redraw EEZs, territorial waters, and national borders using the appearance of volcanic islands.”

“Just to be clear,” said Piranirie herself. “You don’t get to live happily ever after if you do manage to escape that sunken ship. This is covering a much, muuuuch wider area□ Ah ha ha ha ha ha!!”

They had no time for this anymore.

Swimsuit Wraith threw aside the radio and lightly snapped her fingers.

“Frank.”

That was apparently enough to convey her demand. The butler-like young man grabbed Katarina Martini’s arm.

And Heivia finally recalled what their mission was.

“Ah, wait!!”

“I know you’re loath to part ways with such a kind young woman in a swimsuit, but don’t call out to me every time I take a step. I’m not telling you to leave me just yet. And this is no time to be arguing over who gets to take Katarina. If we want to survive, we’ll both be headed to the same place.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Since Quenser bothered to ask, the blonde girl in a black swimsuit must have decided he was willing to listen because she turned toward him instead.

“Several submarine volcanoes will soon be erupting in quick succession. We cannot stay in the ocean, but if we head to the surface, we will only fall victim to the Laser Beam 069...oh, excuse me. To use your adorably pathetic naming sense, that would be the Nitrogen Mirage. Or we could be crushed by the Legitimacy Kingdom Object’s butt.”

“...”

Quenser paled when he was confronted with those facts once more.

In some kind of habit, Wraith’s hand wandered through empty air like it was searching for a pen.

“Given the distance, escaping to your New Caribbean Island would be difficult. And in the worst case, the series of eruptions could propagate there as well.”

“Then what are we supposed to do...?”

“There is one safe zone. There is a single paradise in this world which will be unharmed by the submarine volcanoes and not fired on by the Second Generation acting as Piranirie’s puppet.” Wraith pointed straight up. “The Information Alliance maintenance fleet. I don’t know which ship Piranirie Martini Smoky is hitching a ride on, but if we join her there, the Object’s great firepower will actually work against her and she won’t be able to attack us.”

That was indeed closer than New Caribbean Island.

And a product of that genius girl project would not be dumb enough to place her own fleet in a position where the artificial eruptions and Object under her control would destroy it.

“Katarina, I would like to ask you, our designer,” said Wraith. “Which of those hundred-odd ships is she on?”

“The Flagship 019 in the center. There is no need to look out for trickery, so you can go with the obvious answer. There is no need to go through a profiling process; I made her to be that kind of person.”

Katarina made it sound obvious.

Did she not even need to flip through the pages of a file? It was possible she was imagining an isolated aspect of her mother instead of the individual girls.

However...

“Th-this is insane,” said Heivia. “Even war has rules. But this is what happens as soon as the Martini Series shows up. And now we’re supposed to enter their maintenance base zone!?”

"You can continue following your precious rules to the end if you like, you foolishly well-behaved swine. But anyone who wants a real shot at survival should focus on the number and capacity of the submersibles the Information Alliance divers used. ...There might not be enough space for everyone."

An especially powerful tremor shook the sunken ship.

They could not wait any longer.

Just as Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance and took off running, the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers followed suit. They shined their lights around while passing and being passed by each other and they even started grabbing at each other's hair in a race for the submersibles.

"Wait a second! Is no one taking that old woman with them!?"

"Don't ask me! If you care so much, Heivia, you go back for her!!"

Was the problem that she was not a cute girl? Or that she was not an adorable and kindly old woman with a round back?

And the idiots noticed something as soon as they arrived.

"Hey, there's more than enough of these things."

"Dammit. Manipulating the enemy with information is their specialty, isn't it? She tricked us!!"

Nevertheless, they had no choice but to board them.

Wraith had stolen Katarina, the designer needed to predict Piranirie's actions, from right under their noses, but she would still have to escape to the same area of sea in some kind of vehicle if she was to survive. They could always stay right on that girl's ass and demand she come to a stop somewhere. Although they would have to use the Princess as a threat if these things had no weapons.

The submersibles looked like giant double-edged swords made of a chemical materials and Quenser's group split up between a few of them to leave the sunken ship.

A moment later, a large orange explosion erupted.

"Wahh!?"

"Are you kidding me!? That rusted ship suddenly split in two!!"

Once one point ruptured, it happened quickly. More and more large cracks ran through cold ocean floor and passed by the submersibles Quenser's group was riding. They even saw that fearsome giant squid fleeing like a puny fish. Soon after they saw an orange glow in the depths of the earth, the eruption shot up like a reverse guillotine.

"Surface, Myonri! Surface immediately!!"

"I'm trying! But there's something wrong with the rudder! Oh, no! We're going to roll over!!"

That was when they received a transmission over the submersible's communicator rather than their personal equipment.

"Ksshh!! Here is some advice in the hopes that the signal will reach through the ocean at this distance, my hard-working but foolish neighbors. During a submarine volcanic eruption, the obvious lava is accompanied by lots of nitrogen and carbon dioxide. If that dissolves in the seawater, it will create the carbonated water we all know and love. This will surround the submersible in air bubbles, making it difficult to steer, but it will also increase the buoyancy and lift the submersible more than you might expect. So be careful."

"Does she have to be so arrogant about everything!?"

"Oh, I get it. I had thought Wraith seemed awfully calm, but she reached that sunken ship with her own submersible."

"By the way," added Wraith. "While yours are specialized for covert movement, mine is loaded with four short-range torpedoes for self-protection. So try not to anger me. That is rule one of survival."

The idiot duo felt their balls gently shrivel up.

"The maintenance fleet is 20 kilometers north-northwest of here. The carbonation should be affecting you right about now, but do not poke your head above the surface. Not only is this part of the migration course for those giant bluefin tuna, but the artificial eruption has those jewels of the sea in a panic. This is the one rare instance where their picket ships won't notice submersibles of this size in the ocean."

Not only did they have to worry about the erupting lava and volcanic rock, but they could also be hit by a tackle from a large panicked fish. While so many hazards just barely passed them by, Quenser and the other Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes made their way directly below the Information Alliance fleet.

"Piranirie is one thing," hesitantly began Heivia. "But why are the other soldiers going along with this reckless plan? Attacking Manhattan will only make their situation so much worse. It's horrific to contemplate, but they could even find their own families criticizing their actions."

"As part of the Martini Series, that point of view honestly irritates me to no end, but I am beautiful and generous enough to overlook it. Anyway, this may be a unique aspect of the Information Alliance. Did you know this? The more dedicated someone is to justice, the more diligently they will derail when they are led astray by sweet words."

"...Seriously...?"

"You couldn't work up the courage to stop the bullying? But you took a stand by never actually taking part? That's wrong. Dead wrong. Someone like that was simply pouring all their effort into pretending not to see it. No one was going to praise them for it, but they faithfully stuck with their decision to abandon the victims and prevent the bullying from coming to light. That is where bad deeds come from. It's someone careless who pulls the trigger, but it's the diligent ones that see it through to the end. That's why these things never end in a group. No matter how much they think something is wrong, they never speak up about it. If they did, they would cease to be their diligent self. And the masses have been quite thoroughly taught that their lives will fall apart and they will die if they cease to be diligent."

Using information to control the system was how the Information Alliance's pyramid structure worked.

They wanted a social structure where everyone thought they were free to choose what they wanted,

but they were in fact manipulated into choosing what was convenient for someone else.

Just like how even the most niche book imaginable could be described as a best seller if you divided the genre down narrowly enough. And just like how you could manipulate the majority answer on a survey by selecting 1000 respondents from the slums or from the financial district.

When someone only tried to reach for what was popular, you could easily control them by selecting what was displayed as the word of the day.

And in the maintenance fleet built around the Flagship 019, Piranirie Martini Smoky had become the word of the day.

“I thought the Legitimacy Kingdom was bad, but I guess everywhere is hell.”

“We can at least promise you a ‘happy’ life,” said Wraith. “Because the masses are not even allowed to question their situation. And the administrator looking down at all of them and laughing? They have no idea someone is laughing at them in the same way. It just repeats like that, so I’m sure there’s someone laughing at me too.”

Meanwhile, the submarine volcanic eruptions began to weaken.

That was partially due to putting some distance between them and that hellish area of sea, but it had more to do with arriving at their destination coordinates.

An early-warning picket ship was directly above them.

And further in, they could see the gray bellies of the ships like a school of fat and round fish.

“Where’s the Flagship 019?”

“Check the propeller shapes, Myonri. You saw what it looked like when getting those spy robots on board, right?”

They saw the especially-large belly of the battlecruiser surrounded by several guard ships.

The small submersibles gradually approached and silently surfaced after confirming it was their target. Heivia grabbed some rope he had found in the submersible, opened the hatch, tied a special kind of knot on the end of the rope, and tossed it straight up.

After it attached to the railing, they began climbing up.

It was a climb of 8 or 9 meters, so it took less than a minute for those who were used to this sort of thing.

“M-Myonri, I’m not used to this kind of thing, so pull me up!”

“Why do I get the feeling you specifically chose me?”

Well-behaved Myonri tilted her head as she pulled up the skinny and unathletic boy. And no matter how much everything had been automated and digitized, there were still guards on the deck, so the rogues were quickly spotted.

It had already begun.

As they exchanged short bursts of gunfire, Heivia killed a few guards with his assault rifle.

“Dammit, they’re girls? A warship has a crew of about 200, right? That’s the same as a company. I really don’t want to fight a small war in this steel ghost house, so what are we supposed to do!?”

“That guard ship is going to respond before it comes to that!!”

After finally climbing over the railing like a stowaway, Quenser tried to flee inside the ship, but something odd happened first.

Close-in defense Gatling guns were installed at even intervals along the side of the battlecruiser like streetlights along a highway, but they all turned in unison like the fan section of a home appliance store.

With an explosive sound somewhat reminiscent of a broken buzzer, the horizontal rain released from the Flagship 019 tore apart the surface of the neighboring guard ship. No distinction was made between personnel and materiel. The sailors on the guard ship had raised their rifles without feeling very threatened themselves, but now they were utterly taken aback and fled inside the ship where the thick armor would protect them.

The electronic simulation division had finally made itself useful. (17-Year-Old ♀) Lilim Gazette (the Vomiter) gave a cruel smile and an OK sign with a mobile device in her other hand.

“Nee hee hee. They might have decent defenses against external cyber attacks, but it looks like they didn’t consider the possibility of an infection from inside. These might have been added later on because the close-in defense Gatling guns and missiles are connected just like IoT appliances. Although for the ship’s guns and missiles that are used for offense instead of close-in defense, it looks like we would need to directly visit the CIC.”

However, the idiots could not hear a word she said thanks to the great din.

“...what...you...!?”

“...punch that smug...off your face...so get inside!!”

“...boobs...!!”

They could have sworn they heard a shocking word from Myonri in the middle of it all, but all the noise left the details unclear. They might have misheard, but they might not have.

Since this could easily deafen them or get them hit by a stray bullet, Quenser and the others opened a watertight door and ran inside the ship.

They did not have time to catch their breath.

They heard pounding footsteps and then some female soldiers in sailor uniforms appeared from around a corner in the surprisingly narrow corridor.

“Shit!!”

Fortunately, thick watertight doors were prepared all over the place to prevent flooding. Heivia and the others opened doors to random cabins and used them as shield as they returned fire.

But...

“Watch out! What is this? There are sparks everywhere! Are the bullets ricocheting all over the place!?”

“Here comes a shotgun!”

“Ahhh!!”

With the complex layout and the walls and doors made of thick steel, the advantages of an assault rifle were mostly negated. Their range did not matter and they could not penetrate the walls or doors. That meant a short-range but powerful shotgun was the better choice.

At this rate, the enemy would move in and do major damage, but that was not what happened.

For one thing, why were the armed sailor uniform girls exposing themselves to direct fire instead of holding a position at the corner?

Gunshots rang out from a different direction entirely.

It was the same sound they had heard in that sunken ship. And it came from beyond the corner the sailor uniform soldiers had come from. They had not come to attack; they had been on the run.

“Urp. I really hate seeing girls die...”

“What the hell...? Whatever-that-is is punching through the walls our assault rifles couldn’t get through.”

One by one, the sailors were picked off.

And then the culprits stepped out from around the corridor. It was Wraith in her black uniform and the butler-like young man. Black-uniformed Wraith held a small handgun in her right hand and Frank held something like a revolving grenade launcher with a shortened barrel.

But Quenser ignored that and shouted about something else.

“What, is school swimsuit time over already!? Why did you change!?”

“This is my proper uniform. ...And don’t be so blatantly disappointed. It makes me feel like I did something wrong. Am I just too sexy? Is that it? Then I have no choice but to wear it again for you sometime.” Wraith shook her head in exasperation. “Regardless, you are late, Legitimacy Kingdom. Surely you aren’t going to say you will only put in as much work as you are being paid for.”

“Are you kidding? Did you use that grenade launcher to get through the wall? I didn’t see any explosions.”

“You are astonishingly dumb. It is admittedly based on a grenade launcher, but the barrel was replaced with one of tungsten steel and it fires lead bullets that fit perfectly inside. You could call it the world’s most powerful magnum.”

An anti-materiel rifle would be 12.7mm while a grenade launcher would be 40mm, so considering both the caliber and the overall mass, the weight of the lead bullet and the amount of powder would be Quenser gave up trying to calculate it and just smiled. Finding the answer would be a bad idea. He would only feel his balls shrivel up again.

(The little Martini tends to gather all the attention, but that handsome guy is a monster in his own

right. Oh, but if he relies on that one trick, maybe he's more like me. If he doesn't have the fundamentals down like Heivia does, he might be going for a powerful impact that prevents anyone from noticing how little he can really do.)

It was theoretically possible to refer to the old woman as "little Martini" as well, but Katarina was still being held by the young man. He had to be able to provide as much force as a vise if he needed to, so she would be more secure there than in handcuffs. And even if nothing had been done to her, she might have gone limp from exposure to the loud gunfire in this enclosed space.

"We will now secure this ship and settle things with Piranirie."

"Will you be okay, Wraith? We've seen rats and wharf roaches on this ship. And all I can do is hold you, pat your head, and call you a good girl."

"Try to hold that over me again and I will tear off your limbs and pull out your entrails!!"

As Wraith blushed and shouted back at him, elderly Katarina calmly began to speak.

"Settle this? Given #7's structure, she will be in control of the bridge or the combat command. In other words, the most secure control point."

"Isn't this what you wanted, designer? There are more than 200 sailors on this ship. That's the size of a small company, but you needn't be afraid."

"Huh? Why not?"

Heivia looked skeptical, so Wraith explained while toying with her blonde hair.

"The toxic atmosphere running rampant in this maintenance fleet is coming from Piranirie Martini Smoky, the symbol of an administrative system. But now I have arrived as another Martini and a troubleshooter. By introducing a new order and providing a second control tower, her unilateral control can be fairly easily shaken. Think of it like the class bullies being surrounded by their target's colleagues at work and the rest of the class seeing it." Wraith tossed Quenser a roll of sticky tape. "If they surrender, bind and gag them. If they don't, kill them. I have no obligation to worry about the sailors, but as an Information Alliance officer, I will remind you that it can be tempting indeed to know that surrendering gives you a chance at survival. And this is not just some ideal. I have the experience to back it up."

"In other words, this is the perfect chance to legally tie up some sailor uniform girls. (Grin)"

"What part of this looks even remotely legal?"

The discussion was over.

No matter how formidable a foe the Nitrogen Mirage was, the chaos would end if they could stop Piranirie who had sent the entire maintenance fleet out of control in the first place.

"Oh, right. Wraith, you might see what look like squished wharf roaches, but don't worry. Those are probably the remains of our spy robots. But if you are scared, feel free to grab onto me. I can even carry you around and toss you in the air for fun."

"I warned you, didn't I? Now tell me what it was I said I would do to you."

Just then, Quenser happened to look out a window.

A bluish-white nitrogen laser scorched the air and mercilessly tore away the Flagship 019's bridge.

Part 13

There was noise.

That noise arrived at the resolution of a problem and became an unnecessary hurdle of its own.

"Are you insane, Lieutenant Colonel!? You're stimulating submarine volcanoes across the naval battlefield without confirming the death of your allies first!! Listen, just because they are marked 'missing' on the paperwork does not mean they are considered dead like they are after cardiopulmonary arrest. Do not forget that my men could be deemed killed by your friendly fire if their corpses are found within the cooled lava!!"

"Also, the sea around New Caribbean Island is considered internationally protected waters to recover the marine resource of bluefin tuna. We might be able to fight back when the Legitimacy Kingdom sends a maintenance base and Object there on the pretext of protecting that area, but we cannot directly attack the environment there. We have a reputation to maintain."

"Are you sure you did not misinterpret this? We put you in charge a simple operation in this delicate region of sea, not an all-out attack! For one thing, I am the fleet commander!! You are merely a guest providing external advice, so when did you gain the authority to boss my men around!?"

"I will be reporting this to our superiors."

"I am sure the top brass enjoying the Manhattan scenery will be shocked to hear this! I don't know what this genius girl project is about, but if there are thousands of you, then you are easily replaceable. Do not think you will be protected by your privileged position forever! I will show you your actions have consequences!!"

There was only one answer.

The details were more complicated, but the genius girl project had been meant to provide answers that the stagnant system built by adults could never find.

In a way, she remained true to that.

"Hmm, I guess these people are getting 'rusty' too."

Part 14

The single blast violently shook the 200m battlecruiser and Quenser's group could not stay on their feet. The bridge, which was located a bit to starboard, took a direct hit and the ship as a whole twisted. The walls and pipes that could not stand the stress burst one after another.

"Oh, no. The pipes are bursting! The red ones carry steam, so make sure you don't get scalded!!"

"Wraith, why did you bring that old woman here!?"

"Are you suggesting I should have left her in the submersible? That is an impressively meaningless philanthropic spirit. I will only follow humanitarianism for as long as it is useful to me."

"Ding dong ding donnnng."

Then someone made an obvious call for attention over the ship's speakers.

The surrounding sailors would hear this too, but the girl did not seem to care any longer.

"I can make a pretty good guess based on the chaos in the ship. It's another Martini who's boarded us, isn't it? Well, I guess you had no other way of surviving that situation, did you?"

"Is she crazy? She shot her own ship with her own Object!?"

"It's a very Martini Series kind of thing to do."

What they said here should not have reached her, but she may have predicted their question.

"Don't worry, don't worry. The Laser Beam 069's precision is quite something, so it can whittle away at the ship with its nitrogen lasers without actually sinking the ship. When I solve a problem, I rid myself of every hindrance in order of severity. And that applies to the enemies that have infiltrated the Flagship 019, the senile old man restricting my authority here, and the defeatists who gave up fighting and neutralized themselves."

"Not good! Get away from the windows!!"

Another fearsome beam of light struck the battlecruiser from the side. The bright light blinded Quenser's group, but it had not hit where they were. Had it vaporized another Legitimacy Kingdom unit that had boarded elsewhere, or some Information Alliance sailor uniform girls who had tried to climb over the railing and jump into the sea?

With the young man protecting her, Wraith held her mobile device's microphone to her mouth. She was probably disguising the route taken as she used her Information Alliance officer privileges to access the ship's broadcast system.

"I am Wraith Martini Vermouthspray. I specialize in troubleshooting. Attention everyone!! Piranirie is attempting to bind her allies with fear. She killed the captain in order to leave all authority with herself, so don't be shaken by her sweet words or threats! None of you will need a court martial given the situation!!"

"Nyaaa ha ha!! I was trying to show some respect to a fellow Martini, but what's this? It's only #49? Damn that's low. Can you actually hear me? Oh, and watch out for sudden lightning strikes while you're moving around. And just to be clear, I'm one of the single digit successes of the genius girl project. I'm #7. Even if I can't see any silhouettes out the window, I can still mostly predict the movements of the game pieces. Ah ha ha ha ha!!"

"Sh-she's completely insane... There are pipes and firepower everywhere in here. She's on the same ship, so isn't she afraid of setting fire to the engine room or ammo!?"

Heivia was utterly shocked, but a contrasting voice spoke up in response.

"She is only putting on an act to make negotiation seem impossible. That way you think failing to unconditionally obey her means death. Piranirie's usual trick is to restrict the flow of people and information, divide up the battlefield, and then fill the atmosphere with panic. You could call it the necessary preparations before actually getting to work. ...When my mother, Casandra, would target some food reserves, she started by inciting a riot in the surrounding area."

Katarina's gentle but blunt statement received a hostile glare from Wraith who had been built based

on that woman and the girl's hand wandered through empty air as if in search of a pen.

"This changes the difficulty of achieving them, but it does not change our plans. With the bridge gone, Piranirie must be in the combat command. I doubt we can stop the Object's lasers without stopping her."

They began to move further into the ship.

And once they let their guard down even a little, female Information Alliance soldiers appeared from the cabin doors all around. After that broadcast and the Nitrogen Mirage's actions, their adoration of Piranirie had probably faded some.

But that did not matter.

"Prepare yourselves! Prepare for battle, everyone!!"

"Please no. We really are going to get shot. What happened to the clean wars? Why are we in danger here?"

"Shut up. If it looks like we aren't going to fight, the Object will fire on us. And I don't want to get vaporized because of you, so if you refuse to do this, I'm shooting you myself. So just get going!!"

Trapped by the fear of death, they attacked with looks on their faces no girl should ever let anyone see.

"Urp. Why are they all girls!? Please, I'm sick of this sailor uniform hell! When I said I wanted to slay 100 girls, I meant in bed!!"

"The gender bias is probably due to all the guys leaving and getting their asses kicked back when they attacked your island. So the world is cruelly fair in this case."

Heivia, Myonri, and Wraith shot more and more of the Information Alliance sailors that pressed in at them. The ship's crew could not take advantage of their normal potential even when they gathered greater numbers. That was because they had been ordered to make an immediate all-out attack instead of waiting for a better opportunity. Just as in poker and boxing, rushing right in every time would only get you badly beaten. It was a lot like firing at the paper targets moving along rails in a shooting range.

"Tch!"

Wraith clicked her tongue when she saw the sailor girls leave red paint-like marks on the walls as they collapsed to the floor. Of all things, she was crouching down and pulling out a tourniquet during this chaos.

"We don't have time to get sidetracked! If we stop shooting them here, we'll be pushed back!!"

"The rules of combat here are different. I will grow as coldhearted as necessary to stop this chaos, but that is not what is needed here. Piranirie's threat didn't make them betray us out of self-interest! They've been driven entirely beyond their own control, so they themselves are blamele-...!!"

Wraith was cut off by a gunshot.

A bullet from Heivia's assault rifle had shot through the head of an injured soldier sitting on the floor. Blood mercilessly splattered across Wraith's white cheek as she tried to keep her allied soldier

alive.

She snapped back with the kind of pure emotion that was very unlike the Stopgap Grim Reaper.

“You bastard...!!”

“Look closer. She was holding her sidearm! It isn’t over until they’re dead and stopping before then will only get you shot at point-blank range!!”

The black-uniformed girl grimaced when faced with an unexpectedly good argument from that idiot.

Heivia had of course not wanted to bring that bloody flower to bloom.

Wraith was overwhelmed by the sight and was close to losing her will to fight, so the delinquent noble dragged her along. He continued the massacre parade, but he could be seen holding a hand to his mouth on occasion.

“Now this is a result-focused tragedy. Urp. I feel sick to the stomach.”

Heivia groaned and Wraith held her mobile device to her mouth.

Her own voice exploded from the ship’s speakers.

“Piranirie intends to use up all of the personnel and supplies she was given! Just like an officer who doesn’t want the higher ups to feel too comfortable and reduce their budget next year!! Do you really want to waste your lives like a frivolous road construction project at the end of the year!? Listen, Piranirie has already left the Information Alliance chain of command. Dutifully obeying her will only get you court martialed!!”

The gears of the all-out attack jammed slightly.

However...

“Ohh? Wraithy, do you want to hold a student council election on this sinking ship? Well, a debate over the school broadcast system is fine by me.”

“Everyone, get down!!”

A fearsome beam of light punched through the wall right in front of them.

It was not aimed at Quenser’s group. It was clearly targeted elsewhere and the confused Information Alliance sailor uniform girls were vaporized along with the melted steel.

The ship-wide broadcast continued.

“Hey, #49. A democratic decision only really works when the people are at least guaranteed their lives. If you line them up and hold a gun to their heads, do you really think you can call that a proper decision or a free vote?”

“Piranirie!!”

“You too are just using up the soldiers like they’re part of your paperwork. Okay, okayyy. Everyone, who do you think will win and survive this: #49 or #7? Those who side with the loser will of course be slaughtered, so make sure you fight good and hard□ If you don’t, I’ll provide you with more

motivation until you do. Don't worry. Truth can be twisted every which way. As long as there are no witnesses, that is."

She was being ridiculous.

But that ridiculousness once more changed things for the Information Alliance.

After rationally coming to a stop, those soldier girls despaired at the fact that ideals would not protect them and they resumed charging at the enemy.

"Yes, I've seen this before..."

"Quiet."

"It was the same when my mother stole baby food for me. She drove the starving people to action and kept them going by later informing them they would be slaughtered if they failed. And once they could not stop and began fighting for their lives, she used the chaos to ensure that only she could safely escape without being tracked."

"Shut your stinking mouth, you old hag!!"

Wraith snapped back as if in a fit of rage.

But there was no guarantee that every enemy would arrive from a distance.

While Heivia and Wraith used their assault rifle and handgun to push back the charge, a half-open watertight door slowly moved right next to them.

Frank noticed immediately and fired his cannon-like magnum into the cabin, but it did not end there. The enemy's blown-off arm flew through the air with a pin-less grenade still in its grasp.

"!?"

They only had 3 to 5 seconds.

If it detonated like this, everyone in the narrow corridor would be hit by the blast and fragments.

And it was obvious what Wraith Martini Vermouthsray intended when she immediately stepped forward instead of back.

But someone interfered before she could complete her action.

Before Wraith could cover the blast with her own body, Katarina kicked an opened door from where she had fallen to the floor. The movement of the door knocked the grenade into the cabin where it exploded inside the sealed metal box.

"Why did you save me? That was the perfect chance to have one less of the Martini Series you so despise."

"You have likely inherited the side of Casandra Martini that restored order and reconstructed a shelter to provide safe clothing, food, and water. But at the time, my mother was so focused on the overall threat that she was nearly stabbed by a robber who snuck up to her..."

"Not the point. If you know our weaknesses, you could have spread that information and let us die."

The old woman's expression crumpled at the girl's cold questioning.

"I knew that would be the most efficient method. I of course knew what the best choice was."

Katarina looked like she could not believe what she had done.

She shut her eyes in the center of her wrinkled face.

"But once I saw you, I couldn't do it. I couldn't say it was better for you to be dead."

"..."

Wraith gave a quiet snort.

She did not have time to persistently ask what the woman meant. Even now, more and more Information Alliance girls, her supposed allies, were rushing in to shoot them in the back.

There was nothing but harsh gunfire and the colors red and black.

Wraith could not see them as an enemy to be defeated, so even now, she only attempted to neutralize them by aiming her handgun at their arms and legs. But Heivia followed through by firing right between their eyes or into their hearts.

The delinquent noble clicked his tongue and raised his voice.

"This is a waste of ammo! If you're gonna do this, then do it right!!"

"~ ~ ~!!"

"If they can move a single finger, they can pull a trigger or a grenade's pin. Our only option is to cross this minefield in front of us! Myonri, you too! Your submachinegun is firing low-caliber suppression rounds for a PDW, so firing at their arms and legs will still break bones and tear arteries! It won't save them!!"

He was right. But to Quenser, who was irresponsibly avoiding the fight, it looked like Heivia and the others were being drawn into the atmosphere here. He felt like the baseline of morality only continued to drop on both sides of the battle.

This was Piranirie Martini Smoky.

This harshly colorful world had come from within her.

"Are the only options here the whip or the whip!?"

"Oh, honestly. This gun is too powerful... There are other operators in the CIC, aren't there!? Why aren't they trying to restrain that girl!?"

Wraith seemed to enjoy those sensible questions from Quenser and Myonri. They seemed to distance her from Piranirie's extreme rationalism and Heivia's competing logic.

"That's obvious. In this colorful hell, Piranirie's location is the only safe zone. If she dies, it's all over. Even if she's causing it all, who's going to play the hero when it means giving up their own sanctuary?"

But the Information Alliance sailors were clinging to that false hope.

Which side did they most fear being killed by? Faced with that ridiculous choice, they continued rushing in with sweat covering their faces.

"I recognize this..."

"Did you glimpse your mother again?"

"No, this was in a research paper that Piranirie herself wrote. It was titled Free Control of Lifeforms Using External Stimuli. The actual paper was about putting rats in a steel maze and placing a burner below them until they reached the goal, but this is a similar concept."

Quenser heard a quiet squeaking sound.

For this to happen now, it seemed like some kind of curse.

"...A rat?"

It had likely gotten onboard while the ship was at port. He recalled that one of the wharf roach spy robots had been destroyed by a rat.

And more than just the one rat was squeaking.

Several of them were staring out from the space between equipment.

Quenser felt a chill down his spine when he realized what that meant.

"Are they waiting for us to die and become meat for the taking?" asked Katarina.

"More importantly, are the Information Alliance sailors the only ones being monitored? If they have cameras on their uniforms or guns, we're in trouble too! It's about time for that goddamn Object to fire again!!"

"!!"

They had to have made it pretty far down in the ship, but they doubted the Nitrogen Mirage would care. Even if they were below the waterline, the Information Alliance could always shut all the surrounding watertight doors before firing the shot.

A thick beam of bluish-white light pierced the ship nearby and an entire group of hesitant Information Alliance sailors were annihilated.

"Dammit, that thing's got complete control! What is our Princess doing!?"

"Let's just pray she isn't at the bottom of the ocean...wah!?"

Quenser's group immediately ran into a large room.

They waited for a bit...but the nitrogen laser they were expecting never arrived.

A pause was not enough to relax. It felt like being given unexploded ordnance to hold instead of a body pillow. Where was the Nitrogen Mirage and was the Baby Magnum still safe? They knew the answers would not put their minds at ease, but the dearth of information still applied pressure on

them from all sides.

"...? Are we safe here?"

"What is this place? A central computer room? There's a huge-ass supercomputer here."

"The Flagship 019 is an electronic information control ship, right? Piranirie must be plotting something for her attack on Manhattan. And I doubt it's a way of directly sending in the Nitrogen Mirage. So she's probably using this big computer to calculate out all the necessary conditions."

"Since she is hesitant to fire on us here, you might be right." Wraith joined the conversation while bashfully looking down at her mobile device. "Still, I doubt destroying this computer would be enough to stop her plan which is as foolish as it is ambitious."

After overcoming that gruesome scene, even the Stopgap Grim Reaper may have been starving for contact with someone capable of a proper conversation.

"Why?"

"If that would be enough, she would be panicking and siccing those sailors on us."

Wraith took a step in front of the young man and narrowed her eyes toward the machines beyond the reinforced glass that looked like large refrigerators.

"Anastasia, hm?"

"What? Did you give it a girl's name like the Capitalist Corporations does with Objects?"

"It's simpler than that. This is a DNA computer made using my biological mother's cancer cells. Instead of using the normal system of 1s and 0s, it uses ATCG combinations to quickly compute complex calculations. When my biological mother learned how long she had to live, she agreed to be a specimen so she could offer something to the world."

Was Wraith emphasizing the "biological" part because it reminded her of the time before she became a Martini? Or was it because Katarina was here?

If that woman had not died, it was possible Wraith's last name would not have changed.

"You mean...?"

"Yes, no matter what form it takes, this is my biological mother. After all, the chromosome design was completely broken, so you just place it in a Petri dish and it multiples without end. The Anastasia Processor's excellent results led to more and more production, so now there are apparently about 400 tons of her cells around the world."

"I thought this was going to be a moving story, but you just had to give it that Information Alliance twist, didn't you!?"

At any rate, this DNA computer may have been one of the reasons why Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had sought a place for herself in the genius girl project that filled the gaps in their AI culture. This way she could support what her biological mother had created.

"The question is what she's using this Anastasia to calculate. It has to be something related to the attack on Manhattan."

“Can you operate it?”

“Was your mother – our original – a cute technophobe who grew tearful trying to hook up a TV and DVR, designer? I am part of the Martini Series built into the giant administrative system to eliminate any unforeseen errors produced by machines like this one.”

A DNA computer sounded strange when you heard how it worked, but the console screen was the same as a normal computer. It felt weird that you only had to move the cursor to the icon and double click.

As Quenser watched over her small shoulder, he grimaced at the many windows she browsed through.

“Wait...”

“?”

“Yes, yes. This is bad. Heivia, do you remember the Nitrogen Mirage’s trick? It uses artificial mirages to bend its nitrogen lasers however it wants!”

“What does that matter at this point?”

“Did you ever wonder where the bent lasers went after they missed!?”

“Ah...???”

Heivia did not seem to get it, so Quenser reached for the console himself. Since he was standing behind short Wraith, he was practically leaning on top of her.

“This is serious... The drones are...yes, they’re flying. A water solvent, the first battle was several days ago, a girl’s name, a hurricane, the westerlies, ETA, meteorological weapon, and even the conditions needed for dissemination in the air! ...You’ve gotta be kidding. This means that thing’s nitrogen lasers may have been no more than the primer. It’s electrolytic corrosion. They’ve been firing that big thing to hide their real goal. It was all so we wouldn’t notice they were using optical pumping for excitation of the energy...!!”

“H-hey, how about an actual explanation? Nn, don’t breathe in my ear!”

In a rare display, Little Wraithy blushed and struggled in vain while Frank the Butler expressionlessly exuded killer intent, but Quenser was too preoccupied to sniff the nice-smelling girl.

The wolf leaned on the girl with a serious look on his face.

“On the Central and South American line of the Atlantic, the westerlies head north. The giant hurricanes that appear here hit the east coast of North America, so you’re probably pretty familiar with that.”

“Y-yes. What about it...?”

Wraith asked while shrinking down and trembling like he was occasionally poking her side, so Quenser continued while focused on the screen.

“So a giant cloud that appears here will reach New York. Assuming you don’t have to worry about it maintaining a hurricane shape. Just like a meteorological weapon that messes with the upper

atmosphere to alter the amount of rainfall, Piranirie has used this direct combat to mix a specific solvent into the clouds and then excite them using the Object's lasers. This list here is the ingredients for the dye laser. But the dye laser itself uses water - in other words, the primary component of clouds - to amplify the energy."

"What does any of that matter? They're amplifying the electrical energy in the clouds? So are they going to trigger lightning strikes exactly where they want? Or are they going to use an EMP or something to damage the computers over a wide area? Nothing like that can bring down the world-renowned and shockingly well-protected Manhattan!"

"Sorry, but this is much worse than that."

While more or less embracing Wraith's slender shoulders from behind, Quenser placed his hand over her small hand and the console mouse she held. He began searching for and opening a few files.

"Are you familiar with electrolytic corrosion? When a massive amount of electricity flows into the ground from a giant factory or subway line, the ground and moisture function as an electrolytic solution and the buried metal and cables are corroded through electrolysis."

"Wait..."

"Yes. There are a few different conditions necessary for electrolytic corrosion, but only one of them is important here. When a thundercloud approaches, the electric charge in the ground shifts, as if dragged along by the cloud," explained Quenser. "If thunderclouds with more energy than any natural cloud could contain passed directly over a metropolis, it would cause extreme electrolytic corrosion. The underground power lines and communication cables, the foundations of the skyscrapers, the subway tunnels, the gas and water pipes, and everything else buried belowground would fall apart like someone dumped sulfuric acid on them. So if something like that passes over Manhattan..."

"The ground itself will grow soft and all the buildings will collapse...?"

"If the water flowing from the pipes is broken down, it will become a whole lot of oxygen and hydrogen. And when the gas pipes burst, it'll be more direct. In the worst case, the ground below Manhattan will become a giant bomb."

Of course, normal electrolytic corrosion would not cause anything like this. It would only cause the underground pipes to gradually rust over the years and decades.

That was why Piranirie Martini Smoky was not relying on "normal" thunderclouds. She was using an accelerator pumped full of electricity to create something that did not exist in the natural world. She was using the immense power of an Object to invite in something too extraordinary to naturally exist.

With a tremor in her voice, Wraith once more brought her mobile device to her mouth.

"...What are you trying to do, Piranirie?"

This was beyond the point when she could convince anyone of anything, but she must have felt the need to ask anyway. Her own voice left the speakers across the ship.

"Why are you so intent on firing on the very center of the Information Alliance!?"

“Ohhh? What a strange thing to ask, Wraithy. As a troubleshooter, how many times have you executed one of our own people when they screw up? Y’know, a bullet through the back of a corrupt soldier’s head as they beg for their life.”

“Kh.”

While leaning over her from behind, Quenser thought he felt her firm shoulders shrink down a bit.

Was she afraid of someone knowing about that?

But who? Quenser’s group? Or Katarina?

Piranirie had replied over the ship-wide broadcast that was not encrypted and anyone could hear. She did not care who heard this. She was stubbornly doubling down here, but if handled correctly, could that give her a sharp-tongued charisma?

“We are spare personnel meant to use human ingenuity to make up for the vulnerabilities in Capulet, the administrative system forming the AI network at the foundation of our Objects. #49, you must be the type of person who will kill any number of people so long as it will preserve order on the battlefield. I am no different there. When various factors bring the warfront to a standstill, I apply some oil and reignite the fire. To keep war running on schedule.”

That was one of the two major families from Romeo and Juliet. Only the Legitimacy Kingdom would choose a name for having a noble ring to it, so why had they chosen that name? Quenser silently thought about that for a bit.

Meanwhile, Wraith groaned a question.

“...What are you talking about...?”

“New York is the center of the information world, but it is actually the world’s most uncooperative city when it comes to information collection. The more information the people are in contact with, the greater their information literacy, so they aren’t so easily fooled. They block facial recognition, they reject having their search history saved, they use a decoy server for the internet and email, they hide their IP, they prevent anyone from tapping into their mailbox, and some of them even have multiple social security numbers. But what does that look like to the AI network running everything? The answer is simple: it doesn’t look like anything. It seems several Martinis have been sent in to fill in that electronic blind spot, but it would seem none of them were successful. Something which cannot be measured is determined not to exist, so Capulet has dropped New York a long way down the priority list.”

“...”

“Yes, yes. Didn’t this ship run into some trouble in the Asian...what was it? Oh, right. The Mekong District. I believe it was something about using the tanks’ drive-by-light systems for civilian self-driving cars. That was apparently their last chance. If they could have sent those weapons on wheels through the streets and observed New York that way, they could have corrected for the error. But they apparently screwed that one up. And wasn’t that what you wanted?”

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

They would not do anything different even if they could relive that part of their lives, but they had not known this was hidden behind the plot involving Dorothea Martini Naked. ...Of course, this was

a deeply hidden facet of the whole, so those greedy tank drivers probably had not thought it through that far.

“But in terms of production and consumption, New York is overwhelmingly on the consumption side. And when an error message reports that a supposedly empty ghost town is devouring more resources than anywhere else in Information Alliance territory, it doesn’t seem strange at all the administration system would try to plug that hole.”

“I’m impressed you could get things so backwards... The people of New York don’t exist? Because they don’t exist, there’s no problem with attacking them? Have you completely forgotten why the Martini Series was given our special privileges!? Our entire purpose is to control things manually when the machines make this kind of mistake!!”

“Is it really? I have given myself the role of ensuring the AI network runs as efficiently as possible. It is true Capulet made a mistake. But if that very mistake is a simulation of how to most efficiently bring prosperity to the whole of the Information Alliance, I will follow that detour.”

“AI is not god, Piranirie.”

“Of course not. That is why it must be supported by human hands. I must ensure that those myopic fools do not reject Capulet’s answer as a mere mistake.”

That was the end of it.

Piranirie may have had no real reason to offer up further information and Wraith may have realized nothing she said would get through to the other girl.

The small girl simply looked up toward heaven and groaned a question.

“...Has she abandoned her free will?”

“?”

“We are meant to fill the gaps in the AI network connecting the central servers of our safe countries, so our own opinions are constantly being pitted against Capulet, the administrative system that collects big data from billions of people. Which is right and which is wrong? ...If you let it sweep you away, you end up like that. Island Nation shogi players will train using AI software, but they maintain indirect control because they can raise and lower its skill by tweaking the parameters. Piranirie has become a slave to the machine. She has accepted that things are much easier if you just ignore matters of good and evil.”

She could not be the same as everyone else.

She could not face in the same direction and feel the same enthusiasm.

Not with the general population and not even with the rest of the Martini Series.

“The entire genius girl project was based on a woman who hid the fact that she was a rational killer...”

“What about it?”

The old woman seemed confused why Quenser was bringing this up now, so he spat out the rest.

"This problem is even more fundamental than that. I can't even imagine the kind of isolation that must be pressing in on Wraith, Piranirie, and the others from all directions..."

Wraith gave a quiet snort.

Was she thankful that someone was worried for her, or did she feel ostracized for being written off as something that could not be understood? Quenser did not know.

No, that was the way it was for people in general. Of course you could not understand someone at a glance.

Far too much simple loyalty had been expected of the Martini Series.

"They're thrown into situations that would break anyone and then criticized when they do break. How is that right? And the adults mass-produced thousands of these created geniuses so there were replacements when they broke."

"Enough. ...You are ridiculously kind-hearted." Wraith cleared her throat. "We don't know which cloud is the meteorological weapon which will trigger electrolytic corrosion, do we?"

"It might not be just one. Since their balloon bombs are reliant on the natural westerlies, they might have prepared a full barrage."

"I would also like to know how much time until it arrives. That will change how we put together an evacuation plan or even a countermeasure in which we fire our own meteorological weapon to transform the weaponized cloud into harmless rain."

In that case, what did they need to know in order to protect Manhattan?

How many weaponized clouds were there and where were they floating now?

There was only one accurate source for that information.

"Let's get to the combat command. We can drag all of that out of Piranirie Martini Smoky."

"Let's get to the combat command. We can drag all of that out of Piranirie Martini Smoky."

Part 15

Once they left the central computer room, they were again exposed to the threat of the Nitrogen Mirage. They could not predict when a nitrogen laser would blast right through the ship's walls.

The number of attacks from the Information Alliance troops seemed to have reduced quite a bit from before.

"What's this? Did she purge too many of them, so she doesn't have any pawns left?"

They heard the quiet squeaking of an animal.

"..."

"Don't look, old lady. It'll only be unpleasant."

Heivia and the others had already done a detailed search and Quenser made sure not to look in that

direction. He could hear the sounds of small animals gathering around what was no more than meat. He could kind of tell why no one was left.

"I can imagine some of them couldn't continue on or turn back, so they ended up in a shootout with the commanding officer that ordered the attack..."

"A normal Martini wouldn't waste this many resources." Wraith quietly clenched her teeth as the silence enveloped her. "I refuse to accept that a normal Martini would have such an extreme disregard for human life..."

Wraith's role was the Stoppap Grim Reaper. When various factors had caused the chain of command to fail and a unit had been abandoned on the battlefield, she was sent in to prevent them from being destroyed before the next commander could arrive. At first glance, it looked like she was constantly watching losing battles and coldly ordering them around, but she was actually working to improve their situation and reduce the number of casualties. She could never bear Piranirie's method of wasting her allies' lives like machinegun bullets.

Had that Martini been broken by something inside her or from the external isolation?

Even if they knew the answer, she seemed beyond saving.

The ship was full of melted holes and seawater had flooded some places. While avoiding those areas, they made their way to their destination, mostly following Wraith's lead.

"There it is," said Myonri. "Is that the combat command?"

They approached a giant pair of double doors on the port side.

It bore no fancy decorations, but the walls and door were a lot thicker than elsewhere. The entire room was built to function as an emergency panic room.

They recalled that the destroyed bridge had been on the starboard side. This was not an aircraft carrier that needed space for a runway, so the positions may have been adjusted to balance the ship's weight.

"That's not a door we can pry open with a crowbar. And I'm too afraid of the ricochet to try to shoot it open with my rifle..."

As Heivia grumbled about the problem, Butler Frank casually raised his extra-large magnum created by modifying a revolving grenade launcher.

In the closed space, the cannon-like blast pounded on their eardrums and the lead mass the size of a drink can bounced around like a pinball.

While pathetically curled up on the floor like a pill bug, Heivia tearfully shouted at him.

"Are you trying to get us killed, you son of a bitch!?"

"It's no use, Heivia. He must be the kind of pervert who only responds to blonde little girls who will dominate him."

"Frank," quietly warned the blond girl. ...Oh? Quenser had a feeling that extra-large magnum had been aimed his way.

But regardless, that monstrous magnum could blow a fist-sized hole in the average steel door, but the CIC's door only dented a little. This was not something they could open so easily.

But only a civilian would think that meant to give up. This just meant they had to try harder.

"Quenser, prepare some explosives. Check how many rods the door has and set up the explosives to break them all."

"..."

"Quenser?"

Heivia frowned when his awful friend did not answer.

Instead of reaching for his backpack, Quenser glanced in a completely different direction and spoke quietly.

"I get why the sailor uniform girls aren't showing up. Even if I don't want to think about the answer. But this isn't right. It isn't right for things to be going so smoothly."

"Wait..."

"Why didn't the Nitrogen Mirage fire even a single shot while we took such wide detours? Piranirie has no reason to hold back at this point. That means she wanted to attack but couldn't. I'm sure part of it is the ship barely holding together when it's so riddled with holes, but that's only secondary. There's a more direct reason."

"What? That sounds good and all, but I don't see how it helps us here."

"Piranirie tracked the location of all the game pieces using the cameras on the soldiers. And that goes for both enemy and ally. With all the Information Alliance sailors gone, she no longer has our location as we move through the ship. And she can't exactly fire at random when she's on the ship too. All she can do is sit and wait. ...Until now."

Heivia finally arrived at the most basic of conclusions.

He followed Quenser's gaze and saw what the boy was looking at.

A military shotgun with a small lens attached was unnaturally sitting on the floor.

Piranirie had known they would reach this goal line eventually, so she had made sure she would know when they arrived.

"It's coming... The Nitrogen Mirage's nitrogen laser is coming!!"

"Wait, we'll be fine. We're right in front of the CIC!! It's always fired from the side of the ship, so if we stay by this door to port, Piranirie will be in the line of fire too. It can't skewer the ship from the side, so we're safe while we're-...!!"

Quenser cut Heivia off with a weak shake of his head.

The boy pointed not to the side of the ship, but to the front.

When he spoke, it sounded like he desperately wanted someone to tell him he was wrong.

"This is a 200m mass of steel. A shot down the length of the battlecruiser will vaporize us while only grazing the combat command's door."

Part 16

"Hee hee."

How many people remained on the ship outside of this box?

This box lined with computers and partitioned by clear acrylic panels may have been all that remained of the world. The operators were overcome by that delusion while they silently fulfilled their duties in a desperate attempt to avert their eyes from the reality pressing in on them.

Only the small ruler among them was laughing.

That girl with wavy black hair wore a blue and gold parade coat over a sailor uniform and the baggy sleeves hid all but her fingertips.

She was sitting in her seat with her slender legs resting on the console.

"Ah ha ha ha!! Hee hee ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

She had won.

It was over.

Piranirie Martini Smoky applauded her own results. With the number of movable pawns and mobile cameras reduced, she could no longer command an attack anywhere in the ship. But what did that matter? She only had to lay a trap at the one point she knew the intruders would go.

And they had fallen for it.

There was no way they could escape now. Their one hope of survival was entering the combat command and using Piranirie as a shield, but the walls and door were too thick for that. The door would not break from manpower and bullets and they would have to carefully calculate out how to break all of the rods if they wanted to use explosives. There was simply no way they could do that before the Laser Beam 069's attack arrived.

"Farewell, my fellow Martini. This is just how life is."

Her screen showed the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers rushing for the wall, but that was not going to open the CIC's door.

But then a small warning icon appeared.

Piranirie used the fingertips poking out of her baggy sleeve to skillfully spin a fountain pen.

(The sprinklers?)

The area was already full of holes, but that should have actually prevented a fire from breaking out. Quite a lot of water was being meaninglessly scattered just 30 or 40 meters down a straight corridor from the CIC's door.

It was partly to strike a good balance with damage control, but the sprinklers were relatively high

cost equipment on a warship that even had to preserve toilet water. As long as there were no electronics with broken shielding in the area, it was better to pump in seawater. So why here and now? When Piranirie frowned and called up a diagram of the corridor in front of the combat command, a series of ominous data points appeared before her eyes.

There was something here. There had to be something to it.

A pipe extended from the wall. The pipe was colored red as a heat warning and it was actually a dedicated duct that traveled from the kitchen gas burners to the main funnel that carried exhaust from the engine.

What would happen if the sprinkler water hit that source of heat?

(It would produce a lot of steam...no, a temperature difference...)

“W-wait, Laster Beam 069!! Cease firing!! I repeat, cease firing...!!”

She was too late.

Piranirie Martini Smoky should have kept in mind one simple fact: lasers could bend.

And the conditions were more or less the same indoors as outdoors.

Part 17

It was more of a gamble than a split-second decision.

The only data in his mind was the general idea that light was bent from warm air to cold air.

“No hard feelings if anyone gets hit!!”

After noticing one pipe with a high temperature warning label, Quenser immediately activated the sprinkler linked up to the fire alarm, producing lots of white steam.

From there, it was a matter of seconds.

A massive beam wrapped in bluish-white approached from directly ahead.

No, it had to have already passed through by the time he saw it. Quenser and the others were only seeing the afterimage left from scorching the dust and moisture in the air.

But if they could see the afterimage of the laser beam after it passed through, then they could not have been vaporized.

“It...bent!?”

Just as Heivia shouted that, the destruction finally caught up.

After being diverted aside just before reaching them, the nitrogen laser had pierced the combat command right next to them. That was a solid box similar to a panic room and it clearly swelled out from within. The air inside must have explosively expanded. That wall would have been difficult to blow down with plastic explosives, but a force within the room tore through the wall and stabbed into the opposite wall.

“...Bh...!!!???”

“—————!!”

They could no longer hear their own shouting voices.

They feared they would never hear anything more than this ringing in their ears.

But they had survived.

They were actually able to feel fear again.

“Damn...it... I think I’m going to pay for life insurance from now on...”

“Look, things are pretty bad there too.”

The inside of the combat command was a complete mess.

The thick walls had been blown out or melted and the computers had all been blown away. The liquid splattered across the floor was probably the melted acrylic panels or glass.

Then there were the people.

“Wow. What is this? Every last operator is piled on top of each other. Can you really get people to work together so perfectly on the verge of death?”

Heivia groaned, but Wraith shook her head as if to cut him off.

“The odds are good Piranirie is at the bottom. They believed she was their ticket to safety. Since they couldn’t ensure their own lives if she died, they acted as meat cushions to protect her. Talk about getting the cart before the horse.”

“...”

Katarina viewed the scene with a difficult look on her face.

Things were just as bad as she had expected. But since she had acted to protect Wraith when it came down to it, could she really celebrate this attack on Piranirie?

Even if the outcome here could change the overall direction the Martini Series took.

And Quenser’s group had to ask her about the weaponized cloud attack on Manhattan.

Just then, a warning icon appeared on one of the few remaining monitors in the shredded and scorched CIC.

“This is bad,” muttered Wraith. “The Nitrogen Mirage isn’t stopping. This is displaying the predicted line of fire for that shockingly stupid Object’s main cannon, and it’s aimed right at this combat command!! If it fires now, there really is no saving us!!”

“We’ll just have to do something about that,” said Quenser. “Myonri, check to see if Piranirie is hiding in that pile of corpses. If she’s breathing, treat her injuries! And Lilim! I need the help of the electronic simulation division! The external cases might have melted like cheese, but hook these computers together again and find a way to fire the ship’s guns. And if that Anastasia

supercomputer in the central computer room is still functioning, connect it to this monitor!!”

“What good is moving a ship that’s as full of holes as Swiss cheese!? And a normal ship’s guns aren’t going to do anything to a nuke-resistant Object!!”

“I don’t need direct firepower. I’ll be doing the same thing as before.”

“?”

“Okay, they use heavy oil for the standard fire smokescreen. They scatter oil on the sea and ignite it to create the smokescreen. That gives us what we need.”

Wraith frowned.

“Are you trying to create another mirage using temperature differences? Their Pilot Elite has to be learning. It won’t be long before this doesn’t work anymore.”

“They’ll be worried about a mirage, yes. But that’s why the odds are good they’ll overlook a different method.”

“Quenser, the datalink is online! The aft main gun can still turn!!”

“Let Anastasia handle the calculations for auto-aiming. The first shot only needs to be a smokescreen. Fire!!”

The young man and Katarina immediately sheltered young Wraith.

Were they trying to protect her ears?

With an incredible tremor, the supposedly 70,000-ton ship definitely slid to the side.

Unlike a missile, unguided ship’s guns were exposed to a variety of influences: from the wind and the waves to the earth’s gravity and rotation. It was a very general form of attack that was meant to hit the enemy just 50 times when firing 100 times. The initial smokescreen was not just to blind the enemy. It was to check the margin of error between the ideal targeting and where the shell actually fell so corrections could be made before firing the next shell.

“Even with automatic loading, it would take too long to prepare a physical shell now!!”

“That’s not what I want.” Time seemed to flow differently for Quenser as he responded to Heivia’s flustered warning. “The Nitrogen Mirage creates artificial mirages by producing extreme temperature differences using liquid nitrogen or iron oxide and aluminum. And it uses those to bend its nitrogen laser main cannon however it likes.”

“Hm? What about it?”

“But what will happen if a heavy oil-based smokescreen shell is fired into that? The heavy oil is mixed with naphtha, a flammable substance that released a lot of hydrocarbons. That gives us dense nitrogen and hydrocarbons. Now, if a nitrogen laser, which is much further into the ultraviolet realm than natural light, hits that, it will produce a certain optical reaction. Anyone who lives in a safe country metropolis is probably familiar with it.” Quenser grinned. “Photochemical smog. That’s a prism that bends light with a refractive index entirely different to an artificial mirage and that Object won’t be expecting it at all.”

A fearsome light burst out.

But this was not a mere failure where the laser veered off in the wrong direction. The Anastasia DNA computer could perform complex calculations far faster than the old style of computer, so it had accurately lined the pieces up on the board.

The complex artificial mirages the Nitrogen Mirage had created itself revealed a new side to themselves. The powerful laser it had fired was bent again and again in ways the Object had not expected and it ultimately made a wide U-turn and returned right to its firer.

The Pilot Elite probably could not see it in the final moment.

There was no way to follow the nitrogen laser by eye when it moved at the speed of light.

“Is it...over?” hesitantly asked Heivia.

There was a large hole leading from the front of the ship. It looked like a dark tunnel to them and it gave them a view of a giant pillar of water in the distance.

After some time passed, an incredible tremor shook the already badly damaged Flagship 019. It creaked so much they were amazed it did not just break in half.

It really was over.

The Nitrogen Mirage had sunk into the sea and the resultant waves were crashing against the ship.

Meanwhile, Myonri had found someone within the fallen operators.

“H-here she is. She looks a lot different from the other operators and it’s the same girl we saw with the spy robot.”

Katarina confirmed it with a deep voice.

“That girl is #7, Piranirie Martini Smoky. She is definitely one of the mothers I created.”

“...Oh...”

While lying on her back, a crack seemed to form in the girl’s dried lips and her throat trembled.

She probably did not have long.

Quenser was not a medical expert, but he could somehow tell.

He saw Katarina bite her lip.

“Answer our questions.” Here, Wraith remained cold. “How many weaponized clouds are you using to attack Manhattan? Give me the full list. Your plan has failed.”

“Who...who do you think messed with my head?”

Piranirie’s eyes were unfocused, so were Wraith’s words really reaching her?

That Martini almost seemed to have a smile on her lips as she continued.

“I succumbed to the correctness of the Capulet administrative system in control of the Information

Alliance. But in the end, what really was the Martini Series? I could have sworn Katarina Martini was to blame for all this. As our designer, I thought she had set the alarm clock and then tried to escape the Information Alliance on her own so she could safely watch the disaster she had started..."

"That is not what I was asking. Where are the excited clouds that will cause rapid electrolytic corrosion on a citywide scale!?"

"...But it wasn't Katarina Martini..."

"Hey!!"

"Oh, I get it now. It didn't have to be an internal culprit that drove the Martini Series berserk... That's right. It was someone on the outside that did this to us. All so they could do critical damage to the Information Alliance as a whole..."

Their first aid would be too little too late.

Even if they applied a tourniquet over the wounds and injected saline into her veins to keep her blood pressure from dropping, her life would still be lost.

It seemed a dying person did not shut their eyes in the final moment like they did in dramas.

With her eyes still open, their faint focus faded and the girl uttered her final word.

"...Mom..."

That was all.

Piranirie Martini Smoky would never move again.

While applying pressure to her wounds, Myonri checked the girl's pulse and then shook her head. Someone grabbed Myonri's shoulder and pushed her aside.

"Kh."

It was Katarina Martini.

She placed her hands on the girl's shredded chest and pressed down with her own body weight. She did so rhythmically and forcefully. Then she pressed her mouth against the girl's red-stained lips and breathed into them.

Again and again. Over and over.

Piranirie's slight chest rose and fell, but that was not the product of her own will. It was nothing more than her lungs mechanically inflating like a balloon as air was sent into them.

The old woman looked on the verge of tears.

"Katarina..."

"Just a little longer."

"It's no use. This is war."

"I know this isn't the right thing to do!! But just let me keep going a little longer!! Just a little longer!!"

When Myonri gently placed a hand on Katarina's shoulder, it seemed to break something deep inside her. The old woman's hands wandered aimlessly and then she buried her face in the girl's unmoving chest. She shouted something no one could make out. Meanwhile, the air breathed into Piranirie left her mouth and her chest returned to its normal level.

Quenser had done this.

So everyone else could survive.

Katarina finally wiped the blood from her hands, reached for the girl's opened eyelids, and shut them. Then she gently kissed her forehead.

"Rest now, sweet child."

That may have been how her mother Cassandra had put her to bed. Regardless, the rampage of the Martini Series, the story of a single girl, had come to a close.

But what did this mean?

Just how many bomb clouds were on their way to Manhattan?

And who was this person who had driven the Martini Series berserk from outside the Information Alliance?

This was more than an internal conflict. Suspicions would fall on the Legitimacy Kingdom, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization.

"What do we do?" groaned Heivia. And his voice quickly rose to a shout. "Is this battle still not over!?"

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