

Chapter 2: When You See a Ghost on the Battlefield >> Ghost Unit Interception in the Tunguska District

Part 1

Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell were frozen half to death in the frigid ocean of Scandinavia. Their situation was dire enough for them to start fighting to the death over a single plank floating in the dark ocean.

Needless to say, they were with the Legitimacy Kingdom.

Specifically, the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion.

“B-brr. Brrrr.”

“Th-that’s the Northern Restricted Zone for you. The rules of the clean battlefield do not apply. We never should’ve gotten involved in this Objectless hell.”

Needless to say, Quenser and Heivia could not afford to die here.

Without any Objects, the Northern Restricted Zone brought back the battlefields of a bygone era where fighters and bombers still held sway. The people there continued to fight those emotional wars like it was normal. When ground-attack helicopters and multirole Zig-27s, which could be equipped for anti-air or anti-ground, both decided to show up, it was an all-you-can-eat buffet for those grim reapers. And currently, the Capitalist Corporations’ naval police were shining searchlights into the dark ocean from their boats. If all the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers here were assumed to be part of the infamous Chain Cutters, then they might not even be taken prisoner.

The screams of the others after having burning petroleum dumped over their heads still rang in Quenser’s ears.

He was a self-interested person and he hated that part of himself at times.

Instead of feeling sorry for those people who didn’t even have their dog tags collected, he mostly felt relieved that he hadn’t met the same fate.

“Ugh, it’s so cold. There’s no way we can swim back to shore. Hey, skinny boy, let’s climb onto one of the mining platforms around here. We can talk after that.”

“Those are civilian facilities. If the Capitalist Corporations finds us, they’ll shoot us, claiming they were preventing an indiscriminate attack on civilians! Even though they’re the ones who attacked the civilian-run Plant Castle!!”

“Which is why we make sure they don’t find us. It’s the same game of hide-and-seek but with us out of the freezing water.”

The 37th’s potatoes were new to the Northern Restricted Zone, but they had chosen their guides there very poorly. Quenser and Heivia had never imagined the Chain Cutters would take things so far. They had evolved in a disturbing way inside the Northern Restricted Zone, so they had done things the 37th couldn’t believe fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers would do. The bombing of Warsaw had only needed to be a bluff, but those madmen had swapped the warhead out for a real one behind the 37th’s back. They had also killed off the Plant Castle’s owners to take over there. None of that could be called a clean war.

“A clean war, huh?”

“Hm? You say something, skinny?”

They climbed the ladder onto the mining plant.

They were so soaked with seawater they thought they were going to turn to sherbet in the cold air. February in Scandinavia was not to be trifled with. They shivered as they snuck into a heated room.

They would be forced to kill anyone who found them, even a civilian.

That placed all the more tension on their shoulders.

But for now, they needed to send a report.

Using their military radios would only gather the attention of the Capitalist Corporations search. If they were discovered, they would be surrounded by people wielding weapons more efficient and dangerous than a chainsaw. They used the mining plant’s civilian equipment to use an ordinary wireless LAN.

They knew this transmission would be intercepted.

But that was fine. Quenser pulled a water-resistant manual from a waterproof bag. Not all encryption used complex high-level math. If they hid their real message in something other than the actual words – sighs, footsteps, rustling clothing, head scratches, etc. – the Capitalist Corporations would focus only on the actual spoken words and thus couldn’t discover their real meaning even with the full use of their finest supercomputers. Everyone else might find the transmissions puzzling and ignore them, but anyone working off of the same word list could hold a secret conversation that way.

Quenser used that method to send the following message using an ordinary prepaid phone.

“This is Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage. The mission was a failure. Our (supposed) allies in the Chain Cutters got themselves wiped out. From what I saw of the compound eye-like ground sensors on those attack helicopters, I doubt any of them are going to survive. The transport plane has passed through our airspace and vanished deep inside the Northern Restricted Zone where we’ll have a real hard time getting at it. That means we can no longer destroy the item ahead of time. No one can stop it from being installed in the Information Alliance Object.”

But even this wasn’t perfect.

The Capitalist Corporations of course had their own large intelligence agency. They might have already cracked this old-fashioned method. If so, they would immediately detect the message and surround the civilian mining platform. Sending the message might even get some innocent civilians killed in the attack.

It was a risky gamble.

Quenser continued his message while feeling the weight of the extreme tension.

And he of course made sure to cover the real message with some boring small talk no one would bother listening to.

“Frolaytia, tell the Princess the Ghost Changer remains intact. You need to be on high alert. ...We’re up against a ghost this time. Nothing can change that now.”

Part 2

Difficulty level: +2

Troop death rate +40%

“...”

Object Pilot Elite Milinda Brantini, aka the Princess, formed a small triangle with her mouth when she saw the scene.

The Legitimacy Kingdom’s 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion had set up its maintenance base zone at an old harbor just outside of the Northern Restricted Zone.

Frolaytia Capistrano was seated with her long legs crossed, but the problem was how her butt was squashing Quenser’s cheek while he lay on his side. The many curves pushing out her officer’s uniform may have been the first thing most people noticed about the 18-year-old, but she also held a long, skinny kiseru and decorated her long silver hair with several kanzashi since she was an avid Island Nation lover. The military ruled with an iron fist, not even allowing a single undone button, so

openly carrying personal items and modifying your uniform demonstrated just how much power she had here.

“So what are you doing to do about this, Quenser?” asked the kiseru-smoking demon.

“Squeal. I-I came back instead of running away, so can’t you cut me some slack!?”

Quenser and the others who had been rescued from that hell were the lucky ones. Yes, being thrown back into the February ocean by the rescue team and having to make a near-suicidal trip across the dark, cold ocean inside a human torpedo still qualified as very lucky indeed!

The results reached by the electronic simulation division were brutal. And that was without any accurate specs on the Information Alliance Object. There was a chance of some unexpected surprises to come.

The real threat this time wasn’t the Object itself. It was an add-on weapon called the Ghost Changer.

“We can still make this work. It’s not too late. Like cooking up your leftovers in curry mayo.”

“All of our initial plans need to be scrapped, Quenser. It sounds like we need to review so you understand just how badly you screwed up here.”

“Hwokay.”

“Half a month ago, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance fought in the Hornos District. As usual, it was a fight over an important transportation route - in this case, the southernmost naval route needed to get past South America without using the Panama Canal.”

“Guh, that’s near Antarctica, so it’s actually super cold despite being in the southern hemisphere, right? Like Alaska in the northern hemisphere.”

“More or less. To be honest, it isn’t that important a position and the Legitimacy Kingdom had the advantage. It was nearly time for the carnival in Rio, so there was even talk of a temporary ceasefire if things weren’t settled by January’s end.” Frolaytia explained it all while her butt squashed his face through her tight skirt. “But then things changed. All 800 soldiers in the Legitimacy Kingdom’s maintenance base were slaughtered in a single night. There were signs of gunfire, but no Information Alliance bullets were found. That suggests the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were shooting each other. More than 99% of the soldiers were killed, including the base commander and the Pilot Elite. Looking at the bullet holes, the seemingly random gunfire is most noticeable, but it looks like the nature of the battle changed once friendly fire detonated the ammo dump. ...Some bodies were found with bite marks in their uniforms and flesh, suggesting the fighting continued even after they used up all their ammo. The bites were deep, leaving toothmarks on the bone in some cases. And since the same corpse sometimes had multiple sets of toothmarks, it looks like they

were attacked in groups.”

“Are you serious? That’s way worse than I’d heard. That’s more like a splatter film than psychological horror.”

“The few soldiers who survived that hell all have severe PTSD from the psychological damage. And they’re all saying the same thing: they saw a ghost.”

“...”

A ghost.

If something that vaguely defined was being seen on a battlefield with physical bullets flying, then battlefield morale really was dying. It could lead to a lot of unnecessary harm.

But some soldiers had seen one.

Or maybe it was better to say they had been shown one.

Curses and vengeful spirits were finally making an appearance on the battlefield.

“The accuracy of their statements is not being officially recognized, but we do know the Information Alliance higher ups were getting frustrated with their inability to end that war and lent their Object an add-on we have called the Ghost Changer. We don’t know what it does, but they are clearly using an Object to do something. There’s no other explanation for more than 800 people with different personalities, memories, tastes, and beliefs to go nuts and attack their own people at the exact same time. I’m not saying this is really a curse or spirit possession, but it’s almost like someone threw an invisible switch in all of their heads. There is no psychological explanation for that.”

“And the Information Alliance loves to use information as a weapon.”

“We don’t know what it is, but the Ghost Changer fits in a single container yet they are treating it as an even more highly classified weapon than a 5-billion-dollar Object. This is their trump card against deadlocked wars. They move it from Object to Object even though Object weapons aren’t made to be reused or mutually compatible like that, so you would never even notice it exists if you were only following an individual Object. Our intelligence pursued the unit that left South America after that job, but that container alone was sent elsewhere. They swapped out containers several times along the way while zigzagging it between the east and the west to disguise where it was going, but fortunately we were able to figure out where it was being sent next.”

“Gulp.”

Military uses of parapsychology and the supernatural were generally thought to be a Faith Organization thing, but apparently the highly logical Information Alliance were getting in on the fun too.

They had failed to shoot down the transport plane. That failure meant the estimated troop death rate was up by 40%. They no longer had any way of safely ending this before the Ghost Changer was deployed.

They would have to directly face that mysterious secret weapon which was discussed more like a legend than anything.

“Thanks to our morons’ poor performance and some mischief from the Chain Cutters who were guiding you through the Northern Restricted Zone, we lost our one and only chance. Now, Quenser, it’s time to for the real fun: cleaning up your mistake□ You see, the higher ups are reluctant to send their own adorable troops to a battlefield where the Information Alliance holds sway and are likely to send in an Object equipped with the Ghost Changer. So I know just what they’re going to tell the 37th after we screwed up so badly: go take responsibility by crawling through the mud.”

Thanks to that, they were (punished by) being sent to a war not on their original schedule.

The stage was frigid Siberia, at an inland point of eastern Eurasia. Worse, it was the Tunguska District, which was known for its mysterious legends.

Their base equipment and large vehicles were loaded onto more than 100 transport planes that traveled from Moscow to Siberia while giving the Northern Restricted Zone a wide berth. The Baby Magnum could not be carried by plane, so it had to travel at 500km/h across the ocean, arriving on the scene from the Arctic.

Inside their plane, Major Frolaytia Capistrano gave them their mission.

All of this was new information for Quenser and Heivia.

Another new war was beginning.

“The Information Alliance has gathered their forces to kill an innocent young girl.”

The two idiots frowned.

These shitty wars were all a blend of good and evil, so a simple and noble objective was a dangerous sign. It was best to assume there was a catch.

“How did you get this information?” hesitantly asked Quenser.

“From a POW, of course.”

And what kind of horrific methods did you use to get a tough, trained soldier to talk, miss?

“(What’s with Frolaytia? Her face looks like a swollen dickhead and I get the feeling she’s close to her breaking point.)”

“(Shush. She’s just exhausted, so leave her be until that stiff nipple is soft again.)”

“I heard every word of that. And who do you think got us into this situation anyway?” noted the busty silver-haired commander while biting her kiseru hard. “Elina Silverbullet. Age: 9. Sex: Female. She only took online classes, but she has already graduated top of her class from Columbia University and has published a total of 69 academic papers to date. Her fields of expertise are geology, environmental engineering, and 31 other related fields. For whatever reason, this Information Alliance girl is living a life cut off from civilization in a Siberian log cabin. And for whatever other reason, the Information Alliance is deploying a large force to either capture or kill her.”

“Umm, why would they do that? I mean, the Martini Series is enough to know the Information Alliance has a thing for genius girls, but this feels different.”

Quenser hesitantly raised his hand and asked his question, but the others all glared at him. Not even timid Myonri spared him.

It was understandable when this entire mission was a punishment for the mistake those two idiots had made.

Frolaytia fidgeted with her kiseru before answering.

“That remains unknown.”

“Why do we always get stuck with the worst missions? You aren’t supposed to throw away your life without even knowing what you’re fighting for,” complained Heivia.

But their beautiful major was not one to be swayed so easily.

“Now, Elina was born in the Information Alliance, so securing her should only require some government paperwork, not sending in a military force. Also, she might be an unparalleled genius, but we’re only talking about a single child here. Yet they’re secretly sending the Ghost Changer to handle it. There must be more to this kid. Elina Silverbullet has something the enemy higher ups want badly enough to use the secret weapon they have worked so hard to keep a secret. I don’t know what that is, but given the size of the fore they’re sending, they must value her higher than a Pilot Elite.”

Quenser worked to organize all this information in his head while he prompted his commander to continue.

“And?”

“We don’t know what she has, but it must be a major secret. If we were to steal it from them, we are almost guaranteed to do significant damage to the Information Alliance. ...Well, I think that’s the excuse that was used on the officers back at our home country. Whether she’s captured or killed, that kid is not in for a good time. If no one from the Information Alliance is willing to stop this due to the internal politics involved, we can do it for them. So let’s head out there and assist a peaceful defection. Protecting the weak and asking for nothing in return is the job of the righteous knights, after all.”

“And?”

Quenser lowered his voice this time and Frolaytia couldn’t look him in the eye.

She childishly pouted her lips when she continued.

“The 37th is being honored with this mission as a punishment for failing to destroy the Ghost Changer, so I figure we might as well harass the Information Alliance as much as possible while we’re at it, right? They don’t want anyone to save Elina Silverbullet. If we succeed, some high-ranking officer over there is bound to lose their job, so giving this the most wonderful happy ending we can seems like the best revenge available to us.”

“Much better. This is finally sounding like a proper war.”

He couldn’t rest easy without some kind of ulterior motive like that. Nothing was more suspicious than your commander telling you to fight for the good of humanity. You were definitely being set up to do something shady as hell. It was less trustworthy than a mystery burger that shined bright in the light.

Frolaytia placed her kiseru back in her mouth before continuing.

“According to the intelligence division and the electronic simulation division, the unit deployed to the frozen Siberian forest is the Information Alliance’s 1st Mobile Maintenance Battalion, aka Fish. Their Object is the First Generation Retro Gunner. That rusty old hunk of junk was retired from the front line a decade ago and spent the rest of its life being used for endurance tests and testing new weapons technology.”

“Hold on. They’re using a First Generation for this?” asked Quenser.

“Weirdly troubling, isn’t it?” replied Frolaytia with a cruel smile.

Not only was it a First Generation, but it was a nearly scrapped and retired Object. It should have made for a much easier opponent than a cutting-edge Second Generation decked out with the latest tech, but that made no sense here.

“Don’t tell the Princess,” added their busty silver-haired commander. “The situation is pressing enough for them to use their secret Ghost Changer weapon, but then they send in an Object that’s a piece of junk even for a First Generation. None of it fits together. Does the Ghost Changer give them so much of an advantage the quality of the Object is irrelevant? No, that isn’t how it works. When using their powerful Ghost Changer, they would want to eliminate any chance of losing and having the Ghost Changer captured. We’re talking about one of the twisted technological wars of the current era, so they should be sending in the most powerful Object currently available. But that isn’t what they did. Why not?”

They had no answer.

Not a single one of them did.

They were risking their lives in this war, but their deadly enemy felt as elusive as an evil spirit or curse.

Something was beginning out there.

The ghost was already waiting for them away from prying eyes in the old-growth forest of the Tunguska District.

“The Ghost Changer and Elina Silverbullet would both be enough of a mystery on their own, but there may be some dangerous secret to the Retro Gunner as well. ...True to their name, no one is better at manipulating information than the Information Alliance. Keep in mind that the on-paper specs of this First Generation might not be entirely accurate.”

Part 3

Quenser Barbotage was seated with his arms around his raised knees. He only found angry glares wherever he went, so he had to stay indoors. And this was the most calming place for him.

He sat within the Object hangar constructed in the colder part of Eurasia.

“Move, you fool. This is the front line for us maintenance soldiers.”

“Noooo!! Please don’t kick me out of my last utopiaaaaa!!”

“We have no need for a meatball curled up on the floor. If you want a place here, then start working that brain of yours.”

The cute Princess, who wore a skintight special suit resembling a sailor uniform with its unique collar and the pouches around the hips, tilted her head curiously while her emotionless eyes watched Quenser cling tearfully to the old maintenance lady's leg. Her short blonde hair shook from the motion.

"Is that the latest fad?" she asked.

"Absolutely not! A wrinkly old lady dominatrix!? How niche a kink are we talking about here!? That's like several levels of avant-garde past what I'm comfortable with. I'm still trying to figure out the appeal of moms, okay!?"

Quenser's eyes widened as he made his case, but the old lady simply kicked him away.

The rest of the battalion's anger was not going to die down anytime soon.

The Princess, however, clasped her hands behind her back and fidgeted awkwardly.

"Quenser, I have a riddle for you: what is February's biggest event?"

"Eh? We're doing riddles now?"

"I'll give you a hint: it starts with a V."

"???"

Quenser could only tilt his head.

The Princess got most of her information from the old maintenance lady or Frolaytia, so whether they were telling the truth or just messing with her, she often had a very Island Nation-centric view of things.

The old lady, who knew a lot about Island Nation celebrations, sighed.

"That event was artificially set up that way. ...Hey!! What imbecile filled up the #3 grease!? Use that stuff in the icy weather out there and it'll freeze!!"

"Grease? Grease, huh? I guess even nuke-resistant Objects need that stuff."

"They aren't protected by a futuristic forcefield. They can only withstand a nuclear attack thanks to being 200 thousand tons."

"Give me something - anything - to do. But please make sure our Object doesn't freeze up out there. That has to be one of the stupidest ways to die."

"Ignorant boy. Most weapons - including tanks and fighters - have a long history of battling against the dangers of ice."

The Princess had been zoned out, but she finally responded here.

"Ice...chocolate ice cream. Yes, that could work."

"Eh? Um, Princess? Do you like to make sweets?"

"Do you want me to make some for you? Hee hee hee."

"Bff!?"

Quenser couldn't believe what he was hearing.

The 37th's potatoes lived off of flavorless rations that looked like giant erasers, so anything with real flavor that was made with an identifiable process was the greatest luxury. If you weren't the commander like Frolaytia or the Pilot Elite like the Princess, you weren't allowed to bring any inefficient personal items with you.

The old maintenance lady was the one who had told the Princess the legend of February 14 in the Island Nation while they were working, so she sighed while watching the ignorant battlefield student.

Quenser was trembling with excitement at this wonderful opportunity.

"You mean I'd really get a girl's home cooking? And not just 'home cooking' as a euphemism for mixing gasoline and detergent to make a napalm bomb in the kitchen!?"

"If you really want me to, Quenser."

"Hip hip hooray!! I can finally say goodbye to those boring rations! I can move beyond my days of mere subsistence and start to enjoy my life!!"

Part 4

And so they were thrown into another hellish war.

Quenser and Heivia stood in a blowing blizzard.

“Did I just see my life flash before my eyes? Where are we?”

“This can’t be real. We only got out of the truck 5 minutes ago. How are we already lost!?”

They turned around and rushed back the way they had come, but there was no truck and no tire tracks. Only the thick white curtain of snow.

Farewell, sweet treats.

The unwanted scent of war pushed in toward them instead.

They saw no sign of their fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers despite how many of them were supposed to be out here. Quenser was no longer confident they had actually gone back the way they had come. He feared they were walking in circles thanks to this white screen of snow that kept them from seeing even a few meters away.

“My mobile device isn’t working either. How can we be 120km from the 37th’s maintenance base zone? The Baby Magnum should be nearby, but I can’t see that 50m giant anywhere.”

“It’s -15 degrees out here. I’d be amazed if our electronics weren’t breaking. And let’s not forget that I’m a noble. This cold had better not be killing all my valuable sperm.”

“If it’s so valuable, you should probably stop wrapping it up in a tissue and throwing it out.”

The two idiots warmed themselves with a nice fistfight.

Their objective out here was to secure and retrieve Elina Silverbullet, the genius girl hidden somewhere in this forest of spear-like conifer trees. They didn’t need to battle the Information Alliance or the Retro Gunner loaded with the Ghost Changer. But if it did come to a fight, they could probably find some reason or another to slaughter them all.

The temperature was 15 below freezing.

The thick layer of snow made it easy to lose track of distance and direction. That gave it an otherworldly feeling, like they were surrounded by greenscreens.

The trees standing more than 20m tall were packed in as close as the crowds downtown on the weekend. They were probably cedars, but they looked all fluffy thanks to the blowing snow. Quenser and Heivia knew they would be frozen solid like that too if they weren’t careful. It was colder than a

kitchen freezer, so they knew their corpse wouldn't rot until spring.

There was no sign of civilization out here.

No homes or stores and no roads or power poles.

"And if that wasn't enough..."

Quenser Barbotage glanced to the side.

"A ghost, huh? Dreadfully unscientific, but rather amusing for Tunguska. 2000 square kilometers of this old-growth forest were reduced to ashes by a mysterious explosion. There are many theories, including that it was an asteroid breaking up in the atmosphere." (Sladder Honeysuckle)

"Underestimate past knowledge like that and you will come to regret it. The exact same drugs developed from a complex chemical formula in a sterile lab can also be found in Chinese medicine made by crushing up tree roots over a thousand years ago. And the very idea of breaking free of gravity and flying into the heavens above came from old fairy tales like Kaguya-hime or Jack and the Beanstalk." (Louisiana Honeysuckle)

A stubbly man and a silver-haired 17-year-old were both grinning darkly.

Sladder Honeysuckle was a mass driver researcher who had led the Capitalist Corporations' Mass Driver Conglomerate and used the Second Generation Break Carrier to start a war so he could defect to the Information Alliance.

Louisiana Honeysuckle was a space elevator researcher who had used the Elevator Alliance, jointly funded by the Capitalist Corporations' 7th Core, to create the 100 thousand kilometer balancing weight needed to correct the earth's axis from the distortion caused by the use of 200 thousand ton Objects.

They were both geniuses in the bad way.

They were global-level war criminals who never should have been released from the prison located on a remote African island.

(Why are we reusing prisoners just because they can think in unique ways? I know the Ghost Changer is eating through our troops like crazy, but this can't be a good idea. Controlling these monsters is way harder than fighting some ghost.)

Quenser gulped.

Those siblings had been given the bare minimum of camouflage, but they were not given any pockets where they could hide stuff. And to prevent them from hiding anything inside the clothing, they had belts wrapped tightly around them like a parachute harness, forcibly filling in all the internal space.

They were tough and easy to move in, but they looked more like prison uniforms than military ones.

And more than that...

Quenser heard the jangling of thick chains. Those two had long chains attached to their ankles. They also had handcuffs on their wrists. He didn't see how they could possibly fight like this, but they were here for their knowledge. The higher ups had apparently decided they only needed enough freedom to work with their fingers and to fire a handgun for the bare minimum of self-defense. They were still basically prisoners, and they had been sent into this ghost battle without any real preparation. The higher ups didn't expect them to come back alive any more than the 37th's potatoes.

(And what's this about the bare minimum? Even the puniest gun is still a gun. Did the higher ups give even a second's thought to how we'll feel getting shot in the back by them!?)

The Legitimacy Kingdom had decided to reuse brutal war criminals.

Which meant another pair of siblings was here too.

"Oh, my beloved brother! At long last, the time has come for us to work side by side! Hee hee. Hee hee. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!!!!" (Azurefear Winchell)

"Nooooooo!! Please, someone tell me the blizzard is making me hallucinate thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis!!!" (Heivia Winchell)

Oops, he was starting to place Heivia in the war criminal category alongside his sister.

The girl with long blonde hair blowing in the wind was a daughter of the noble Winchell family. However, she had used the secretly-constructed Second Generation Destruction Fes to attack a civilian cruise ship and start an internal conflict with the daughter of the noble Vanderbilt family. All because she loved her big brother a little too much.

They were all bad news.

In a way, these villains were more frightening than the Objects themselves. Spending time in a prison in the middle of nowhere had done nothing to rehabilitate them. These were the human irregularities whose charisma could infect the rest of the prison instead.

Thanks to them, Quenser and Heivia's group was the only one without an animal robot to carry their

gear. Because no one wanted the prisoners to steal that gear.

“H-hey, it could be worse. Skuld and Mariage could be here too.”

“You need to fix your habit of staring at the ground and smiling, Quenser. You’ll never get promoted like that.”

“I’m not even a soldier. Students don’t get promoted.”

“Oh, shut up. If we’re playing that game, then I’m a noble heir, so I’m supposed to be set for life! So why am I out here nearly freezing to death when there aren’t even any enemies around!?”

“You love to call yourself the heir, but where in the line of succession are you among all your siblings?”

“I’d better at least be above Azurefear since she’s a goddamn war criminal, but I’ve gotta be in the top 3 at least. And with some military accomplishments under my belt, I’ll be #1. But not even I know how many candidates there are out there. I’d rather not count up how many times my relatives decided not to use a condom.”

“Y-you’re talking about blood-related relatives here, right?”

“Of course he is. But the dirty old men distantly related to us don’t care about the line of succession. They just use their money to cum inside their maids, random sex workers, orphanage directors in need of funding, and god knows who else, making a complete mess of our family tree. If we included the mistresses who claim a blood relation they don’t have and all the illegitimate children, the number of candidates might increase tenfold or more,” explained Azurefear with a shrug (and rubbing her cheek against her big brother). Evidently, she was not a sheltered girl who was appalled by the filthy turn of the boys’ conversation. “Of course, the Winchell women with nothing but time on their hands after being kicked out of the line of succession are known to sleep around a lot too, but the risks associate with pleasure are a lot greater for women. Their fun rarely leads to us suddenly having more new brothers and sisters. Hmm, I wish they had given me some perfume when they let me out.”

“Wait, so that wasn’t just this idiot’s values being messed up? Is the entire Winchell family like this?”

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it,” spat Heivia. Louisiana must not have been as bad as them because she gave those siblings an exasperated look. “Anyway, everyone from my godawful siblings to the bastards I’ve never even heard of claim they’re the heir. And the Winchell family controls way too much wealth to simply pass control of the family to the oldest son. That’s why I have to prove my worth in the military! And I was supposed to get an easy deployment meant for hyper VIPs. I’m a radar analyst! So why the hell was I kicked out here to destroy the world’s most dangerous superweapon!? It’s not right!!”

They were already lost.

They were enjoying a nice picnic surrounded by war criminals in a white forest cut off from civilization. It could hardly get worse. It was wrong that the number of prisoners was greater than the number of jailors just five minutes after leaving the military truck. And those prisoners were armed with guns. Quenser could see them in his mind's eye grinning past a fanned-out hand of cards. A revolt was inevitable.

"Where did Myonri get off to anyway?" Quenser felt a little dizzy. "An annoying odd job like this is perfect for that jack-of-all-trades with all sorts of qualifications that seem entirely useless in combat. Get back here, you wildflower sommelier!"

"What, does your unit have a failed idol who never got a chance at stardom? If she wants to win the guys' hearts, she needs to throw out all those high-level qualifications and show off how good-looking but scatterbrained she is. On days off, she could strip down to something indecent and take a nap with the rest of her clothing lying around her. With lots of tossing and turning to show off her body, of course."

"Shut up, Louisiana. Boys don't fall for that calculated crap. And we aren't interested in some wrinkly clothes on the floor. What matters is the body wearing them!"

"Oh, really? A funny thing to say for the guy who ate my sports bloomers and underwear. Don't act like the sweet smell didn't knock your brain out of commission for a bit there."

"Ho ho?" laughed Big Bro Sladder in great interest. Like he had spotted a vintage wine at a neighborhood bar, or like he had seen someone make a highly unorthodox move in a chess game. Quenser paled, fearing the man felt a new affinity with him because geniuses were so often also eccentrics.

"Y-you're the one that shoved them in my mouth! Listen, don't you forget I can tighten all those belts enough to strangle you at the press of a button on my radio. And once the switch is thrown, they give off a GPS signal and the glow-in-the-dark paint and scent capsules burst. Even if you try to attack us and run off, you will be immediately shot to death. No matter where you try to run in this white forest, the dogs will track you down."

"I thought these were positioned oddly for a harness. Is this the Island Nation's tortoise shell bondage? You said your mobile devices weren't working, so let's hope the simpler radios still function. I mean, that GPS will scatter its signal everywhere once it switches on, right? I certainly don't want to summon the enemy to us if it malfunctions."

"Gh!?"

"Oh, don't worry. I have no intention of running away," spat blonde Louisiana with a shadow over her face. "Because there isn't anywhere to run to on this planet. With all those 200 thousand ton

weapons moving at such high speeds around the globe, the earth's environment has already been fatally thrown out of balance."

"..."

There was no point in listening to their nonsense.

If they were civilians trapped out in the blizzard, it would be better to stay in one place and preserve their strength while finding some way of letting the others know where they were. But they were in the middle of a military operation. With a time limit, waiting was not an option.

It was unclear how useful it was, but Louisiana blew on her thickly-gloved hands before saying more.

"It's awfully presumptuous of you people to just march us out here and expect us to have some way of fighting that Ghost Changer thing. Admittedly, there are no end of UFO sightings at high altitude and space."

"Isn't that just the high g's, weightlessness, and oxygen levels messing with people's perception?"

"I refuse to accept that the human brain is that simple."

Needless to say, no one knew how the Ghost Changer worked. The story sounded absurd, but since a maintenance base zone of 800 really was wiped out in a single night, the Legitimacy Kingdom needed to analyze this ASAP. And when they weren't even sure if this was a bio, chemical, or physical weapon, they needed to send in geniuses from a variety of fields to analyze it.

On the other hand, they didn't want to needlessly kill off the Legitimacy Kingdom's treasured scientists and engineers.

That had created a need for geniuses who could be sacrificed. The criminals whose talents were going to waste behind bars were perfect for the job. And ones with a familiarity in several fields were even better.

(Why don't the goddamn higher ups ever consider how we feel having to babysit these people!? But how could they when they're so far up the chain of command I've never even seen them?)

At any rate, they needed to find Elina Silverbullet, the genius girl living in a log cabin tucked away somewhere in the Tunguska District. And they needed to do this before the Information Alliance and their Ghost Changer-equipped Object got there.

Quenser sighed.

“We know the Princess, Myonri, and the others are somewhere around here and we know they’re headed to the same place. We just have to trust that we’ll find them as we approach the log cabin.”

“Yeah, but where is that cabin? Damn, getting scared and turning back may have been a mistake.”

Heivia complained while checking the distribution of trees, the rises and dips in the terrain, and the water sources and comparing them against his paper map.

Quenser frowned.

“What will that tell you? All I see out here is fluffy white snow. It has to be more than a meter thick.”

“Don’t you know how to glean information from the terrain? A forest’s trees grow with a different distribution between sloped and flat areas and they won’t grow at all without any water. ...Oh, here we go. We’re at A9. So if we follow this Y-shaped river south for 20km, we’ll find the log cabin from the satellite photo.”

“What, you could find her secret base in a search engine?”

“Apparently, it was normally hidden by a tunnel of trees, but the weight of the snow brought down some of them. Without the thick layer of snow to deflect everything from IR to UV, the heat source was impossible to miss.”

The color white tended to deflect all wavelengths of light instead of absorbing them, and that included the near-infrared often used for mechanical searches by satellites and drones. Far-infrared was absorbed on the interior, so the log cabin was covered either way. It also created an insulating layer of air like inside an igloo.

“What are you saying - it was protected by snow that never melted?”

“Don’t die out here. Who knows how many years you’ll be buried in the snow for. You’ll end up on display at a museum someday.”

They couldn’t trust their mobile devices in this cold, so they trusted Heivia’s trivia that moss grew thicker on the north side of a tree trunk because it would avoid the sunlight. Once they had their bearings, they began their hellish march through the snowy forest with criminals in tow.

Whenever a gust of wind would blow in and alter the density of the white curtain, they had no choice but to stop and bear with it. Quenser looked back time and time again, but not because he wanted to head back the way they had come. He was obsessively checking on the number and positions of the untrustworthy criminals.

Sladder grinned while frequently shaking his hands so the metal handcuffs didn't stick to his skin in the cold.

"What are you so worried about? We're not going to snatch you up and eat you. Life in solitary confinement wasn't all that bad. There was a window, even if it did have bars over it. And the combination of the damp, cracked wall and the sunlight allowed some small flowers to grow."

"Okay, Sladder. I get it. If you hold a grudge, just come out and say you want to kill me."

20km.

They had to travel 20km. That was a half marathon, but those would be run on paved city streets, not in over a meter of snow while carrying more than 10kg of military gear. They were risking their lives just reaching the log cabin. Quenser could only pray they would not be the ones needing help when they arrived.

"We were not given any detailed information on this mission. How do you plan to retrieve this Elina Silverbullet girl once you reach her? The blizzard might obscure us, but there is still an enemy Object on this battlefield. That means anti-air laser beams, which in turn means no helicopters or tiltrotors."

"Shut up, Sladder. And stay out of my sight because I don't want to see tortoise shell bondage on a guy. To answer your question, that extra gear Heivia is carrying is a reinforced rubber motorboat. If we climb to the bottom of the ravine and escape along the river, we can leave the battlefield at nearly 200km/h without worrying about the las- dwah!?"

Quenser nearly bit his tongue.

His vision suddenly dropped straight down and he would have fallen 10m to the bottom of that very ravine if Sladder hadn't grabbed his arm. The height was bad enough, but he would have fallen into rapids rough enough to keep from freezing at this temperature.

"That was a snow cornice. The snow blown from the edge of the ravine will freeze and stick out like a roof or bridge. You can think of it like a naturally-forming pitfall. Step through it and you win a one-way trip to the bottom."

"..."

"You are one of the jailers, meaning you are supposed to look after us prisoners. We might be doomed if our caretakers need to rely on a skinny scientist like me on the physical front. I was hoping to live the good life on the taxpayers' money, so do your part, civil servant."

Quenser had not mentally recovered enough to respond. His heart was hammering away in his ears,

but probably not because he was falling in love with Sladder due to the suspension bridge effect.

Louisiana laughed lightly, holding her handcuffed hands up to her mouth.

“Heh heh. Extremely low temperature oxidants such as liquid oxygen and ice accretion on artificial surfaces are common causes of trouble in need of a lot of research, so aerospace scientists like us know a lot about the structure and traits of ice. With an elevator, we use wires and pulleys. With a mass driver, they use grease to control the trail of the projectile.”

“Oh? In my field, ice and powder are more commonly associated with stimulants and synthetic drugs. Hee hee. Like amphetamines or MDMA. Although if you’re only interested in cost-effectiveness, you can’t go wrong with LSD that can be mass-produced from the ergots on wheat infected with a certain fungus.”

Why didn’t Azurefear notice how depressed it made Heivia to see his dangerous sister show off the expertise she had developed while securing the 5 billion dollars she needed to build a brand new Second Generation? That cute and sexy sister was not going to win the heart of her big brother (who was engaged to a rival family’s daughter) anytime soon.

To repeat, their mission did not truly begin until they had arrived at the log cabin 20km away and secured the 9-year-old girl there.

This trip was meaningless if they couldn’t get back afterwards.

They could not rush this and collapse on arrival. They had to worry about the Information Alliance army and their Ghost Changer-equipped Retro Gunner who were after the genius girl. Not to mention escaping along the ravine river.

They took occasional breaks and checked to make sure they were still going in the right way. The meter-deep snow came in handy for building a shelter since they only had to dig into it by hand to create something like an igloo.

There were no landmarks to go by when they were surrounded by a featureless white void the entire time. It was dispiriting to feel like they were endlessly walking in place like that.

At one point, Quenser nervously glanced around, even though he knew he could only see 5m at the most.

“D-did you hear something?”

“It’s just the wind. With that blowing in your ear, we’d be in a shootout already if we were close enough to actually hear someone whispering.”

Quenser had lost track of how many breaks this was, but munching on his second flavorless ration helped remind him that time really was passing. He tried looking up and found things were getting darker. He couldn't actually see the sunset, but he knew it had to be that time of day.

"It's finally time for the ghost to come out to play," he said, feeling discouraged.

"Show some tact and let me sit next to my brother. And I don't see why a ghost should only come out at night. Anyway, commoner, is this ghost of yours dressed in cold weather gear, equipped with a cutting-edge sniper rifle, and frequently contacting someone by radio?"

"?"

Quenser frantically ducked down, earning him a smack on the head from Heivia and Azurefear both. The siblings wore identical exasperated looks. Apparently getting down was important, but moving too quickly would disturb a thick layer of snow and draw attention to them.

He could only see 5m at best through the thick curtain of falling snow, but the blizzard's density was uneven. When the wind weakened and the white wall opened up for a brief moment, the view miraculously cleared up.

There it was at the bottom of a gentle slope.

Quenser let out a visible breath and leaned against a nearby tree while viewing the scene below them.

Snowy conifer trees surrounded a log cabin. The building was a little bigger than a studio apartment and looked to only be a single story. He saw some soldiers in white camo around it. At a glance, he noticed at least three, but there might be more behind the cabin and in the surrounding forest.

Maybe it was to fight the cold and maybe it was to hide their identity, but the soldiers all wore white masks with ski goggles over their eyes. That made them look somehow inhuman.

They had not heard anything about the 9-year-old girl being guarded by a bunch of heavily-equipped soldiers.

That meant someone had arrived ahead of Quenser's group and taken control of the log cabin. What was happening inside there? Tension gripped Quenser's heart, but he forced himself to stay positive: if these people wanted to kill her, they would have done so already and then left.

The delinquent noble clicked his tongue.

"What the hell? Who do those assholes belong to?"

“Wasn’t the Information Alliance supposed to be deployed here ahead of us?” asked Louisiana.

Heivia shook his head, looking disgusted.

“Those sniper rifles aren’t Information Alliance and they’re not Legitimacy Kingdom either. They’re the luxury model that won the shooting event at the Technopics. But we’re not scored by judges on the battlefield, so no pro uses them. None of the world powers issues those to their soldiers.”

“...”

Sladder was looking elsewhere.

Quenser’s thoughts turned to his backpack.

“So they’re as special and unusual as me and my Hand Axe, which is more expensive than platinum?”

“Don’t get cocky, skinny boy. And when soldiers are using nonstandard gear to hide their affiliation, you just know they’re up to no good.”

“So is the Information Alliance running an unofficial operation, or is there some third party here?”

“We can kill them either way. But first let’s check on Elina. As long as they aren’t in position to take her hostage, we can gun down all these soldiers. If they are, we start by taking out the soldiers immediately around her to keep her safe while we slaughter the rest. Simple right? First order of business is getting a look in the window, Quenser.”

Quenser did not react when his name was called.

Heivia found that odd, but then he realized what was going on. The blizzard may have been a blessing after all.

The red laser pointer line was actually visible thanks to the reflection of the snowy screen. More than 10 such lines crisscrossed vertically and horizontally to create something like a spider web trapping them.

“I know there’s supposed to be a ghost in this forest...”

Needless to say, all of those red lines were directed at someone’s chest or forehead.

Not one of them could survive.

Quenser Barbotage slowly raised his hands.

“But I hope that isn’t referring to us in the near future.”

Part 5

Their situation could hardly be worse, but it was also curious.

The enemy had their weapons trained on the 37th group’s vitals, so they only needed to fire - no warning necessary. Yet the mysterious Unit X opted to wait. That was strange and it reminded Quenser of the fact that Unit X was still here when they could have shot Elina Silverbullet and left.

The two idiots whispered to each other while being held up.

“Maybe they want the assistance of my staggering intellect.”

“No, they’re hoping to get some ransom money out of this handsome and influential noble.”

It turned out neither of them was right.

They were guided inside the log cabin by soldiers in all white jabbing them in the back with sniper rifles.

(...? They’re holding us up, but they aren’t confiscating our weapons? And our mobile devices are chock full of Legitimacy Kingdom classified data and decryption keys.)

Unit X was not interested in weapons or data.

But they had still left the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers alive and taken them inside the log cabin.

Quenser was only more confused now. They hadn’t been tied to a chair and tortured with endless eyedrops or ear cleanings, but it was still worrying to not know what these people wanted. ...In the worst case, they might be used to film a torture video using some innovative new tools, or they would be lined up and forced to clear out some landmines.

Even up close, Quenser and Heivia could not tell which world power Unit X was from. Were they even professional soldiers? They could always be guerillas or terrorists.

The log cabin had a plain interior.

It was all one room except for the bathroom, so the bed and kitchen space were right next to each other. The poor excuse for a fireplace must not have been enough to keep out the cold because an

extra wood-burning stove had been added in one corner.

A small girl sat in a rocking chair next to the fireplace.

The 9-year-old girl had shoulder-length blonde hair and she wore a knit poncho, sweater, and skirt which all looked handmade. That outfit had to be nice and toasty, but with that level of dedication, even her underwear may have been wool.

She did not appear restrained by the mystery unit. In fact, two soldiers in white masks carrying cutting-edge sniper rifles were standing on either side of her rocking chair like bodyguards.

She stopped moving her knitting needles to look up.

She gave the newcomers a somewhat sleepy look. How could she be so relaxed right now?

“A second group this deep in the forest? Today is the day for visitors, it seems.”

“Elina Silverbullet?”

“I don’t know what your exact mission is, but surely you know what your mission objective looks like.”

She breathed an exasperated sigh this time.

What was going on here? It seemed safe to assume Unit X was not interested in harming the girl. Having a masked and armed group wandering around your home was a lot like being under house arrest, but she seemed awfully relaxed dozing off in front of the fireplace. They didn’t seem to be her soldiers, but then who were they?

Meanwhile, Elina Silverbullet shifted her focus to someone other than Quenser.

“?”

That person was Louisiana Honeysuckle. Louisiana herself tilted her head curiously, but Elina nodded with her rocking chair creaking below her.

The genius girl slowly shut her eyes in acceptance and finally spoke.

“I see... So that’s what this is about.”

Maybe she understood, but Quenser and the others felt left behind.

Once she eventually reopened her eyes, she pointed at Unit X with one of her knitting needles.

“Are you after the same thing they are? Or have you not reached that point yet?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Confused? The latter it is, then. They are a step ahead of you. Getting killed without even knowing why is a tragic way to go.”

Quenser did not like the sound of that.

The guns surrounding them weighed a lot heavier on his mind.

“Everything you need is on here.”

The 9-year-old girl reached into her pocket, pulled out a flash card smaller than a stamp, and flicked it his way.

“This paper was suppressed by academia and got me branded a heretic. But if it wasn't true, they wouldn't have been so desperate to make sure no one read it.” Elina spoke in a pleasant but somehow cold and inhuman voice. “Do you know what my specialties are?”

“Geology and environmental engineering.”

“I also have doctorates in 31 other related fields.”

She must have been at a bragging age.

That was weirdly childish compared to her emotionless eyes.

“But all of those are just classifications on paper. If you ask me what my specialty is, I have just one answer.”

“...?”

“The severe influence on the natural environment from the dams, skyscrapers, and other massive structures we foolish humans have thoughtlessly produced – with a focus on remotely triggered earthquakes caused by distortions to the tectonic plates.”

Quenser couldn't find anything to say, so no one stopped the genius girl from talking.

"My life goal is to divulge the devastating lies that have created the current clean wars. Especially in regard to the global artificial disasters caused by the mass usage of Objects."

Silence followed.

Quenser and Heivia both turned toward Louisiana Honeysuckle. What had she wanted to do so badly she had even constructed a space elevator measuring 100 thousand kilometers long?

"Just one is 200 thousand tons," said Elina in a singsong voice. That disturbing lullaby sounded like something that would summon disaster if you were to carelessly hum it. "They move at speeds of 500 or even 1000km/h and they battle with constant quick movements similar to mixed martial arts footwork. The main cannon blasts that can pierce through a nuke-resistant Object do not all hit their mark. The effect on the tectonic plates and the earth's axis itself cannot be overstated."

"..."

Louisiana Honeysuckle had said something similar.

The colossal Objects battling all over the world had caused the earth's rotation to shift, so she had tried to use a 100 thousand kilometer balancing weight - the space elevator - to fix the earth's motion before it shifted too far.

Quenser, Heivia, and the rest of the 37th had heard her claims when working to stop her.

But they had not reached a consensus on how seriously they should take those claims.

If they rejected the age of Objects, they would be throwing out the hopes and dreams that had brought them to a battlefield full of real bullets. For Quenser, that meant becoming an Object designer so a commoner like him could financially surpass the royals and nobles. For Heivia, that meant proving his worth on the battlefield so he could become the head of his family and end the fighting with a rival noble family. The others all had their own reasons as well, but the most reliant on Objects was the Princess. That was why none of them had shared Louisiana's claims with her yet.

Quenser wished he could just forget he had ever heard it.

The difference between a genius and an eccentric was paper thin, so he had hoped Louisiana was just delusional.

But she wasn't.

An aerospace expert like Louisiana Honeysuckle and a geology and environmental engineering expert like Elina Silverbullet had both arrived at the same conclusion from different directions. Quenser knew they were both far more intelligent than him. If it came down to their sense of what was reasonable and his, he didn't stand a chance.

There was no escape now.

He could not look away from the coming failure of the clean wars.

"B-but isn't that all theoretical?" asked Heivia, a tremor in his voice. He was probably trying to smile, but he only let his strained mental state show on his face. "It's the same as the expanding sun engulfing the earth one day or the earth's axis slowly shifting out of place over time. It might happen someday, but it's not something we have to live in fear of today."

"And what pray tell," said the rocking chair girl with a cold tilt of the head, "makes you think that 'someday' isn't today? It is already too late to stop it."

Even Heivia was rendered speechless by that.

Those who profited off of the Objects were so frantic because the situation really was that pressing. They had to take such desperate measures because the change could be seen right there in the numbers. If a country was reliant on fishing or diamond mining, what would they do if their marine or underground resources dried up? They couldn't exactly let someone publish an article proving they had nothing left to sell, so they would plot to assassinate the journalist to protect their people from starvation and thirst.

There was no time left.

The devastation had already begun.

Quenser gulped.

"Th-then are you saying the Information Alliance didn't bring their Ghost Changer-equipped Retro Gunner out here because they wanted their genius girl's brains? Did they send in all those forces to make sure they killed you to silence your theory that puts Objects at risk!?"

"Is the Information Alliance here too? I am not about to defend the people trying to assassinate me, but it would be wrong to treat the Information Alliance as the sole villains here." The genius girl's rocking chair creaked in front of the fireplace while she fully relaxed in the heat. "Maybe the Information Alliance are the only ones who directly sent troops in to assassinate me, but don't you think the other world powers indirectly support that attempt? The Information Alliance aren't the only ones who reap the vast benefits of this age of Objects. If you ignore the borders, it becomes obvious that the people who benefit from the clean wars control a majority of the world. Thus, all

four world powers are colluding to eliminate someone who could take those benefits from them. And if you need some evidence...”

Elina Silverbullet cast her gaze at someone again.

This was the person whose presence had informed her what was going on here.

“Louisiana Honeysuckle here should be locked away deep inside a Legitimacy Kingdom special prison, yet here she is out on the open battlefield. And some other war criminals were thrown in with her to help hide that she was the true target.”

“...”

“The world powers’ plan is obvious: gather all the scientists who threaten the clean wars in one place and kill them all. And include some other notable people to hide the inconvenient truth when people see the bodies.”

The white-masked soldiers next to Elina held a hand up to their ears. After hearing something over their radios, they got moving fast.

But it was already too late.

If their comrades outside had sensed something was wrong, then it was already close. The Information Alliance’s trump card here was the Ghost Changer-equipped Retro Gunner. It was best to assume they were already trapped in the eerie ghost story that had led to 800 Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers killing each other at the frozen cape at the southernmost point of South America.

Elina had seen this coming from the moment she saw Louisiana here.

So she remained calm and composed as she spoke.

“You poor things were sent here as nothing more than camouflage corpses.”

An unbelievably powerful attack crushed the log cabin like it was a tissue box.

Part 6

It was a very strange Object.

Shockingly, the spherical main body was only supported by one leg. The leg was jointed like an excavator or a desk lamp and it was attached to a long propulsion device that extended backwards

like a ski. The device did not use static electricity or an air cushion. It was more like a roller skate.

It likely distributed and managed the 200 thousand ton weight with rows of countless massive, heavy wheels. Even with the sturdiest metal wheels, the axles wouldn't survive otherwise.

The main cannon was a set of three large-caliber railguns attached near the top of the spherical main body's front side. The trio of powerful weapons lined up in a row like that could look frightening, but it was also a sign that the designers had not been confident in its accuracy. It lacked the accuracy to hit the enemy in a straight line shot, so it fired three in a row to hopefully hit even if its aim was a little off.

It was a rusty scarecrow.

That old-style Information Alliance First Generation was close to being scrapped. The outdated thing had been pulled from the front line to test fire new weapons and test out new technologies.

But if that was truly all it was, they never would have given it the Ghost Changer. Not when they couldn't afford to have that secret weapon captured by the enemy.

There had to be more to this First Generation that balanced itself with sliding weights on its rear side.

The true hell was about to begin.

"Pant, pant."

Quenser Barbotage kept tripping and falling in the thick snow as he frantically left the log cabin...or what was left of it. It had only been a bit bigger than a studio apartment, but it had still been a building. Seeing it crushed like a tissue box underfoot was enough to get a feel for how ridiculously huge Objects were.

Gunfire erupted all around him.

"Yikes!!"

He kept his head low, but he had no idea if that was the right thing to do.

He could hear different types of gunfire: the lighter repeating sounds of submachineguns or PDWs and the heavier singular sounds of sniper rifles. He guessed the Information Alliance troops were clashing with Unit X surrounding the log cabin. He still didn't know who Unit X was or how powerful they were, but they were outnumbered here. A small unit of elite troops attacking a large army with their own Object would meet the same fate as a swarm of army ants being swallowed by a lion.

Quenser kept nervously looking over his shoulder while trying to figure out how he was still alive.

(Those morons are attacking each other when no one asked them to. That means I'm only free to move until they recover from their confusion. I need to get as far away from here as I can now, or I'm in trouble!!)

He couldn't look after Sladder, Louisiana, and Azurefear like this.

He wasn't even sure where Heivia had gotten off to.

But he wasn't alone. He held a skinny wrist in his hand and tugged its owner along with him.

He was accompanied by Elina Silverbullet, the 9-year-old genius girl.

"Not what I would call a wise decision. If you were hoping to survive by abandoning your comrades, taking me with you was the worst thing you could have done. In case you have forgotten, I am the top priority of all sides of this conflict."

"Shut the hell up. You say we're just decoy corpses meant to disguise the deaths of the geniuses who've discovered the truth? To hell with that. I am not dying for such a stupid reason."

No matter where he looked, all he saw was the white curtain of snow.

Until he saw a dark shape moving up ahead.

"Wh-who's that!?" he shouted, stabbing a pen-like electric fuse in a Hand Axe plastic explosive resembling balled-up clay.

"Don't throw that," said the shape. "If I am attacked, I have no choice but to shoot."

"?"

Their visibility would be as bad as his, so they would only be able to see him as a vague shape. So why had they known he was using a bomb instead of a gun? After a moment of thought, it hit him. Elina Silverbullet breathed a visible sigh of exasperation.

"This must be one of your people. Otherwise they wouldn't know your unorthodox means of attack."

"S-Sladder?"

‘Yes.’

The criminal approached in his handcuffs and with the chain around his ankles. The stubbly mass driver researcher was not alone. A gorgeous blonde stood by his side.

“I captured this scrawny scientist when he was wandering off on his own through the hail of bullets. Ha ha. The entire Legitimacy Kingdom should thank me really. ...Anyway, where is my brother?”

“Louisiana is missing too. I hope Heivia has that criminal restrained.”

“(Why oh why am I stuck with the commoner? This pairing is all wrong.)”

“Agreed. I find Louisiana so much easier to deal with.”

After exchanging a glance and checking on the survivors, the natural question came to mind.

Louisiana Honeysuckle was also one of the geniuses who had discovered the truth, so she was a top priority target for the Information Alliance - and maybe all four world powers. But their current complement of weapons was Quenser’s bombs and the two prisoners’ self-defense handguns. It would be suicide to pursue Heivia and Louisiana while the Information Alliance and Unit X clashed and an Object was on the loose. Most likely, they would be spotted through the curtain of snow and filled with bullet holes.

Then a deafening boom and a shockwave temporarily swept that snowy curtain away.

“Whoa!?”

The Retro Gunner’s main cannons were a trio of railguns.

The forest had a lot of steep ups and downs, but it still wasn’t an actual mountain. Yet powerful rumbling in the distance caused part of the white ground to slide. Similar to a thin layer of sand sprinkled on a vibrating panel of glass, a thick layer of snow was moved by the trembling ground below. Quenser’s arms scrambled for purchase but found none. He was nearly swallowed up to the hips by the snow.

“Ugh, dammit. A-are you still alive, Elina?”

“Yes. My lighter weight makes it harder for me to sink into the snow.”

Buried so deep, Quenser could not crawl back out on his own, so he actually needed the 9-year-old’s small hand to help pull him out.

The Object attack had silenced the sniper rifle gunfire. Conversely, the submachineguns and PDWs had grown much more intense.

That meant fewer enemies, but that was nothing to celebrate. With one side of the Unit X and Information Alliance battle gone, Quenser's group would be the next target.

Sladder stared into the distance as if he could see through the blizzard.

"Splitting the power between multiple cannons reduces their individual initial velocities. That's about as insulting as being served instant coffee, but I suppose it is sufficient if you don't need to reach orbit. ...Those railguns have turned the tide."

"A-a-a-anyway, we need to get out of here," said Quenser. "I don't know who Unit X is, but I doubt they turn this around now. With the chaos dying down, the Information Alliance will use their superior numbers to seize this area. Once they can set up a perimeter or checkpoints and begin the hunt, we can't escape them just by hiding in the forest. We need to escape the battlefield before they have us surrounded."

"That is all very sensible." Elina Silverbullet did not seem particularly bothered that her home and possessions had been flattened. "But how exactly do you suggest we escape ahead of them? Surely not on foot."

"..."

The plan had been to ride a rubber motorboat down the cold river. The river running down a V-shaped ravine had a rapid current, so it would carry them from the battlefield at nearly 200km/h without the Object noticing.

But that was no longer an option.

Heivia had been carrying the inflatable boat, but he was currently missing.

(Heivia wasn't the only one with a boat. Damn, what is the Legitimacy Kingdom doing? This is a job for the Princess's firepower or for jack-of-all-trades Myonri's bag of tools that are barely ever useful!)

Quenser had a radio, but the electronic device was malfunctioning in this -15-degree hell. And if he did send out a Legitimacy Kingdom signal here, the Information Alliance might notice.

His bones still remembered the rumble from that triple railgun.

Even if the metal shells didn't hit him directly, he would still be blown away with enough dirt to form

a crater.

“We have to make do with what we have. For now, let’s follow the ravine downstream.”

“They will catch up if we move on foot.”

“We can’t contact the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom, but they must be spread out across this area. Each team was supplied a boat, so we just have to run across another group and hitch a ride on their boat!”

That was no guarantee of course.

But if they wanted to increase their odds of survival, they had no choice but to trust that the others would still be following the plan.

He was worried about Heivia and Louisiana, but they needed the Princess to deal with the Retro Gunner. Since he couldn’t trust his radio enough to send out a signal, they couldn’t request a rescue until they escaped from here.

The only way to save their stranded comrades was to escape alive and call in the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom forces.

(No, that excuse won’t convince Heivia. He’ll resent me regardless.)

“Pant, gasp. How am I still walking? I thought for sure I’d be worn out after walking a half marathon in the snow, but my body actually feels light.”

“Oh? Standing downwind of me must have given you a boost of energy,” said Azurefear. “I didn’t realize you were the kind of pervert who gains endless stamina from smelling girls.”

“P-please don’t talk about fetishes in front of a 9-year-old. I-i-i-it makes me feel guilty.”

“I notice you aren’t denying it. And did you know that taste can be weakly absorbed and sensed through the skin and intestines, not just the tongue? And taste and smell use the same chemoreception process, so you may be able to absorb scents through your pores. You can never let your guard down around a pervert. They could be stealing away your precious flavor and aroma at any moment. Ah ha ha. Now, what happens if I brush my hair back upwind of you?”

“Stop!!”

The already darkening sky was approaching actual sunset.

The white world was changing to black.

The log cabin had been the one artificial structure out here, but it had been flattened. The darkness was dreadfully deep in the empty wilderness. Especially on a moonless snowy night.

It was a simple matter, but it still robbed Quenser of his previous confidence.

“We need to go...damn, where’s the moss on this tree? No, there’s too much snow caked on to see it!”

“Even in this blizzard, using a light would be suicide right now.”

“Then what do you suggest, Sladder!? If we can’t see, we’ll step on one of those snow cornices, or whatever you called them, and fall into the ravine. We’re trying to walk along a ravine’s edge in the dark, remember!?”

“Hee hee. If you had half a brain, you might have considered finding a 2 or 3 meter stick to poke at the ground ahead of you. The eyes are not the only human sensory organ, after all. ...Oh, if only my brother were here so I could give him a hands-on lecture on the topic.”

Azureyfeare made sure to mock him as she provided some advice, but he decided he could trust her advice since she wouldn’t want to freeze to death with an idiot like him. He wasn’t happy about it, but he followed her advice. He broke off a young tree that was only about as thick as his thumb. The base of the tree was buried in the snow.

“Don’t worry. This will work just fine,” muttered Quenser, mostly for himself. “You can test the ground ahead of time. I don’t have to worry about stepping right through the snow if I test it first.”

“That is not the only threat found in the forest. This is Siberia, home of the world’s largest bears. And unlike Alaska, there are tigers here too.”

“Can you please just shut up!!”

Battlefield etiquette was quickly collapsing with Heivia missing. He was forced to begin a nervous escape without a guide.

Fortunately, the Retro Gunner did not immediately notice and pursue them. It may have simply not seen them, or it may have had another target it wanted to destroy first. That other target might be remnants of Unit X, or it might be Heivia, Louisiana, and the others. War was frighteningly equal. When one person was given a chance to survive, it meant someone else’s life was at risk.

“Brother...”

Azureyfeare Winchell placed a hand on the side of her head and held down her long hair while looking back.

They found the escape river quickly enough. The fluffy layer of snow suddenly ended and they saw a dark ravine that seemed to have absorbed the colors of the night. It looked like a pitch black fissure in the earth. It felt like a wound allowing shadowy blood to seep out from the depths of hell, which made it terrifying. The sound of the water below was unusually loud, giving them an idea of how rapid the current was. The current was enough to avoid freezing. Had they really wanted to descend that 10m cliff and ride a rubber boat on that?

There was still nothing but nature surrounding them.

There had to be some Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers around, so the plan was to hitch a ride down the river on one of their rubber boats. ...But had that been too naïve? It at least seemed more realistic than felling some nearby trees with bombs and tying them together with rope to create a raft.

Quenser brought a hand to his chin and muttered under his breath.

“The temperature is 15 below and the water is probably 1 or 2 degrees. A handmade raft? Tried and true professional military gear is one thing, but attempting a handmade vessel without any testing would definitely dump us in the water and turn us into frozen dinners.”

“Hm? What are you talking about?”

Elina Silverbullet tugged on his sleeve. His life was truly over if a 9-year-old was worried about his mental fortitude.

(We'll get lost if we stray from the plan. We'll end up walking circles forever. We need to keep going. Maybe it won't show results right away, but someone has to be traveling down the river by boat. If I'm right about that, we'll run across them eventually. We only have one real choice, so what can we do but keep choosing it? If we get worried and start focusing on other things, we'll lose this one chance we have.)

He tried to convince himself of that while poking at the thick snow with his long stick.

But he felt something odd this time.

That wasn't snow. It was a dry, light sensation, like the sugar figures on top of a cake crumbling away.

“...”

That wasn't entirely inaccurate.

He had found a figure doubled over and lying on its side. It was too badly burned to identify the clothing, the face, the gender, or even the age. And it was still wrapped in pale flames like burning alcohol.

It was a human corpse.

His poking stick had easily broken off the arm, punched into the chest from below the arm, and burst out the other side.

The corpse easily crumbled.

Quenser Barbotage screamed.

Part 7

He did not remember what he had yelled.

He only vaguely remembered that he had shouted so much his throat and stomach squirmed like they were turning inside out and he had spewed the undigested contents onto the snow.

Azureyfeard had him restrained while he trembled. He may have rolled off the cliff otherwise.

That corpse was not the only one.

And not all of them had been burned. Something dark red had been splattered across a large rock sticking up from the white snow, but was that human mincemeat? Several internal organs were still dripping blood while skewered at the spear-like top of a conifer tree.

There was real cruelty on display here.

This was the result of someone who found humor in death, not someone who wanted to kill with maximum efficiency.

(Goddammit.)

Quenser was soaked with sweat and too disturbed to even think of covering young Elina's eyes.

(These aren't Information Alliance or Unit X. These bloody uniforms and scorched guns...were they Legitimacy Kingdom!?)

For some reason, Sladder Honeysuckle spoke while staring down at the crumbling carbonized corpse on the snow.

“It happened at 7:40 AM on June 30, 1908.”

He was referencing a certain legend.

It was one of the few remaining “living legends” because not even all of modern science had arrived at a clear answer.

“The Tunguska event. Suddenly and without warning, an unidentified explosion burned down 2000 square kilometers of old-growth forest. The damage was mostly to undeveloped forest, but the actual human damage is unknown. The explosion was so powerful that unnatural noctilucent clouds appeared across Europe and the land over a several dozen kilometer radius of the blast site remained barren for more than 20 years. The most likely theory is an asteroid breaking up in midair and scattering heat and shockwaves in all directions, but there are plenty of other theories.”

“What?” Quenser wiped at his sour mouth. “Are you saying a ghost did this? You must be joking!! This a modern battlefield ruled by bullets and blades! If someone burned, then there was a weapon here that burned them!!”

“This wasn’t just a flamethrower or incendiary bomb.”

“What, how can you possibly know that!?”

“The method is different.” Sladder pointed at the corpse’s chest - at the disturbingly dry wound that Quenser had accidentally caused. “When your stick poked through the carbonized corpse, did you notice how little resistance there was? And why is it still burning in this blizzard of 15 below?”

“What is your point?”

“Wax,” stated Sladder. “It wasn’t just the proteins of muscle and calcium of bone that were burning. That would only cook them even with a specialized flamethrower. This was wax. The entire body has turned to wax. That allows it to function just like old-fashioned candles. The uniform, equipment, and hairs are the flammable wick and the fire that starts there is supported by the waxy body. That explains the body’s unnatural softness and how it can continue burning out here.”

Wax.

A candle.

Quenser did not understand what he was hearing. What did any of that have to do with humans and

corpses?

But Azureyfeare placed a hand on her chin.

“Come to think of it, I have heard of corpses remaining stable instead of rotting in certain special environments: when dried, when frozen...or when the body is turned to wax.”

This didn't sound like a contagious panic.

Quenser was too terrified to think, but the villains like Azureyfeare and Sladder could still calmly access their knowledge.

Sladder sighed.

“If you want to turn the human body into wax, you have to cut it off from all oxygen and leave it in a damp location for an extended period of time. Simply put, you either submerge it in water or bury it in the ground where no germs can grow.”

And.

He had one last example.

“Buried below a thick layer of snow works too. Any corpse left to be buried by the blizzard in the Tunguska District might end up like this.”

“Then...then what is this? Is the Information Alliance using a new weapon that doesn't just burn people - it turns them to wax?”

“That isn't possible.” Sladder had supposedly made the suggestion, but he shook his head now. “Fully turning a body to wax requires a lot of time. At least a few months, but it could take years. You can't turn a corpse into wax with the speed of making instant noodles.”

“Then what is happening out here?”

Quenser sounded lost.

Sladder looked away from the carbonized corpse half buried in the snow. He viewed the soft organs caught unnaturally at the top of a spear-like tree.

“There are more puzzling factors.”

“What...wait! I’m still trying to work out what I’m looking at down here!”

“Those organs in the tree...or should I call them a piece of a corpse? Don’t they look awfully soft for something exposed to -15-degree winds? They only seem to be freezing now.”

“True. But the Tunguska District is so cold a wet towel will freeze solid in only a minute if you hang it out to dry,” noted the local(?) girl Elina Silverbullet in a monotone voice.

Quenser’s spine finally froze.

He only now realized what Sladder was getting at.

“Hold on. Then when was this person killed?”

“A lot more recently than we were thinking, it would seem. If that girl is correct, then there is something out here close enough to reach us through the thick snow in less than 60 seconds.”

Quenser quickly looked side to side, but he couldn’t see anything through the white screen. Not the Information Alliance, not Unit X, and not the Ghost Changer-equipped Retro Gunner that had to be out there somewhere.

Those organs still hadn’t frozen.

Did that mean whoever had killed that person and cruelly decorated the forest with their organs was still nearby?

But who had done it?

And how?

Footprints wouldn’t disappear in just a minute, yet there was nothing. Visibility was poor, but Quenser’s group would have heard any gunshots. And if an Object had fired some strange superweapon, they should have at least passed out from the shock. Yet this gruesome corpse was sitting right there unfrozen.

And that corpse was not the only one. Another was splattered across a rock and more gore could be seen in some more distant trees. If that many people had died, there would have been screams and defensive gunfire, but they hadn’t noticed anything. Had the victims not even had the chance? Had their assailant been that overwhelming?

Something out here could creep up behind its target without making a noise and then mutilate

professional soldiers with just a touch.

Almost like a ghost.

A silent fear crawled up into Quenser's mind. This was very different from the threat of bullets and bombs that made so much noise. It felt like time had been stolen from the victims. A human body was only supposed to fully transform into wax after months or years under special conditions and the mincemeat and organs should have frozen solid in this frigid forest.

What could possibly lead to this result?

Could some new tech mess with special relativity to speed up time at a specific coordinate? Could some special camo fully neutralize a human's senses? No, thought Quenser, shaking his head. Those weren't physically possible. He kept working his mind to come up with more ideas, but none of them held any weight.

There had to be something out here.

But was it really time to conclude none of the rules he knew could explain this?

For now...

"Then...then what was this? Did the Information Alliance use the Ghost Changer to summon the ghosts of the soldiers and hunters who died during the Tunguska event? Are they dooming people to the same fate they met turning to wax under the thick snow?"

"We can't even say we know for sure what caused the Tunguska event. There are plenty of theories beyond the asteroid one. And since the event actually happened and was recorded, those theories cannot be ruled out no matter how absurd they might be."

"..."

"We really only know two things for sure here: The Tunguska event happened and the Information Alliance brought their Ghost Changer weapon here."

Azureyfeared took a step away, crossed her arms, and viewed silenced Quenser in an appraising way.

Young Elina tilted her head with no readable emotion on her face.

"If we fail to identify the cause before it reaches us, we might just get to experience it firsthand. I am the Information Alliance's top priority target after all."

She accurately stated the conclusion none of them wanted to think about.

The two geniuses were in agreement: what they saw here could not be explained with ordinary chemistry and physics.

Quenser still couldn't believe it. He may have wanted someone else to objectively deny it for him.

Because the terror would capture him otherwise.

He felt like laughing at himself for having such a silly concern after seeing all of this.

What had the Information Alliance awoken in this land? Sladder was right. The presence of those mutilated corpses meant the ghost was something physical. It wasn't just an illusion like a chemically induced hallucination or an image projected on the snow with laser art.

This was a physical ghost.

That increased the danger level considerably.

The Ghost Changer was not just a bluff. Their "ghost" was undeniably lethal.

"A-animals..."

Quenser was nearly taken in by the atmosphere, but he quickly shook his head.

He couldn't start arguing over whether this was a natural or artificial ghost. Starting the discussion there meant he had more or less accepted it already. He wouldn't disprove a thing that way.

He had to stay calm.

A curse? Spirit possession? But ghosts didn't exist. He wasn't going to give in on that point.

So he forced himself to laugh it off.

"Sladder, you yourself said earlier that the Siberia is home to the world's largest bears. A ghost isn't the only explanation for all this. A wild animal could have attacked the soldiers after some kind of image was used to panic them."

"Yes, the human sherbet splattered on the rocks and tree trunks could have been from a bear attack and the organs in the trees could have been birds of prey hanging them up to save them for later.

And wild animals might be able to swiftly hunt down their human prey without us noticing," said Azureyfeare. "But that does not explain the initial carbonized corpse. Animals do not ordinarily use fire. I did not notice the flash of lightning or rumble of thunder and I doubt there is an active volcano here. Besides, this would require fire hot enough to carbonize the body down to the bones. Even a crematorium needs several hours to accomplish that."

"We misjudged the initial conditions. Forget about the burning human being remade into wax. They would burn more easily like that."

"There has to be more to this!! That's so much more realistic than thinking some formless grudge or curse mutilated these people and set them on fire. Battlefields are chock full of death and grudges. Movies love ending on a beautiful image of a soldier dying with a satisfied smile, but that's bullshit. If curses could actually kill, then the winning side of every war in history would have been slaughtered shortly thereafter!!"

Sladder, Azureyfeare, and Elina.

Those abnormal geniuses all shrugged after watching Quenser sweatily yelling in the -15 degree weather. With so many bizarre things happening around him, he wanted to find some stability by reconfirming the "common sense" he took for granted. Did that ordinary way of thinking really make him the odd one out in this bizarre alternate dimension?

Or was his idea of common sense really that different from theirs?

He heard a scraping of metal coming from somewhere.

It was an artificial sound that clearly did not belong in this biting blizzard.

"Sh!"

With a quick warning, Quenser grabbed Elina Sliverbullet's hand and got down on the snow. The genius girl did not bat an eye.

It appeared to be a truck.

But it had no obvious headlights. Driving like that through the forest during a blizzard on a moonless night seemed like suicide, but the military truck was approaching them all the same. It was driving slower and more carefully than normal, but it was definitely coming their way.

The next threat had arrived.

Quenser tensed while Elina asked a quiet question without even moving her lips.

“What now? If that is the Information Alliance, this is insufficient to hide from them. They will detect us with ease if they have a thermo sensor, an anti-personnel radar, or light-amplification night vision gear.”

“Quiet. We wouldn’t have a chance on ordinary ground, but this is the snow.”

Sladder and Azureyfeare seemed hesitant, but they ultimately got down to join Quenser.

The deep rhythmic rumbling of the machine gradually grew louder.

But the loudest sound for Quenser was the beating of his own heart.

(We’re dead if they find us. One call for support and the Retro Gunner will be after us. Or that ghost will kill us.)

The sound did not stop.

He started to worry the truck wouldn’t notice them and they would simply be run over by its thick tires.

It approached, approached some more, and then passed them by.

The source of the sound continued on behind them without them ever even seeing what it was.

“?”

“(Be quiet.)”

Confused, he started to lift his head to look, but Azureyfeare forced it back down with a hand.

“(That engine sounded like an Information Alliance four-wheel-drive military truck. And it was on the other side of the ravine. That’s why only the sound passed us by.)”

Quenser had been afraid they were dealing with a ghost truck now, but apparently not.

Azureyfeare was definitely a bad person, but he found himself tempted to rely on her strength here. That may have been the negative sort of charisma found in gang bosses.

The ravine was more than 10m across. The blizzard made it impossible to see anyone at that distance, but a truck was a different story.

Quenser regained his cool and took a look.

“I see something swiveling on top of that truck.”

“You aren’t as clever as my brother, are you? If they are using active night vision, that is probably emitting IR or radar waves.”

The thick layer of snow would reflect light, which meant thermo sensors using infrared would have trouble detecting someone hiding below the snow. Same for night vision that mechanically amplified even small levels of light. Anti-personnel radars detected a target’s location from the reflected microwaves, but you had a chance of escaping detection if you curled up to mask your distinctive human shape.

Quenser breathed a sigh of relief just before he heard some dry gunshots ring out.

He felt a squeezing at his heart.

He forced his hands over his mouth to suppress a scream while tears spilled from his eyes.

After a short scream, he heard a few more gunshots followed by silence. Someone had just been shot. As a student, he didn’t know all that much about guns, but even he could tell only one type of gun had just fired. The lack of return fire suggested someone had just been shot after surrendering and begging for their life.

And that someone was probably wearing the same Legitimacy Kingdom uniform as him.

If that truck had driven along this side of the ravine, Quenser’s group would have met that same fate.

The sound of tearing metal was probably one of the gear-carrying animal robots the other groups had been given.

“Damn.”

“Looks like the ghost isn’t the only thing to fear,” said Sladder while the roar of the engine slowly faded into the distance.

Driving along in a loud vehicle with the heater running felt really brazen.

“And this may be our chance.”

“?”

Quenser tilted his head, so Sladder explained.

“The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were issued rubber boats, remember? We might just find what we need if we search those foolish corpses.”

Quenser couldn't stand it anymore.

He pulled a softball-sized stone from the snow and chucked it at the war criminal without so much as a warning.

Part 8

But no matter how cruel it might seem, it was still the most logical choice.

Quenser was forced to accept that fact when Azureyfeare Winchell used some kind of self-defense technique to send him spinning through the air. Sladder simply shrugged without a scratch on him. Quenser had been right next to the man, so he really wished he had just hit him with the rock instead of throwing it.

The prisoners were handcuffed, but they had him overpowered.

While he groaned down on the snow, Elina Silverbullet whispered in his ear.

“I envy you.”

“?”

“When I heard the gunfire, I too considered how we could use it. That must mean I am more like them than you.”

If they had some way of crossing the ravine, they might just find a rubber boat with the Legitimacy Kingdom corpse. But there was no sign of a bridge and any bridge that did exist would be a crucial point. The Information Alliance would definitely have at least one guard there.

(It's around a dozen meters across. All we have to work with are dirt, snow, rocks, and trees. It's 15 below. The trees are tall and straight, so maybe we could turn one into a bridge. Or...?)

Quenser shook his head.

No, they didn't even need to cross the ravine. Hadn't he heard metal being destroyed too?

"The burning wax corpse, the human sherbet on the rock, and the organs caught in the trees."

"You mean the ghost victims? What of them?"

"They were Legitimacy Kingdom too, so the animal robot carrying their gear might still be wandering nearby!!"

He shouldn't have had to explain that, but the obvious solution had slipped their minds entirely.

Maybe they had been too focused on needing to cross the ravine and maybe their fear of the ghost had worn them out too much.

They soon found a deer-like shape moving through the trees. That was the robot. The corpses may have been too mutilated for it to recognize them. Without a controller, Quenser had to trip it with his long stick and then the prisoners broke its lenses and legs with their chains. He opened one of the bags it was carrying. It only carried some bent assault rifles and some mobile devices with cracked screens. Azurefear clicked her tongue when she saw the useless rifles. They were made to fire grenades too, but that didn't look promising either.

"I doubt these fuses will work anymore. Carrying those around would be too dangerous."

"You were given handguns for self-defense, weren't you? You could always pick up some ammo."

Quenser wasn't interested in the weapons. He wanted a way to escape, not to fight.

He glanced over at the broken robot.

(Sorry, but I need to borrow your gear.)

He feared the thick military rubber boat would have been broken by all this damage. And even if the boat was intact, would the large motor run? For that matter, those mutilated soldiers might not have even had a boat.

He feared more and more that he had been clinging to false hope here.

Then he opened another bag and felt something inside.

"Yes," he said on reflex. "I found the boat!! I was right after all!!"

“But...hasn't it melted from the heat?”

“That doesn't matter, Elina. The boat might have a hole, but we have the motor and battery. As long as we find an intact boat, we can combine it with the surviving parts. We might even be able to press the hole against part of another boat and melt them together with some fire. That's the beauty of standardized devices.”

It turned out only the exterior bag was damaged and the actual boat inside was fine. That saved them the time of patching it up.

“Now we can travel down the river.”

They would still have to be careful about the noise from the motor, but the Information Alliance patrols would be easy to detect since they were using trucks. Switching off the motor whenever they heard those loud engines would be enough. And since the Information Alliance had let the gear robot survive, they must not have done much recon work. If they didn't know the Legitimacy Kingdom was carrying boats, they wouldn't think to focus their search on the frigid ravine river.

The bright path to survival was finally in sight.

They approached the ravine with the deflated unit. Quenser used his stick to check for a snow cornice and then looked down to see it was more than 10m to the bottom. Climbing down to the river might sound simple, but now they needed an actual method of doing so.

Still, it was better than no plan at all.

Azureyfeare whispered to Quenser while he looked down into the ravine.

“About the ghost.”

“?”

“Animals don't use fire and we still can't explain how that one soldier was turned to wax, but I think your observation was decent for a commoner. I think we should divide the ghost victims into two categories: those that were killed by the 'ghost' phenomenon and those who died to something else.”

“Died to...something else?”

She held her long hair down with a hand to peer down into the deep ravine while she nodded.

“We still haven't seen for ourselves what this ghost even is. I am worried about my brother...but the

ghost produced by the Ghost Changer may be something surprisingly mundane. Something that only becomes so unimaginably deadly when used in the Tunguska District.”

The Tunguska District was the origin of a mysterious event.

An explosion with no apparent source had instantly turned 2000 square kilometers of old-growth forest to charcoal and left the land barren for decades. It was covered in green again now, but the legend remained.

Quenser thought for a bit and then groaned. He had only learned one thing: no immediate answer was forthcoming.

“I can’t believe this. Does that mean we have to solve the mystery of the Tunguska event on top of the Ghost Changer? I thought people had settled on it being an asteroid breaking up in the atmosphere?”

“Ah ha ha. But doesn’t that make it a lot easier to investigate? Whatever the answer, it was a natural phenomenon, just like a wild animal attack. When people find the answer, they go ‘oh, is that all’ and lose interest. That’s the kind of secret you can find just lying around, unlike a new piece of military technology protected by countless layers of security.”

Sladder, the expert who had developed mass drivers capable of reaching the moon, had hinted at another possibility earlier. Quenser only had a passing familiarity with it due to its relation to Object main cannons, so the man would know more about it.

Something about this bothered Quenser, so he looked up from the ravine.

He wanted to gather all the necessary information before continuing.

“Hey, Sladder. What exactly caused the Tungus-”

He trailed off.

That wasn’t Sladder Honeysuckle standing next to him.

It was someone with half his face melting off.

Quenser’s breath caught in his throat and he couldn’t even scream.

But the half-melted face did scream, shoving Quenser away with both hands.

“M-monster!!!”

“?”

Did Quenser look like a monster to him?

But he didn't have time to ponder that. He had just been peering down in the ravine while on the lookout for snow cornices, so what happened when he was shoved hard?

He staggered back into the deflated rubber boat and the small child standing nearby.

He and Elina Silverbullet fell from the 10m ravine as a chunk of snow broke free below them.

Part 9

Ten meters was a tricky height. You might survive if you landed on a soft flower bed, a sheet iron roof, or the thick cushion used for the pole vault, but you didn't stand much of a chance if you landed on the jagged rocks at the bottom of a ravine.

On instinct, Quenser held young Elina tight in one arm and used the other hand to pull in the elliptical object floating next to him. Then he used his mouth to pull hard on the thick cord.

Nitrogen gas burst out, rapidly inflating the rubber boat. It probably worked similar to a car airbag or a fire extinguisher.

Of course, it didn't slow them as much as a parachute. The boat dropped quite rapidly while still bent nearly in half with Quenser and Elina contained within. Then it hit the hard ground.

They bounced.

Fortunately, they didn't have to worry about jagged rocks piercing their bodies. These military boats had been designed to accommodate rough landing operations anywhere from a sandy beach to a rocky coast, so the cushioning of the air within was nothing to sneeze at.

But it was too soon to breathe a sigh of relief. Gravity seized ahold of them again after their bounce. This time, they landed in the dark river running down the center of the V-shaped ravine.

Quenser thought his heart was going to stop when the liquid touched him.

He reflexively curled up, but then he realized he had let go of the girl and she was vanishing into the dark river!

“Pwah!! Elina, where are you!?”

When his head breached the surface, the biting wind grew twice as powerful. His bangs began to freeze starting from the tips. He had never imagined 1-degree water would actually feel warm to him.

And his cries received no response.

The current was even faster than it had looked from above. If he hadn't grabbed onto the boat with aching and rapidly numbing fingers, he would have been tossed about wildly. There was no way a 9-year-old like Elina Silverbullet could swim while fully clothed here.

Quenser held onto the boat for dear life and turned on his light despite the danger.

He was risking his life with that light, but it barely helped.

Steam was rising from the river even though it was only 1 degree. That was just how deadly the air was.

A dark and gloomy feeling pressed down on him, but then he spotted something. That wasn't just an illusion brought on by the wavering steam. A small hand stuck straight up out of the dark water a short distance away.

This wasn't something from a ghost story. It was a living human being still trying desperately to survive.

“...”

She was about 10m away and upstream of him, but if he waited too long, her hand would sink back below the water and probably never resurface. Yet if he let go of the motorboat in these rapids, he would lose his means of getting downstream.

He could choose the girl or the boat.

Quenser Barbotage clenched his teeth and made his choice.

“Argh!!”

He tore away his fingers that were half freezing to the boat and he fought the current.

He couldn't use his light anymore. Darkness surrounded him once more, hiding the small hand from

view.

He ended up relying mostly on intuition.

He trusted the sensation he felt in his fingers, grabbed tight, and pulled up.

“Cough!! Cough, cough!?”

“No, Elina!! Don’t breathe in through your nose!! Gather the air in your mouth and let it warm up before breathing it in. You’ll damage your lungs otherwise!”

To prevent coughing Elina from reflexively delivering a finishing blow to her own body, Quenser forced his wet hand over her small face and warned her. The nose could inhale more air than the mouth and you could not hold the air between your cheeks when breathing through the nose. It went without saying what would happen if you sent this piercing cold air directly to your lungs.

(But what do we do now!? We’ve lost our boat!!)

For now, he focused on staying afloat while they held each other close and let the current carry them. He kept one arm solidly around Elina’s shockingly small hips and used the other hand to shine his unreliable light around.

The light reflected off of something.

It was the abandoned rubber boat. It had been swept downstream, but it must have gotten caught on a sharp rock jutting up from the riverbed.

He reached desperately for it.

Grabbing it must have affected its balance because it resumed moving. It flowed downstream once more.

There was no saving them if they remained in the 1-degree river.

It was difficult with just the one arm, but since Elina was buoyant, she didn’t feel as heavy in the water. He held his light in his mouth and first pushed her small body up into the boat. Then he climbed in after her. If she hadn’t moved to the other side, the boat might have capsized under his weight.

But boarding the boat did not make them safe.

He thought he could actually hear it when he saw Elina's hair and poncho freezing. He could guess the same was happening to him.

It was 15 below zero out here.

The white hell of Siberia had truly bared its fangs now.

The two of them held each other tight. There was no room for shame here. If they didn't overcome this cold, their ears, fingers, and whatever else would get frostbitten and fall off. Elina's fluffy knit clothing was designed to store air to insulate her from the cold, but cold water was its worst nightmare. There was no preventing the wool from soaking up all that water.

They shivered while looking out ahead - downstream.

The motorboat was supposed to let them escape the battlefield at nearly 200km/h, but that felt like a joke now. The V-shaped ravine curved this way and that through the darkness and sharp rocks stuck out of the water all over the place. Quenser was hesitant to start the motor up at all, much less travel at nearly 200km/h. Simply letting the current take them was terrifying enough. The most he could do was shine his unreliable light out ahead and cling to the rear motor unit to operate the rudder.

(Another example of Frolytia's ultra optimism. When I get back, I'm warming my fingers on her boobs until they stop trembling.)

As sturdy as the military boat was, a tear from one of the fang-like rocks would still sink it. And just because it had survived last time did not mean it would survive next time. The damage would not go away on its own. Unfortunately, shining his light on the river ahead did not tell him what was lurking below the surface.

(This won't last long.)

Quenser felt dizzy while he held Elina with his teeth chattering.

He could feel his pulse more than ever before, but that felt more like a last-ditch effort than anything. And if his heartbeat weakened, he doubted it would ever recover. The upper limit would gradually fall until finally reaching a flatline zero.

(We'll both die if we don't find some place to dry off and change clothes!! Even if we do make it downstream, we won't make it to the Legitimacy Kingdom evac point 120km past that!!)

"Wh-what is...that?"

Elina Silverbullet was shivering too, but she pointed her small finger elsewhere. She was looking up at a dark shape in the distance.

“A bridge?”

“Shh!”

Quenser wrapped both arms around her and lay down in the boat.

The Information Alliance probably had the area surrounded while they gradually worked their way inwards, but they would be focusing their inspections and hunting on the known land routes. They wouldn't be focused on the ravine river, but a bridge where the road met the river was bad news. He didn't see any searchlights, but he knew they had been driving a truck around with the headlights off and shooting any Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers they found.

The bridge was more than 10m above.

They could be sending something invisible down into the ravine even now. Whether it was IR or microwaves, he, Elina, and the boat would be shredded by a machinegun or grenade launcher the instant they were detected.

It was risky, but they couldn't turn back either.

He had no plan, but their only option was to let the current carry them. Forcing the motor to fight the rapid current would make a dangerously loud noise. Besides, running away would just get them frozen to death. This was another danger to contend with, but their best bet was still to travel downstream and try to reach the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base.

He steeled himself as they approached the concrete bridge spanning the ravine.

Would they make it through or not?

His tension rose to its peak.

“...”

The boat came to an unexpected stop. He looked around in shock to find the boat's path was blocked by a metal fence placed across the water's surface.

It was an unusual thing, so the Information Alliance must have done it.

“What now?”

“We can’t keep going! There don’t seem to be any soldiers above us, but the fence might be electrified. Touching it might have triggered a sensor!!”

At least it hadn’t been linked with a naval mine that detonated as soon as they touched the fence. Maybe the Information Alliance hadn’t wanted large fish or trash triggering it on accident.

Fortunately, there was a metal staircase installed on the ravine wall, presumably for bridge inspection and maintenance. On the other hand, that meant there was only the one path up. They had to run up there and vanish into the night before those Information Alliance freaks came to investigate.

He grabbed the fence and pushed his body against it to slide the boat over. Once at the edge of the ravine, he picked up Elina, hopped onto land, and climbed the metal stairs.

Climbing a 10m spiral staircase was a lot like climbing 3 stories.

He needed to clear those stairs before any Information Alliance soldiers showed up. With that and the biting chill, he ran up the stairs without worrying about his clanging footsteps, but he thought his heart was going to stop once he reached the top.

He saw simple structures similar to boxy metal containers, the unique silhouette of a radar facility, and even giant hangars resembling gyms with semicircular roofs. They were so surrounded on all sides that the curtain of snow wasn’t enough to hide it.

This was the Information Alliance maintenance base zone.

They must have been restricting light usage because the entire place was dark.

The bridge across the ravine was crucial to transportation around here, so they could monitor who moved in and out by setting up a checkpoint at that one point. So the Information Alliance had set up their easily-deployed maintenance base around the bridge.

(Well, this sucks.)

They really had hit a dead end now.

An Object maintenance base zone would hold anywhere between 800 and 1000 soldiers. There was no way an amateur battlefield student could sneak his way through there without being spotted. But returning to the ravine wasn’t an option either. If that fence had been electrified, the Information Alliance would send an armed team down to investigate the alarm he had triggered.

They were in a real “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situation.

The tension was enough to distract him from the cold, but then Elina spoke from his arms.

“Umm.”

“What is it? I’m trying to come up with a plan here.”

“It’s not about that. I was wondering what happened here.”

He wasn’t sure what the genius girl meant.

She must have noticed because she clarified for him.

“Like you said before, there are no soldiers up here.”

“Oh.”

“But this is undeniably a military facility. And a large one at that. So isn’t it odd that there’s no one around?”

He had a bad feeling about this.

Come to think of it, he hadn’t seen any guards around. And not just because they were using night vision goggles and didn’t need their lights.

The place felt deserted.

The lack of artificial lights could be explained, but could a “small city” of at least 800 people really stay as silent as an old-growth forest in midwinter?

Quenser gulped and took a step away from the stairs and into the Information Alliance maintenance base zone.

His bad feeling had been right on the money.

Countless corpses had been mutilated, burned, and splattered against the walls in ways that couldn’t be explained with bullets.

The base was littered with victims of the ghost.

Part 10

Quenser had hit his limit.

He wanted to run away somewhere - anywhere - but the maintenance base surrounding the bridge was filled with death and gore.

With his psyche pushed to the limit, he simply obeyed his sense of danger. He picked up Elina again, accidentally kicked aside a flare gun buried in the snow, tackled open a nearby building's door, and stumbled inside.

The gentle, heated air washed across his half-frozen skin and hair.

Was the dampness he felt in the corners of his eyes really just the frost and ice melting?

"What happened here?"

An Information Alliance truck had been out on patrol earlier, but they wouldn't be following those routines if this were happening. So had this only just happened?

The building he had entered looked like a barracks or medical room. He still felt dizzy as he tossed Elina Silverbullet one of the towels hanging on the wall. He couldn't support his own weight, so he sat down on a nearby bed.

A broken radio sat at his feet, like it had been thrown against the floor. Who had its owner been unable to contact? Was the ghost interfering with radio communications too?

"Wasn't the ghost supposed to be something caused by the Ghost Changer loaded onto the Information Alliance Object? So why were their own people killed after being cursed or possessed or whatever!?"

He was shouting at the top of his lungs in the Legitimacy Kingdom language, but the Information Alliance never showed up to surround him. No one was left to hear him. The base was entirely dead.

Elina did not seem to have an answer either.

She simply sat there in thought with the towel over her head, so Quenser crouched down and wrung her knit clothing out like a rag to try and get the cold water out and then dried her off with the towel as best he could over her clothing. Otherwise, she could easily freeze to death inside this heated room.

Not even a well-supplied Information Alliance base would have a uniform that fit a 9-year-old girl, so her only real option was to soak up as much of the water with the towel and then stand in front of the stove to dry the rest of the way off.

“Nh, nhhh.”

He was making these decisions for her, but the genius girl seemed fairly satisfied. Either she was surprisingly defenseless or she had opened up to him more than her emotionless eyes let on.

“Let’s start by listing off the possibilities,” she said. “Did the Information Alliance lose control of their ghost and self-destruct? Or were they not the ones who released the ghost on the battlefield in the first place?”

“Neither of those makes sense.”

Quenser shook his head.

He was looking after Elina and keeping her alive. Without that simple heroism, he may have succumbed to the fear, searched out a gun, thoughtless fired on the wall as a way to lash out at sharing a base with so many corpses, and been killed by a ricocheting bullet.

The responsibility changed the way he thought.

But not even he could say if that was a positive change.

“This isn’t the Information Alliance’s first time using the Ghost Changer. They move it from Object to Object as an add-on weapon to hide it from the records, but they must have some kind of detailed manual or routine they share. I doubt they would have screwed things up so badly it killed the 800 or 1000 people on the base.”

“In that case.”

That did not stop Elina.

Her cold expression remained, but she may have needed to keep thinking to distract herself from her anxiety. She laid out her thoughts while he dried her hair with the towel.

“Could the Information Alliance’s ghost not be what killed these soldiers? That would mean there is another mysterious cause of death out there.”

“...”

Something hidden in this land had caused the Tunguska event.

That something had blown away an area of 2000 square kilometers, filled Europe's sky with an eerie glow, and left the site of the blast barren for decades afterwards.

When the Information Alliance had tried to conquer this battlefield with their dreadful technology, had they awoken something else they hadn't known was here?

"Even if their skills had dulled with Objects ruling the battlefield, what could possibly wipe out a base of 1000 before they could even send out an SOS?"

"Every possibility falls under one of two categories."

Elina did not have all the answers.

She looked like a loner genius girl, but she may have actually been the type to take inspiration from discussions.

She stood in front of the stove to dry off and watched Quenser transform the hot water in the kettle into a hot drink using the cocoa powder at the bottom of the mugs.

He knew having wet underwear felt awful, but he frantically slapped her hands down when she started to lift her knit skirt in front of the stove. What exactly was she trying to warm by the fire there!?

Her desire for warmth was greater than her shame, but her restless hands instead reached for a pocket-size plant guide. Had the Information Alliance soldiers been looking for edible plants in between shifts?

"Either the Information Alliance destroyed itself from within, or it was slaughtered from without. Whatever theory we construct will be greatly influenced by that."

Even with their Object out and about, the 1000 soldiers at the base would have been well armed with guns, artillery, tanks, and armored trucks. Not even 1000 bears would be enough to slaughter them in the blink of an eye.

Was the ghost's curse or possession even more powerful than that?

External heat was not enough to keep the cold out, so Elina took the mug Quenser offered her, wrapped her small hands around it, and tested the hot cocoa with the tip of her tongue.

“It could have been a gas or bacteria. What if a sealed container was sent down from upstream and detonated when it hit the fence at the bottom of the ravine near the center of the base? Hot.”

“The corpses were mutilated. Some kind of macro force was used to kill them.”

“Foo, foo. Then maybe a large unit of powered suits attacked. Maybe another part of your Legitimacy Kingdom force.”

“Powered suits aren’t as convenient as they look. A tank or attack helicopter can overpower them, so you can think of them as stronger than infantry but weaker than an armored truck. They can’t unilaterally slaughter an entire base if you have enough of them. There would definitely be some Legitimacy Kingdom corpses, wreckage, and bullet holes, but I don’t see any.”

“Oh, this isn’t just sugar. It has coconut and caramel too... Then could it have been something more powerful than a tank or attack helicopter?”

But what exactly could it have been? They were right back to discussing an unidentified ghostly curse or grudge.

Still, something bothered Quenser about it all.

Some corpses had been burned with an intense heat. Others had been crushed by a powerful shockwave. All of the gruesome deaths were reminiscent of the legendary Tunguska event.

However...

(Huh? What was it Frolaytia told us about the Hornos District at the southernmost part of South America?)

Now he wished he had secretly recorded her. He had unfortunately filled up his memory with the sensation of her ass on his face. He held a hand to his chin and tried as hard as he could to remember. This time, the conversation mattered more than the butt.

Yes.

This is what she had said...

“But then things changed. All 800 soldiers in the Legitimacy Kingdom’s maintenance base were slaughtered in a single night. There were signs of gunfire, but no Information Alliance bullets were found. That suggests the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were shooting each other. More than 99% of the soldiers were killed, including the base commander and the Pilot Elite. Looking at the bullet holes, the seemingly random gunfire is most noticeable, but it looks like the nature of the battle

changed once friendly fire detonated the ammo dump. ...Some bodies were found with bite marks in their uniforms and flesh, suggesting the fighting continued even after they used up all their ammo. The bites were deep, leaving toothmarks on the bone in some cases. And since the same corpse sometimes had multiple sets of toothmarks, it looks like they were attacked in groups."

Part of that caught his interest.

"Friendly fire?"

"Hm? Did any of them have bullet wounds?"

Elina tilted her head while holding the adult-sized mug which was a little too large for her hands.

Yes, they hadn't seen that here. All of the corpses had been mutilated, blown away, turned to wax, or reduced to mere organs. No actual autopsies had been performed and it was still possible they had been mutilated after being shot in the head, but it still didn't look like these soldiers had killed each other. If they had been firing wildly like that, there would be bullet holes in the walls and floor, but none of that was in evidence.

The most material damage they had seen was the radio thrown against the floor and the flare gun buried out in the snow.

But the Ghost Changer itself was the same piece of equipment.

It had to have the same affect as last time. This might look like an entirely different result, but it had to have the same cause. Both attacks started in the same place but then branched out differently for unknown reasons. So what was the real cause? And what had caused this difference?

A ghost.

The Tunguska District was a special place.

But was that really what he needed to focus on?

"Because there isn't anywhere to run to on this planet. With all those 200 thousand ton weapons moving at such high speeds around the globe, the earth's environment has already been fatally thrown out of balance."

"Animals don't use fire and we still can't explain how that one soldier was turned to wax, but I think your observation was decent for a commoner. I think we should divide the ghost victims into two categories: those that were killed by the 'ghost' phenomenon and those who died to something else."

“What are you so worried about? We’re not going to snatch you up and eat you. Life in solitary confinement wasn’t all that bad. There was a window, even if it did have bars over it. And the combination of the damp, cracked wall and the sunlight allowed some small flowers to grow.”

Quenser Barbotage looked up.

“Could it be?”

Part 11

There was no good and evil in war.

The Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance would have their own reasons for their actions here in the Tunguska District. The mysterious Unit X would also have been desperate to stay alive. The Ghost Changer-equipped Object was like a nightmare for Quenser’s group, but it may have looked like a legendary sword to the Information Alliance who wanted to protect their comrades’ lives however they could.

So there was no point in discussing who was the villain here.

Or at the very least, reflexively declaring the Information Alliance evil wouldn’t be productive.

And in this case, Quenser couldn’t just chalk it all up to a conspiracy of the four world powers. That was the same as insisting everything that had ever gone wrong for him was due to a mysterious curse interfering with all the critical moments in his life.

But there was a villain here.

And Quenser had seen them himself.

They had been within arm’s reach.

They were out here on this battlefield, but not as a bizarre ghost story – as a living, breathing human.

“Elina.”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to end this, but we’re the ones who brought this battle to your doorstep, so you have no obligation to accompany me. If you don’t want to die, you can stay here in this warm base, waiting

for someone to rescue you.”

“I do hate to say goodbye to this warm stove and more hot cocoa, but I too played a role in this.”

The fear of the battlefield would have soaked into her very bones - the terror of the cold, the bullets, and the eerie ghost’s curse or spirit possession.

But the emotionless genius girl did not hesitate.

“Whatever the actual method is, I was the one who set the stage for it by living here in the Tunguska District. I knew I would have to face some kind of problem like this if I refused to back down on my suppressed paper. But I refused to give up and that led to this war. If not for my selfishness, this plan may have never panned out.”

“...I see.”

Her cold and robotic demeanor made it hard to tell, but she did have emotions.

Intelligence had its pros and its cons. She would have been happier if she had never arrived at that answer.

She may have felt somewhat responsible for this battlefield littered with Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance corpses. But whatever calculations the true genius’s conclusion were based on, that average student could confidently tell her she was wrong. This war was something they had brought to the Tunguska District. None of this was her fault and she shouldn’t feel any of that weight on her shoulders.

But the risk to her would not go away if he left her behind. The corpses covering the base were enough to know the place was not safe.

He sighed and nodded.

“Then I’ll take you with me. ...To be honest, I was terrified of having to reenter that frozen forest on my own.”

“I don’t know what you intend to do about that ghost, but I am honored you consider me worthwhile to have around. It tells me I’m not just dead weight.”

They were both ready to go now.

The boy had said from the beginning that they already had the greatest weapon against them. He

had said trying to run away would only lead to death, so it was best to not even try.

So now there was just one thing to do: begin to fight.

He pressed his radio's switch.

He sent out the emergency signal that restrained the prisoners and transmitted their location.

"Found you."

He glanced down at his mobile device instead of his radio.

He had booted up the military's highly accurate map app.

"Sladder Honeysuckle!! I have his GPS signal and I've detonated his glow-in-the-dark paint and scent capsules. He can't escape now!!"

"Sladder?" Eliza clearly didn't understand. "And I thought you said your radio and mobile device weren't working in the cold."

"They weren't actually broken."

Quenser smiled and looked around while drying his hair with a towel.

The Information Alliance maintenance base would be stocked with all sorts of weapons, from handguns to missiles, but Quenser and Elina couldn't use weapons like that. He guessed this would come down to throwing Hand Axe plastic explosives.

He searched through all the gear and only took a flashlight that looked more powerful than his own.

"We just couldn't trust the signal it was showing us. The blizzard screwed with our sense of direction and distance, so we started to doubt what the machine was showing us. We're 120km from the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base. I had my doubts when I checked the display, but looks like it was right. The truth is a funny thing. If I'd thought about it more, I would have realized of course the digital numbers are more accurate. I just wasn't in a mental state that let me think straight."

"Because of the ghost?"

"Once you get how it works, it's kind of silly." He snorted with laughter while walking toward the door. "We kept talking about the Ghost Changer-equipped Object, but we don't actually know what the Ghost Changer looks like. Why is that? The Object is 50m tall and we saw it ourselves when it

crushed your log cabin. The Ghost Changer is an unconventional weapon since it can be passed between Objects. But if they were adding a huge cannon or lens, it would mess with the Object's design philosophy. So how did it work?"

"?"

"It's simple really."

He threw open the thick metal door.

The -15 degree air was like poison now that they were accustomed to the heated building.

But now that Quenser understood the trick, he saw the view out the door as an open world full of hope. It was now his turn to attack.

"The Ghost Changer is a special grease. The gears, cylinders, joints, the axles for its steamroller-like wheels, and every other movable part on the Object is intentionally allowed to rub together and burn the oil with friction. And the subtle flavors and smells that creates messes with the human brain!!"

They intentionally had the Object damage itself.

Was that why they had chosen the Retro Gunner instead of a new model? Was the cost of damaging a functioning Object just too great? Or did an old piece of junk enhance the effects? Was it like how a rusty saw was more frightening than a sharp knife?

"Are you saying the Ghost Changer is like a chemical weapon spread by the smoke and steam created when burning it?"

"You wouldn't need an Object if it was. Since they use that thing's joints, I bet this is about high pressure physics."

"You mean how graphite turns to diamond at a pressure of about 50 thousand atmospheres?"

"Objects weight 200 thousand tons, so the pressure on their joints is far greater than the average press. Labs and factories can apparently produce a few million atmospheres using the shockwave of an explosion, but this might be even greater."

"I see. I have heard some other unusual reports from the world of high pressure physics, such as ferromagnetic iron becoming paramagnetic or germanium's electrical conductivity increasing a millionfold."

“It produces phenomena that don’t add up based on our normal understanding of physics. I doubt the Ghost Changer grease would work if you just heated it with fire. I bet the weapon only works if you use the magic of high pressure to bend the rules of property change.”

The two of them soldiered on through the blizzard.

The Information Alliance flashlight was quite bright, so it pierced a good distance through the darkness. If he wasn’t careful to angle it down a bit, it would reflect off the blizzard and dazzle his eyes. The Information Alliance seemed to prefer night vision using IR or microwaves, so he would make better use of the flashlight than them.

“Ugh...”

“What is it, Elina? Did you drink too much hot cocoa, so now you need to pee? If you can’t keep that dam from breaking, try to do it at the base of a thick tree. Any pursuers might mistake it for wild animal markings.”

“Having him caution me about being indecent was the greatest mistake of my life.”

The 9-year-old was getting ahead of herself and deciding she had already seen the worst her life had to offer. Her voice dropped terrifyingly low, but the cold was still too powerful and she remained clinging to Quenser.

However, the genius girl’s groan had not been the result of pressure building below her stomach after leaving the warm room for the cold outdoors.

“So you were saying the ghost is created with smells and flavors?”

“More accurately, they create an atmosphere where a ghost seems likely. You begin to doubt your common sense, you throw out all your accurate digital data, and you close yourself up in a shell. That makes you the perfect target for any sort of superstition. Your brain starts to misinterpret things, like the rustling leaves sounding like whispering voices or the swaying branches looking like spying people.”

“Misinterpret?”

“You know how the voices you hear over the phone are really the physical voice being recreated using a combination of electric tones, right? Or how cheap meat can seem fancier when injected with fat? People love to label the things they’re experiencing by comparing them to the categories in their head, so our senses are actually pretty inaccurate.”

“But you expect me to believe this works on everyone, regardless of physical constitution and mental structure? What kind of miracle drug is this Ghost Changer? The Island Nation’s Hangonko was

theorized to use mustard, but it's actually just a legend with no real chemical formula. Talk of hallucinogens might sound convincing, but it's not like they ran a proper clinical trial to make sure it would cause everyone see the exact same ghost. That claim is as absurd as saying zombie powder can damage anyone's brain enough to turn them into a puppet just because it uses pufferfish."

"Admittedly, it would be difficult with ordinary flavors and smells."

He already knew their destination.

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance had been removed from the battlefield. Same for the mysterious Unit X. Now that he knew that, he didn't fear using a flashlight or activating his mobile device's backlight. He only had to follow the GPS signal through the dark and snowy forest.

"But did you know, Elina, that flavors and smells are sensed using a process called chemoreception? Your body can detect the change in your cells when exposed to certain chemicals. That change just so happens to be greatest on your tongue and in your nose."

"You mean how the spiciness sensed on the tongue is similar to pain or burning?"

"More or less, yes. But that's the real issue here. We tend to think that our five senses are sensed using five different organs, but taste can actually be sensed on the skin and in the intestines, just to a much more limited extent. And the same might be possible for smell since it uses the same chemoreception process. There is also research that suggests our skin and blood vessels can just barely sense light."

"Sensing taste and light through the skin?"

"It could be anywhere really. We think of vision as coming through the eyes, hearing through the ears, smell through the nose, taste through the tongue, and touch through the skin. But if we start to absorb sensory information through parts that don't fit that mental mapping...well, humans like to manage the things they're perceiving by applying labels to them. When heating food in the microwave, you think of it in terms of how long you heat it, not how many degrees or watts you use, right? You don't question it when you heated it 'long enough', but the inside is still cold, do you? Most everyone is willing to accept that because they've never been burned by microwaves. We can swap out the labels for stimuli we can't perceive. Same for units and quantities. If you hold a fluffy sweater in one hand and a ball of yarn weighing the same in the other hand but you aren't told they weigh the same, you will sense the smaller ball of yarn as weighing more. Your knowledge alters what you're sensing."

In the military world, it wasn't uncommon to develop weapons that secretly provided unseen stimuli.

For example, a handheld laser weapon that damaged the human eye from a distance or an acoustic weapon that induced psychological changes through long-term exposure to ultrasound or high pressure. Chemical weapons were the same. The tear gas and vomiting gas used to neutralize rioters

could be viewed as weapons using taste and smell. Even stun guns and the like could apply in the sense that they applied an extreme tactile or pain stimulus.

The Information Alliance had taken that a step further.

They had increased the specs until their weapon could summon a “ghost” to the battlefield.

“People can’t fight data inputted through the ‘subconscious perception’ created when their body’s structure is at odds with their mental map of their senses. You should at least be able to imprint them with an idea more effectively than subliminal messaging which may not work at all.”

“They use stimulus signals the human mind can’t classify? That’s cheating worse than using a cryptid.”

“Probably why they call it a ghost.”

“But how does that connect to that man’s conspiracy?” Elina let out a white breath and looked up at Quenser. “Sladder Honeysuckle, I mean. Didn’t you say he was held in a Legitimacy Kingdom special prison? How could he be involved in an Information Alliance secret weapon?”

“...”

Quenser did not answer.

They were approaching the signal.

This would be checkmate if they found Sladder constricted by the belts and giving off this GPS signal, but Quenser doubted mechanical security would work against such a skilled engineer.

The odds were slim.

(Sladder was under constant surveillance just like the other prisoners. He only had freedom after shoving me off the cliff and before I hit my radio’s switch.)

When Quenser had fallen into the ravine, Sladder had looked like a ghost with a melting face, but that didn’t necessarily mean Sladder had seen the same thing when looking at him. Quenser had only heard the man shout “monster”.

It was always possible he had been entirely rational and shoved the boy while hiding a smile.

(He couldn’t have had more than half an hour. That isn’t enough time for specialty work, especially

in an old-growth forest without any tools.)

He may not have slipped his restraints until Quenser's signal reached him. So even if he had escaped, he couldn't have gone far. Quenser was certain he could find the man by looking for a silhouette covered in glow-in-the-dark paint or following the footsteps that smelled of the tracking scent.

He was right about that.

In a manner of speaking, anyway.

The snow right next to Quenser was blown away shortly before he heard a pleasant gunshot.

Quenser immediately picked up the genius girl and rushed behind a nearby tree. That gunshot had not come from a small self-defense handgun. Sladder must have stolen a sniper rifle from a dead soldier.

And that specialized gear had worked against him.

Sladder hadn't needed to give a warning shot there, so that meant his shot had been blown off course by a crosswind. Sladder Honeysuckle, leader of the Mass Driver Conglomerate, was a master strategist who had set a global conspiracy in motion, but he had never been all that great a shot. At the end of the Break Carrier battle, he had fired a handgun several times at close range and still failed to kill an amateur like Quenser.

Quenser brought his radio to his mouth while hiding behind the tree.

He didn't know if that sniper rifle was Legitimacy Kingdom or Information Alliance, but surely Sladder had stolen a communicator too. He chose to send an unencrypted signal across all bands.

"Sladder!! I know more or less what it is you're trying to do here. ...Yeah, you were originally planning to defect from the Capitalist Corporations to the Information Alliance, using your precious mass driver tech to get them interested. But we stopped you and you were thrown into a Legitimacy Kingdom prison instead. You're upset your deal never went through, aren't you? It's only natural you would try to join the Information Alliance if you had the chance!!"

There was no response, so Quenser continued on his own.

"You were the first to notice when we were surrounded by Unit X at the log cabin, but you didn't warn us and held your tongue to get us captured."

Was Sladder afraid Quenser would trace the signal to locate him if he responded?

“When the Retro Gunner attacked Elina’s cabin, Azureyfeare said she captured our ‘scrawny scientist’ when you were trying to head off on your own. You were hoping to slip away in the confusion, meet up with the Information Alliance, and complete your defection, weren’t you?”

Quenser took the splinters of a tree branch that broken underfoot, shoved them into a small piece of Hand Axe, and threw it in a random direction. He detonated it with his radio, spreading flames and smoke around.

The darkness was swept away, revealing their positions to each other.

They were 200m apart.

The silhouette visible through the snowy curtain revealed that Sladder still had the chain around his ankles, but he had removed the belts and handcuffs. That explained how he could use the sniper rifle.

But that also meant he hadn’t had enough time to remove the chain. He had stopped working after noticing Quenser and Elina approaching. Things were not progressing according to plan for him, which Quenser counted as a win.

There was no more point in hiding his position, so static ran through Quenser’s radio.

“What are you hoping to accomplish with this conversation?”

“What happened to Azureyfeare?”

“I shot her.”

Quenser clenched his teeth hard enough to cause an odd sound from his back teeth.

200m apart was midrange, putting them just out of handgun range for a professional soldier. That was too far for Quenser’s throwing arm to get a bomb to Sladder.

But what about Sladder?

Quenser could only hope Sladder could not draw on the sniper rifle’s full specs using the multipurpose scope that made use of several sensors and lenses.

“After I used the ghost panic to shove you two into the ravine, it was only us two prisoners left at the top. If I told her how to remove her restraints, I thought for sure she would leap at the opportunity, but it turns out Azureyfeare Winchell is the type of prisoner who still finds value in belonging to the

Legitimacy Kingdom. She was in my way, so I had to dispose of her. But to be frank, I only won by pure luck.”

Of course he did.

Azureyfeare was an expert sniper who was more comfortable wielding an anti-materiel rifle than a tennis racket and she had forced herself to board an Object despite not being a Pilot Elite. She was like a beautiful manifestation of war. Sladder never would have stood a chance in a fair firefight.

Which meant he had not fought fair. He would only need a momentary opening. Some kind of dirty trick that would get her to pause.

“She is obsessed with that brother of hers, so I only had to tell her I could remotely detonate the lithium battery of the mobile device in his breast pocket. Such a silly bluff and she still fell for it. Frankly, I was flabbergasted it bought me two whole seconds.”

“Sladder...”

“Technology is to be used. Anyone who lets it use them has no future. You should know that as a future engineer yourself.”

“You’re not using it; you’re abusing it. You’re a disgrace to the field of engineering.”

Now Quenser had a reason to kill him.

That just left finding a way to do so. Fortunately, he had an idea already.

Elina’s small hand tugged on his coat.

“Is Sladder Honeysuckle really behind this war using the Ghost Changer? But how? I understand why he would want to defect, but how could he have been involved in an Information Alliance secret weapon while in prison?”

“You can make a good guess, can’t you?” said Sladder.

“Your cell had a window. I believe you said the combination of the damp, cracked wall and the sunlight allowed some small flowers to grow,” said Quenser. “And one barred window is all you would need to exchange information and materials with a flying drone. You drew up the plans in your cell, folded up the paper, and handed it over to the Information Alliance drone. And thus the Ghost Changer was born. That’s how the add-on weapon built by the Information Alliance was really a toy created to help you break out of prison. Isn’t that right?”

“Well done.”

Sladder was not remotely shaken.

He was creepier than a vengeful ghost.

“Zero-g life leads to hallucinations. When people are thrown out into the vacuum of space wearing a perfectly sealed spacesuit, they can still panic after thinking they smell the burning grease from a nearby wire.

“So you had already planned for the 37th to be involved?”

“Yes, but I couldn’t be certain it would happen. That was more the result of coincidence than a plan. I had predicted the 37th would be involved to an extent, but I never really cared about Elina Silverbullet. Any battlefield would have worked as long as the Ghost Changer was there.”

The focus of this entire battle had been a lie.

All the death and destruction was a great vortex spiraling around Sladder, not Elina. And once you knew the truth, so much clicked into place.

“The Legitimacy Kingdom wanted as much help as they could get to fight back against the mysterious Ghost Changer, but they did not want to kill off their own valuable scientists and engineers,” said Sladder. “It wasn’t hard to predict they would choose to use any foreign prisoners with a PhD.”

“Which is why the Ghost Changer didn’t just attack the Legitimacy Kingdom. Your jailbreak was the primary goal, so if the Information Alliance here interfered with that, you were willing to sacrifice them as well.”

“I may have given them too sweet a prize up front. The Information Alliance decided protecting the Ghost Changer’s secret was more important than securing my intellect. The fools should have known that was only a sideshow before the main event. I swear this world just will not let me research mass drivers in peace.”

“So,” cut in Quenser.

He had seen a radio thrown to the floor and a flare gun buried in the snow, but who was it the soldiers had been trying unsuccessfully to contact?

“The first one to be driven mad by the Ghost Changer was the Retro Gunner’s Pilot Elite, wasn’t it? The truth of this battle was no different from the one in the Hornos District: friendly fire.”

They had seen so many crushed, mutilated, and burned Legitimacy Kingdom corpses.

Normal flames couldn't do that. Turning a corpse to wax apparently required spending months or even years below the thick snow.

The mincemeat on the rock and organs in the tree had not frozen in the -15 degree weather, so they had concluded something had crept up disturbingly close by without any of them noticing.

The ghost of the Tunguska District could defy the laws of physics to kill and even steal away the passage of time.

So did that mean no one could explain what had happened there?

"Don't make me laugh. You can make wax with fat and hydrogenated oil. It can be industrially created. You don't need to spend months cut off from all oxygen. For example, the human body will absorb the hydrogen from the air and turn to wax when under around a million atmospheres of pressure."

"Oh," gasped Elina.

"An Object cannon can do that easily enough. The metal shell fired by a railgun or coilgun will kill you instantly even if it doesn't directly hit you. The thick wall of air creates a massive amount of pressure, so the corpse isn't going to be in a pretty state. That carbonized corpse may have been considerably shorter than the poor bastard was in life."

"B-but we would have noticed if the Retro Gunner had fired!" protested Elina. "The bodies there hadn't frozen, but a wet towel will freeze solid in less than a minute outside."

"Elina, I'm sure you run into wild animals living out here in the mountains, but have you ever held a tranquilizer gun?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"The ones that don't use a needle apply great pressure to the target's skin with a gas so they will absorb the liquid tranquilizer. And there are plenty of liquids found in nature that don't freeze even at 15 below. For a close-to-home example, tea seed oil's freezing point is about 20 below. Now I wish I'd brought that plant guide we found in the Information Alliance maintenance base. I'm sure there are other examples in the conifer trees around here."

"Wait...high pressure?"

"The Object shell landed near the soldier, hitting them with a shockwave and sending plant sap and

juices piercing into their body. Once their body is full of a liquid with a lower freezing point, their corpse and organs won't freeze even at 15 below. Those Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were killed and splattered across the area well before we arrived, but the high-pressure injection made their flesh and blood 'hard to freeze', so they still hadn't frozen when we got there. That's all there was to it. We didn't find a crater either, but I'm guessing the blizzard had just covered it up. It wasn't birds of prey that carried the organs into the tree branches, nor was it a ghost. An Object blast splattered them, sending their organs into the air."

No time had been stolen. The wax corpse and the unfrozen organs could all be explained with the high pressures caused by a railgun.

At the time, Sladder had repeatedly rejected every idea anyone came up with.

He had pretended to be offering his expertise, but he had really been nipping all of Quenser's ideas in the bud. He kept hinting at the alternative theories behind the Tunguska event, but he had never provided anything solid. Almost like he was intentionally sowing confusion and panic to more easily control the situation.

That led to another answer.

What had caused the other slaughter at the Information Alliance maintenance base zone?

"We never even needed to consider the old Tunguska event legend. They were blown away by railguns and roasted by laser beams when the Retro Gunner went nuts. Friendly fire explains it all."

"Friendly fire?" parroted the 9-year-old girl in disbelief. "But the Ghost Changer was a special grease that intentionally grinded and burnt out the Object's joints to create a subtle smell, right? The Object's cockpit is airtight, so how could the smell reach the pilot!?"

"Elina, do you detect a rusty odor?"

"Eh? ...N-now that you mention it. But of course I do after all the lives that were lost around here."

"I see. But that smell isn't real. There are no corpses or bloodstains here."

Her shock was understandable, but it was true.

"Our sense of smell is easily influenced by our imagination. The idea of blood smelling rusty is only an imaginary link between the color red and rust. There is iron in blood, but that isn't the same as rust and there isn't enough of it to detect a smell anyway. Well, at least it's a more plausible idea than trying to take a 'blood-curdling scream' literally. Besides, how often do you even smell rust in your everyday life? The grease's scent didn't actually need to reach the cockpit. As long as the Elite saw it, knew what it was supposed to do, and could imagine it vividly enough, they would 'smell it'

just like that rusty smell you noticed just now.”

Explaining the weapon to the Pilot Elite operating it had made the problem even worse.

In a way, that was more frightening than the actual chemical substance used for the Ghost Changer. You would need the kind of detailed personal data only found through counseling or profiling and your method would need to be finetuned for the individual, but that would create a verbal weapon that truly left no evidence behind. If Sladder Honeysuckle had focused on assassinating VIPs instead of direct warfare, he might have transformed into a ghost capable of always destroying his target.

“Breaking down the established theory, huh? You sure love doing that. But don’t forget that an Object is full of communications equipment. Sladder, I don’t know whose corpse you stole that gear from, but the Retro Gunner would have picked up your transmissions if you pretended to be Information Alliance. That means you could have pushed the Pilot Elite to their psychological limits by making up some phony report.”

What you could do and what you wanted to do were not the same thing.

That had always been what made this genius suffer so much.

“So what now?” asked Sladder. “Did you think I was going to give up on life and throw myself from the cliff now that you had revealed my trick? The battle only truly begins once the threat has been identified and that is what my sniper rifle is for.”

“There is no escape for you.”

“Quenser Barbotage. I am well aware of your specs.”

“...”

“And you have no means of killing me from a range of 200m. Are you going to stuff explosives in a metal tube to build a mortar? Or are you going to load a plastic explosive on a large bottle rocket? Or perhaps apply a thin layer of explosives to the inside of parabolic antenna to build a directional mine?”

The boy clicked his tongue. He hated to admit it, but that man was the better engineer. Quenser was only a designer in training while Sladder was a top-rate professional.

“You can’t do it. If you were alone, you may have attempted a reckless last-ditch effort, but you can’t bring yourself to attempt a risky adlibbed weapon with that 9-year-old girl with you. None of that has been on the table ever since Elina Silverbullet entered the picture. And when safe and reliable options are all you have left, you are no more than an amateur. ...Thus, I can shoot you from a position of safety. And I will if you insist on standing in the way of my mass driver research.”

"Is that so?" Quenser smiled in self-deprecation while pressed against the backside of the tree. Sladder was exactly right on all counts. "I get using the confusion to fake your death and leave the battlefield. With so many mutilated corpses, no one's going to bother to identify them all. But what are you going to do about the Retro Gunner? If the Pilot Elite is still running wild after seeing the ghost, you could always be killed. Not even your genius plotting can do anything about that. And the odds of it happening seem greater than being struck by lightning while outdoors."

"Why would I tell you that?"

"So you do have some trick keeping it from attacking you."

Steal that and they could settle things with the Retro Gunner. Carrying a trump card that kept the Object from attacking would allow the Legitimacy Kingdom to go on the attack without fearing the old First Generation.

That meant Quenser's top priority was Sladder Honeysuckle who had all the answers.

He had to kill that man to pave the way for everything else.

"By the way, Sladder, didn't you say you shot Azurefear Winchell since she was in the way of your jailbreak?"

"I did say that."

"And you said you used a silly bluff to kill her since she was so much more skilled than you. You said you got that sister to freeze up for just a moment because you lied about detonating the mobile device by Heivia's chest."

"Yes, and?"

"Here's the thing." Quenser kept his tone light while he held Elina close and pressed his back against the tree. "You seem to be getting a hard-on over how badly you outplayed everyone, but I haven't encrypted this radio. Every radio on both sides can read this signal. And, Sladder, you seem to think you played a perfect game using both sides to your advantage, but was your control of the board really as flawless as you thought?"

"?"

"So."

This was war.

Had Sladder really thought Quenser's actions here were entirely meaningless?

"What do you think is going to happen to you if the very-much-alive Big Bro Heivia and your own sister Louisiana hear all this and track you down using your GPS signal?"

Sladder Honeysuckle unnaturally crumpled to the ground before Quenser even heard the gunshot.

It took a moment before the sound of bursting explosives arrived from the side.

This kind of dirty war really was more Heivia's thing. Sladder had missed while using a sniper rifle packed full of sensors, but Heivia had accurately shot right through his target's thigh during a snowy night. He would only have been able to see silhouettes through the snow, but he could identify his target from the sniper rifle Sladder himself had said he had.

The mass driver engineer's strong will could be seen in how he refused to let go of the sniper rifle even now.

But then his hand and the sniper rifle's grip were destroyed by another shot.

He curled up in agony on the snow while someone else trudged toward him. It was Louisiana holding her small self-defense handgun.

"You absolute disgrace!! Using your tech for the public good is the bare minimum required of a genius to avoid being labeled an eccentric. But you sold it off for your personal gain, so you don't even deserve to live!!"

"Heivia, restrain her! We can't kill him yet! He still has a countermeasure against the Retro Gunner!!"

While Sladder had tried to build a mass driver for his own purposes, Louisiana had constructed her space elevator to protect everyone on the earth.

Quenser didn't need to hide any longer.

He was still on the lookout for mines or bombs buried in the snow, but he doubted Sladder would have stuck with the sniper rifle then. Sladder was a strategist. If he had plenty of mines around him, he would have rolled around in pain after the initial shot to the leg, luring Heivia in to step on one of the mines.

He didn't need any help to stop the bleeding.

At 15 below, his bloody wound would freeze on its own.

Quenser, Heivia, Louisiana, and Elina - the survivors of the ghost panic - surrounded him and he weakly looked up at them with a bullet hole in his hand and leg.

"There is an antidote."

"I thought as much. The sense of smell is said to be 20 thousand times more powerful than taste, but it's also very delicate since mixing different compounds easily changes their nature entirely. Perfume and artificial fragrances would be the best examples of that. ...You couldn't let yourself be affected by the ghost while out here, but you weren't wearing a gasmask or a hazmat suit to cover all your skin. That meant you must have another chemical compound that negates its effects."

For the Retro Gunner, it might be even simpler. The Elite was only imaging the smell due to their knowledge of the Ghost Changer, so tearing down that mental image would be enough to bring them back under control.

Quenser crouched down and stuck his hand in the neck of Sladder's prisoner uniform. He tore something away. The man had worn it around his neck like a good-luck charm, but it actually contained a mixture of a few herbal leaves and flower petals.

Hadn't he said some small flowers grew in his prison cell?

The human nose couldn't detect it, but it wasn't meant to be smelled with the nose.

"A sachet, huh? Pretty romantic, but it doesn't suit you at all."

"That's where you're wrong. All engineers should be romantics. Even if no one else understands them."

Quenser could never agree with that.

Maybe this man was the ultimate form of a designer, but he had gone in a different direction than the boy was interested in.

"What will you do with me now?"

"I don't know and frankly I don't care what happens to you," said Quenser, slowly straightening his knees to stand up. Almost like he had lost interest in Sladder. "So I'm going to make a bet with you. And I promise you, I will accept either outcome."

“?”

“If.”

Quenser brought his usual radio to his mouth. But who was he talking to? His plan to use an unencrypted signal to share information with Heivia and Louisiana had already paid off.

But Quenser was definitely speaking to someone other than Sladder.

“If you really are dead, then no one will deliver a killing blow to Sladder. But if you aren’t quite dead, then I’d say you have a right to revenge. So it’s your choice. I will leave this all up to fate.”

Sladder seemed to finally understand what this was about.

Quenser and Heivia turned their backs on the villain. Louisiana proved to be surprisingly kindhearted since she gently covered Elina’s eyes. She looked back toward her brother just once, but her duty as a researcher must have won out. She tore her gaze from him and followed the potatoes with Elina.

And Quenser, Heivia, and Louisiana spoke in unison.

“My money is on Azurefear being alive.”

Wherever she had heard them from, an anti-materiel rifle fired in the distance and a life was snuffed out faster than the speed of sound.

Part 12

“The Information Alliance’s Retro Gunner has sent the white flag signal. The pilot must have regained enough of their senses to realize they destroyed their own maintenance base.”

“I see,” replied Frolaytia when the electronic simulation division operator gave that report. Their “verbal countermeasure” had actually worked. Although the end of Sladder’s interference may have been what really mattered. “What about the Ghost Changer?”

“Did you not read the old maintenance lady’s report? The joints have completely burned out, so we can’t extract and analyze any of the special grease. That was probably their last way to resist before surrendering.”

“...Probably for the best.”

Even if there was an antidote, the rules of war would finally collapse altogether if the Legitimacy Kingdom copied that weapon and every side started using it against each other.

Losses had been heavy this time.

If Elina Silverbullet's claim was accurate, then the 37th had been sent to an unwinnable war solely to kill both Louisiana and Elina. And all four world powers had been behind that decision. That meant Frolaytia's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion had been stabbed in the back by the Legitimacy Kingdom.

(They want to eliminate anyone who questions the clean wars. In that case, they might see the 37th as a target too.)

Being so stupidly honest in the report she had sent to her higher ups weighed heavy on her now. Doing her job properly had only made things worse. Apparently, she was a little too used to her role as a civil servant.

But if they were a target, there were ways of using that.

At the very least, she had to consider it a good thing that she had confirmation and wouldn't be foolishly attacking her higher ups based on delusions or misplaced frustration.

The next step was to counterattack.

Frolaytia Capistrano was not obedient enough to just accept this situation and die needlessly.

"Quenser. Heivia too. I want to corroborate Elina Silverbullet's claim. You were there, so I want your help."

"What exactly do you want?"

"First, tell me about Unit X at the log cabin. Elina says they were former Faith Organization soldiers. As you could guess from the Capitalist Corporations sniper rifles - and the winning Technopics model at that - they're an illegal organization that needs to hide its identity. They call themselves a mercenary company, but there is no real word for them other than terrorists. They were kicked out of the military for promoting the theory that Objects are destroying the environment, so they plotted this mission to have their revenge."

Frolaytia could not hide her irritation and gnawed on the mouth of her kiseru. She hadn't known what she was doing when she submitted that report, but she felt like she was viewing the future of her own battalion.

However, there was one crucial difference between the 37th and Unit X.

Quenser picked up the explanation for her.

“Unit X used to be the Electric Drills, an unofficial internal auditing division of the Faith Organization military. They would correct any misdeeds discovered in the military and ‘drill holes’ in the figurative rotting walls...but their name is suspiciously similar to the Chain Cutters who caused us so much trouble in the Legitimacy Kingdom. I didn’t notice it before since they were only working behind the scenes.”

“That’s probably how they do things,” said Heivia. “X has secured forces all around the world to fight back against the joint will of the four world powers, but they don’t train up their own soldiers and send them in undercover. They remotely corrupt a unit that’s already established in enemy territory and reeducate them. They’re online terrorists. As long as they’re clever with words, they can inject their ideology in people and gain an endless supply of active-duty soldiers, so they can gain a top-rate fighting force a lot cheaper and faster than building their own training ground and training their own professionals there. They can also skip the process of sneaking their people into the enemy country and setting up fake identities and lives for them. ...The Electric Drills were just one such group that was discovered in Faith Organization territory and had to leave.”

The Chain Cutters had readily attacked civilian doctors to cut off the shipping routes. That might seem horrific at first, but they may have had their own justification for it. Maybe they thought it was necessary to cut off the supplies and thus end all Object activity in an area with a vulnerable tectonic plate.

Not that it mattered.

Not even the greatest justification would bring the dead civilians back to life.

Frolaytia breathed out some sweet smoke.

“X. Or as they’re also known, Bad Garage,” she said.

“They apparently contacted Elina because they wanted scientific backing of their claims,” said Quenser. “The environmental destruction by Objects theory can still be found in certain corners of the internet, but someone out there has been ensuring it’s only seen as some crackpot theory. So Elina said they wanted to ‘rebut the rebuttal’ with actual numerical data and a scientific paper to back them up.”

“Would the world powers really just give up after that? Like with the Chain Cutters and Electric Drills, Bad Garage had infiltrated the militaries to set up their own people in enemy territory, so they were clearly planning something bigger than that.”

With that, their busy silver-haired commander tossed an investigation report from the intelligence division onto the table and fanned out the pages.

“This is what the criminal underworld has been up to lately. There’s the usual best sellers like drugs, weapons, and slaves, but something curious has jumped to the top of the list: counterfeit IDs. Some idiots have been buying up a massive amount of top-quality counterfeits at the asking price. They’ll be entering the country as museum curators in the name of restoring damaged artwork.”

“Are you saying we know Bad Garage’s next target?”

“They made a mistake trying to enter the country disguised as a group of government workers. Citizen’s groups always go over government spending with a fine-toothed comb and government workers wouldn’t split their group up over different trains and cars. That would have raised some alarm bells. So the key to all of this is a large bus belonging to Zodiac Tourism.”

“So you’re saying we just have to track the bus they rented in order to disguise themselves?”

“Exactly. They must want to show as many people as possible that the Objects really are destroying the earth’s environment. And if possible, they want to ensure not even a joint effort by the four world powers can cover it up.” Frolaytia spoke in a singsong voice as she looked ahead to the next battlefield. “So their best bet is to deliver a devastating blow to the world powers in the process.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I can’t imagine I’ll like the answer.”

If having a bad feeling come true made you a prophet, then the entire human race was made up of prophets.

So Heivia’s displeased look was answered with a nod from Frolaytia.

“The Tiber District. Rome.”

“...”

“Needless to say, that is the Faith Organization’s home country. If a devastating disaster hits that densely-populated city where you can’t take two steps without running into a cross, the people will have no choice but to believe in the environmental destruction by Objects theory, the higher ups won’t be able to cover it up any longer, and the collusion between the world powers will be torn to shreds. ...No phrase has torn apart friendships more than this one: why should I be the only one to suffer?”

Intermission

Once the ingredients arrived, the rest was easy.

The process was not all that difficult.

“Hm, hm, hm, hm.”

The Princess hummed quietly to herself while she worked.

The Pilot Elite living quarters were kept separate from the general barracks. She had a bathroom, bath, and kitchen here. But she had never been picky about food, so she had mostly just used the freezer and microwave.

But today she had courageously chosen to take a step outside her comfort zone.

The recipe sites had all tried to scare her by talking about how difficult the process of double boiling was for homemade chocolate, but she had discovered they made a convenient product that did it for you. It looked like one bowl sitting inside another and you only had to pour water in between the two bowls and plug it in. Then the heating element would heat the water to the perfect temperature. It was a cheap-looking set made of plastic which reminded her of a hand crank ice cream maker. It looked kind of childish, but when there was a safe and easy walking path up the mountain, there was no need to grab your ice axe and scale the sheer rock face.

Three cheers for online shopping.

She had pretty much everything she might need, from the ingredients to the tools.

She couldn't believe the package had arrived on the designated day way out here in the remote Tunguska District of Siberia. The delivery man's dedication to his work was truly impressive.

(I arbitrarily decided on chocolate ice cream, but is that really the best choice?)

She thought on that for a while, but that was just one of her many ideas. It wasn't something she had dedicated herself to doing.

In the Island Nation, it was apparently important to give a present of chocolate on February 14.

She had lost a lot of allies during the battle against the Retro Gunner...or against the Ghost Changer really. But it wasn't the 37th's style to let that get you down. Mourning the dead was fine, but carrying that weight around would only get you killed as well. So to keep yourself in top mental condition, it was important to enjoy some cheerful events during difficult times.

The double boiling set had come with a few different molds. The heart shape was too embarrassing for her, but the square made it look too much like a piece of an industrial chocolate bar, which brought into question why she had bothered making her own. She expressionlessly groaned in

thought before grabbing one of the plastic molds. It was an ordinary circular one, but it looked vaguely Object-ish to her.

Cuteness was all about curves.

Chicks and kittens were mostly round.

“Quenser is always breathing heavily when he stares at the Baby Magnum, so he must like round things too.”

While guessing at his tastes on a level as generalized as “do you prefer the north pole or the south pole”, she placed the chocolate-filled mold in the fridge. According to the manual she had found by scanning the 2D code into her mobile device, the device was made to cool the contents to the entered temperature as efficiently as possible.

It would take time for the chocolate to fully harden.

She had prepared a few different types of wrapping paper and ribbons, but the different combinations would provide very different impressions. She could use this time to think through all of them one by one.

She felt like she was making good use of the limited free time she was given between missions.

(I should go check on Quenser. That might give me a hint for the wrapping.)

That sounded like a good idea to her.

So Milinda Brantini exhaled through her shapely nose and left her special living quarters.

However.

She came to a stop in one corner of the maintenance base.

She hung her head all alone as she heard the words spoken on the other side of the door.

“The environmental destruction by Objects theory can still be found in certain corners of the internet.”

The words were spoken by Quenser Barbotage of all people.

Intentionally or not, he had never mentioned that topic when she was around. Now that kindness stabbed cruelly into her like a knife.

Yes.

That meant the theory had to be true.

“But someone out there has been ensuring it’s only seen as some crackpot theory. So Elina said they wanted to ‘rebut the rebuttal’ with actual numerical data and a scientific paper to back them up.”

Her entire life was built on a lie.

That harmful lie was the only thing giving her a place in this world.

“...”

She stood there thinking.

She bit her lip.

And she silently slipped away.

<http://tl.rulate.ru/book/5253/1909688>