

Chapter 4: Thus Spoke the End >> *No Mission Name Set Due to Confusion in the Chain of Command

Part 1

How long did Quenser Barbotage stand there staring?

A few minutes?

A few hours?

Looking to the big clock didn't help since it was scorched and the hands had stopped.

Everything was black and orange.

Rome had been so full of world heritage sites, but now it was submerged in a sea of lava erupting straight up from the cracks in the pavement. The Faith Organization's home country had been destroyed. This marked the end of an era and symbolized the collapse of the global power balance.

It was beginning.

There was no going back to the clean wars now. This was an endless global war that would continue until all four world powers were gone. It was a world war.

But Quenser Barbotage could not just stare forever.

Time was passing.

A stained glass window shattered overhead, sending colorful shards raining down toward the boy. Even a historical building or work of fine art would be transformed into a downpour of blades when falling from sufficient height.

Quenser was wearing some rough casual clothing to blend in, so he wasn't protected from embers and shards as much as in his military uniform.

"Kh!!"

He grabbed the nearby small child's hand and crawled below a wooden bench. A moment later, they were surrounded by too many sounds to count.

He shouted out from below the bench.

“How are the train passengers!? Was anyone hurt!?”

“They went back into the tunnel, so they’re fine!! You worry about yourself, Quenser!! These people are civilians, so the Faith Organization police will protect them if we leave them here. ...The problem is us. The Faith Organization has already declared war. Who knows what kind of justifications they’re using, so they might just treat us like mass shooters without evidence. If it gets out that we’re Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers, the angry masses might just hang us from the roadside trees!!”

Heivia Winchell, Myonri, and Putana Highball were here too.

Millia Newburg from the intelligence division was in Rome as well, but she had gotten separated from them. Unfortunately, it didn’t look like they would be able to get everyone out of the city like this.

Quenser crawled out from under the bench, still holding the boy he had rescued. He of course had to watch out for the glass shards as he did so.

(God, saving people is just not worth it.)

Just then...

“Eek! Kidnapper! Those Legitimacy Kingdom murderers are snatching children off the streets!!”

The false accusations were already beginning.

(I’m not in uniform, so how’d she know I’m Legitimacy Kingdom!? My clothes? The scent of my hair? My mannerisms? I don’t know, but it’s a good reminder that Rome is enemy territory!!)

A dangerous change came over the crowd’s mood. It wasn’t that they all heroically wanted to save a strange child. When subjected to an inexplicable disaster, people wanted to locate and attack some kind of cause or villain.

“Dammit!!”

“Heivia, they’re civilians!! This isn’t war!!”

Quenser couldn’t believe how hollow his words sounded. Was that argument even valid anymore? It was like seeing an old TV ad from a time before a major disaster struck.

If Heivia and Myonri hadn’t held out their T-shaped submachineguns, the murderous crowd of civilians probably would have started firing. Yes, soldiers weren’t the only ones with guns.

They had reached a dangerous stalemate.

The tingling on their skin was from more than just the lava's heat carried on the wind.

But it didn't last long.

"Oh, no."

The first to notice was Putana. Her pupils constricted and her face paled.

Quenser heard a deep grinding sound approaching.

"Are you kidding me? These eyes...run away, everyone!!!!!"

The 8-wheel armored truck that charged in from the side ran over the Faith Organization civilians by the dozen.

It was utter pandemonium.

The Faith Organization military had put defeating their enemy over protecting their people. What were they even fighting for at this point? What did they hope to leave behind?

The Faith Organization armored truck approached with its beautiful feet and skirt coated with red and black gore. The groans of the people who hadn't quite died were drowned out by the humming of a motor as the 120mm gun on top of the truck rotated to aim at the Legitimacy Kingdom group.

The gun's specs were the same as a tank gun.

"Goddammit!!"

Quenser picked up the boy and ran into a narrow alley just before an explosive roar filled the world outside. Heivia had said to leave the tourists behind because they would be protected, but the young boy would have been obliterated along with that church's wall if Quenser had followed that advice.

That armored truck was in charge out there and it was so focused on killing its enemies that it had lost sight of its allies.

The recoil of the shot must have slid it to the side, killing even more of the civilians it had run over. Although to the ones caught in the 8 wheels, half crushed but unable to actually die, the dead ones may have seemed like the lucky ones.

"Don't look. Don't look at any of it. This is just a bad dream, so you don't have to look at it."

Quenser's head ached from the close-range gunshot. He ran deeper into the alley with the small boy in his arms and he also radioed the others.

"Heivia, Myonri, Putana, are you still alive? We need to meet up somewhere. Check the color of the sky. The lava shouldn't have erupted quite as much to the east, so head that way!!"

There was no response.

He prayed they had at least heard him as he made his way to their rendezvous point.

The boy in his arms asked the most fundamental question.

He must have been oversaturated with emotions because he sounded weirdly calm.

"Is it over?"

"Don't worry. I swear to you I'll get you out of here. I won't abandon you, so there's nothing at all to worry about."

Quenser was not at all confident in what he was saying.

And that lie revealed itself even sooner than he had feared.

He held his breath at the alley's exit while a bunch of Faith Organization soldiers marched down the street with bayonet-equipped assault rifles. Once they were gone, he turned back the way he had come, hoping to find another way around.

That was when the stone wall exploded and a mass of composite armor burst into the alley, blocking the way.

It was that armored truck. He had no idea what kind of shortcut it had taken and he noticed a stuffed rabbit caught in its bloodstained 8-wheel undercarriage.

...How could they carry such hate in their hearts?

Quenser honestly didn't get it. It sounded exhausting. He knew militaries came in many different forms, but what good were they if they prioritized killing the enemy over protecting the people they held dear? That didn't sound sustainable unless the soldiers enjoyed the killing itself and everything else was just an excuse.

He heard the humming of the motor turning the gun his way.

That was when static came from his radio.

“Ksshh! Burning Alpha here. Hey there, little knight, do you have an anti-friendly fire card on you? If not, then I’ll mark your radio signal as friendly. Keep transmitting on a safe bandwidth, hold that kid tight, and keep your head down.”

Quenser had no idea what this was about, but his understanding wasn’t necessary.

A Legitimacy Kingdom delta wing fighter shot by overhead.

A moment later, the smart bomb that separated from the bottom of its wing accurately blew away the 8-wheel armored truck.

He was outside the range of the blast, but the invisible shockwave still hit him like a solid wall.

He was knocked backwards with the small boy in his arms. He found himself a few meters away from where he thought he was, which just showed how far he had flown.

“Cough!! Cough cough!?”

He was coughing hard, but he was more worried about the boy than himself.

“A-are you okay? You weren’t hit by any shrapnel, were you? Good.”

(But this is the Faith Organization’s home country. How is one of our planes flying here!?)

“Burning Alpha to my virtuous Legitimacy Kingdom brother. Your rendezvous point is outside Tiburtina Station. Get there now if you don’t want to be stuck at the back of the line. Especially when you have that kid with you. Don’t forget that this is a battlefield and the odds of death rise by the minute.”

“...”

Quenser walked through the burning and smoking city of Rome while holding the boy’s hand. The air support was perfect. He had a gun aimed at him a few times along the way, but each time a 40mm Gatling gun or missile from the sky accurately eliminated the threat. The fighter must have been using specialized ground attack equipment.

No distinction was made between the Faith Organization soldiers, powered suits, and armed

civilians.

Of course, his ally was really only interested in protecting the child.

One person was torn to pieces by a stream of bullets and another was transformed into a living pillar of fire. One person couldn't bear the pain and jumped into a river of lava while dragging along something dangling from their ruptured gut. ...Quenser had expected that to result in an instant death, but the actual result was very much not that.

"Why is this hap-"

"Don't look!! Listen, I'll hold your hand and guide you, so just close your eyes. Then we can escape all this scary stuff!!"

How was he a hero?

The most he could do was hold the trembling boy and cover his eyes. He was a frail and pathetic liar without any ability to influence this war.

This was happening because his team had failed to stop it.

Of course, they had been pursuing a decoy into the subway tunnel and there hadn't been any way for them to stop it. He was honestly relieved once the fighter flew elsewhere.

Right up until he heard a quiet metallic sound.

Someone was aiming his way through the dark smoke.

It really didn't seem to matter he wasn't in uniform. An outsider like him stuck out like a sore thumb.

"!?"

Soaked in sweat, he tried to protect the small boy, but the gunshot and pain he expected never came. He was surprised to find himself taking that action since he thought of himself as more inappropriate and disorderly.

He hesitantly opened his eyes to see a familiar face nearby.

It was the local commander of the Faith Organization police special forces known as the Valkyries.

Her name was Sarasa Gleamshifter.

She wore a tight-fitting black combat outfit with add-on parts resembling lingerie.

Her gun was a short-range sniper rifle with an awfully big caliber for its compact size. The cool woman with short blonde hair aimed that at Quenser and the boy and clicked her tongue like she had found something she didn't want to find. Whether that meant Quenser or the small boy was unclear.

She had control here. With Rome in this state, she would have a hard time finding a reason not to shoot an enemy soldier.

(I don't have time to pull out a bomb and insert a fuse. I can't beat her. But can I shove her out of the way? Could I at least get this kid to the alley right over there?)

His pulse rang loud in his ears.

Time remained stubbornly frozen. It felt like making any move on his part would cause everything to collapse around him, so he couldn't even bring himself to construct a ridiculous plan in his head. Which meant the fool couldn't protect the life in his arms.

And eventually...

"Go," said Sarasa.

Quenser blinked in confusion as the Valkyrie commander aimed her gun upwards and stepped aside to clear the way.

She gestured behind her with her shapely chin.

"Take that kid and get out of here! If the others see this, I'll have no choice but to shoot you!!"

Propelled by her voice, Quenser pulled on the boy's hand and took off running. Sarasa intended to remain in this hell. When he took a hesitant look back, his eardrums were struck by a warning shot fired into the air.

Running full speed with the small boy in tow was his only option.

Toxically bright lemon yellow smoke was rising from Tiburtina Station. That would be a smoke grenade. That was their rendezvous point and tiltrotors capable of carrying trucks were currently landing, their rotors loudly beating at the air. The people gathered there weren't in uniform, but

they had to all be Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. They didn't have insignia or dog tags to identify themselves while undercover, so they were instead holding up their mobile devices to a device that read its registration data.

A blonde beauty wearing a hoodie and tight pants over a bikini waved her full arm his way.

"Over here, Quenser!"

"Millia."

"Who's the kid? Not that it matters. Just get over here. Looks like I've got a lot of praise to give you, but this place is far from safe. Get onboard!!"

Obeying the instructions that the blonde intelligence division woman shouted over the din of the two giant rotors, Quenser and the boy boarded one of the midsize VTOL transport crafts. After around 30 people poured in, it lifted from the ground before the cargo door was even closed. He couldn't tell if Heivia, Myonri, and Putana were on the same tiltrotor as him. He was also surprised to find so many Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers had been in Rome.

The aircraft wobbled to the side and rapidly gained altitude.

Quenser realized he had been wandering Rome for a long time. It was already night time. Dark smoke had covered everything and he had been too focused on the hell below to notice the change in the sky's color overhead.

The view down from the open door was hell itself.

The orange lava and black smoke had taken over, leaving none of the colors of the white marble world heritage sites. And millions of people were still trapped in that hell.

But he didn't have time to get sentimental.

A trail of white smoke shot up from the surface. A surface-to-air missile flew directly past them and struck one of the other tiltrotors. The metal manatee stuffed full of Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers ruptured from within and fell back toward the Roman hell as burning scraps.

This wasn't calculated.

Even the slightest difference and that would have hit Quenser's tiltrotor instead.

The friendly craft drew a streak of dark smoke as it dropped to the ground 400m below and

exploded. But instead of mounting a rescue, gunfire rang out from below. The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers still on the surface must have surrounded the missile launch point and opened fire. After several explosions, the school being used as a hideout collapsed. A school, usually a symbol of safety, had been destroyed to get at a single killer.

Why did everyone so happily flock toward the killing?

Quenser knew the odds were slim, but wasn't there something they could have done before revenge?

He covered the boy's eyes with a hand and spat out a few words.

"This is wrong."

Part 2

The tiltrotor escaped westward, flying just above the ocean surface. Once they crossed the Mediterranean, it was only a short flight to the Legitimacy Kingdom's Normandy District, which meant their home country of Paris.

But they could not celebrate. That showed just how close they still were to the furious Faith Organization's headquarters. Rome and Paris were only about 1000km apart. Everything here was packed into a distance only about half the length of the small Island Nation floating in the Asian sea. If their defensive line fell, Second Generation Objects might rush in all at once. After all, those things could perform high-speed mobility at 500-600km/h. A single open seam could cause it all to fall apart.

The clean wars had protected them from all this.

Nothing was designed for a true battle between home countries.

"So what's your name?"

"...Carat Affinity."

Quenser pulled out a large, eraser-like ration, broke it in two, and handed the boy half.

"Okay, Carat. Are you hungry? You should eat while you have the chance."

"What is this? It has no flavor."

"Good, I'm not the only one that thinks that."

Quenser smiled a little and some other soldiers gathered around. A lot of them had red stains on their undercover clothing or bandages and makeshift splints on their arms, but they all wanted to help look after the kid. Some even showed the small boy a magic trick with a coin or how to fold some complex origami with exhausted smiles on their faces. They may have wanted to keep their hearts from being corrupted by this new age by reminding themselves of the goodness there. Quenser himself felt Carat's presence had saved him in that hell. Without that young boy trusting in the existence of heroes, Quenser may have already started down the path of killing. And if that had happened, he doubted he would be on this tiltrotor now.

(Heivia, Myonri, and Putana aren't here. They did get away, didn't they?)

He felt his weight tilting to the side. The tiltrotor had just turned off of its straight-line course.

He thought he saw a lightning-like flash tear apart the sky and then an escort fighter that had joined them was sliced through by a laser beam. With the alarm belatedly blaring, Millia Newburg grabbed the receiver on the wall and shouted at the pilot through it.

"Why the hell are we flying this high? Stop getting scared and bring us down now! Aerial refueling? That can wait! We're in an Object's anti-air zone. We're screwed if we don't have a mountain to shield us!!"

The Faith Organization had begun their attack. The Alps defensive line was starting to fall and the Legitimacy Kingdom forces were falling back to their secondary defensive line further north. No aircraft could survive when in range of an Object's anti-air lasers.

Quenser spotted a familiar silhouette.

"That's the Princess."

The main cannon on the very edge shook like a wiper, perhaps to mimic a wave.

The Baby Magnum was not alone.

The Faith Organization's Second Generation Zombie Powder and Blast Samurai were already crossing the Alps. Millia had said they needed a mountain, but it looked more like they needed to put the horizon between them and those Objects or they would be shot down at the speed of light.

(We can't let the Princess know it was the Objects' presence there that caused that disaster.)

Once they moved inland from the Mediterranean, he could feel the tension gradually fading. Paris did not have a unique defense network like the Information Alliance's Manhattan or the Faith Organization's Rome did. They only had three layers of simple but powerful defensive lines constructed around their home country. He could see the wheat fields, the vineyards, and the thick

transport routes spread out like a spider web. Those eight-lane highways were large for farm roads and were designed to allow a 50m Object through. To allow for that, they had no real median and there were no streetlights on the sides.

Strange and unique systems tended to cause unexpected errors once they were actually used.

To protect what truly mattered, it was better to trust in the tried-and-true methods.

It was simple – extremely simple – but would that simplicity get the job done in this new world war? Quenser wasn't confident. After what had happened to Rome, he had no idea what they could even do to make him feel safe. Had the people at the top really designed the defense system with a situation like this in mind?

"If you're still alive, then listen up!!"

After their tiltrotor landed in a vineyard on the outskirts of Paris, Major Frolaytia Capistrano gathered everyone who had escaped Rome in the garden in front of the vineyard's residence. They were about halfway between Paris's center and the third defensive line, which left them still outside the city.

Why hadn't they flown directly into Paris?

Quenser guessed Frolaytia was about to explain that for him, but he doubted it was going to be good news.

For now, he left Carat with Charlotte Zoom, the Black Uniform glasses woman who happened to be nearby.

"Here."

Carat Affinity held something out to Quenser. It was a small cloth bag with a string attached. Rubbing it revealed it had a flat piece of wood or thick paper inside.

"It's an Asian amulet. You aren't supposed to open it."

"Thanks. I hope it brings me good luck."

That was all Quenser said before waving goodbye and joining the other filthy potatoes. Frolaytia was continuing her speech.

"Currently, the Faith Organization is approaching Paris along two primary invasion courses. The

first is a land route over the Alps and the other is a sea route across the Mediterranean. However, we have discovered the possibility that both are only diversions.”

Quenser was relieved to see Heivia, Myonri, and Putana among the potatoes covered in soot and mud. They hadn't had time to change, so they were hard to miss when everyone else was wearing identical uniforms. This meant he wasn't the only one lucky enough to escape that hell.

The initial problem had been started by Bad Garage, but they were dead now.

This war was all about finding someone to blame when the real culprits were gone.

When Quenser had encountered Sarasa in Rome, she had seen Carat, clicked her tongue, and secretly let him past. There were good people in the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization.

But Frolaytia described a situation that didn't allow for that sort of idealism.

“The enemy used those obvious invasion routes to hide the elite commandos they sent to Charles de Gaulle Airport, located only a few dozen kilometers from the center of Paris. We have received a report of the airport being occupied using poison gas weapons! This war is over if they get the airport running again. The Faith Organization will be able to send in transport planes full of soldiers and vehicles. We must take the airport back before that happens and nip their direct attack on Paris in the bud!!”

At a distance of a few dozen kilometers, the Faith Organization airborne troops might not even need to set foot inside Paris. They could line up rocket launchers in the airport and send fire raining down on Paris.

But they were hesitant to immediately gather several Objects to defend Paris with their anti-air lasers. They had already seen what happened to Rome. Heivia raised his voice while forgetting all about the chain of command.

“So are we going to have a ton of Objects gathered around Paris now? Damn the Faith Organization. Is that how they hope to get revenge – an eye for an eye or whatever!?”

Logical arguments were not always convincing to someone who was running off of emotion, but Quenser cut in all the same.

“I don't think there's a large magma reservoir underneath Paris.”

“That just means they have something else planned. Like pressurizing the groundwater to liquefy the entire city into a marsh!! We can't just assume everything will work out all right!”

Frolaytia agreed with Heivia's frantic shouting.

"I sent in a report, but I have no idea if the higher ups will even see it. The clean wars structure has collapsed, after all. Everyone has awoken from that dream and now an unprecedented world war has begun. The higher ups are probably buried alive in more reports than they've ever seen before. ...If the gravity of this threat is not conveyed to them, Paris might just become a second Rome. That's why we need to take back Charles de Gaulle Airport before all those Objects arrive in the name of air defense. Got that!?"

Part 3

"Contact. Claire Whist to Baby Magnum. I'm one of the guest technical officers given an online invitation to deal with this emergency. My specialty is Object design. I know your specs already, so can you pass me the data I need to analyze the enemy Object?"

All hell had broken loose in the Legitimacy Kingdom territory near the Mont Blanc border on the west side of the Alps.

"!"

The Princess observed the enemy through her special goggles that used lasers to read her eye movements.

The Baby Magnum was making quick evasions to the left and right, but the Princess was aware she was also gradually falling back. This one was especially difficult to deal with.

The Blast Samurai.

It had a main cannon on either side...except they weren't quite cannons really. This Faith Organization Second Generation wielded twin 10m blades made of ultra-hot low-stability plasma. She was dead if it got close enough. That plasma was so powerful it couldn't be fully controlled with ordinary magnetism, so it would be able to slice through a nuke-resistant Object like it was made of jelly.

"Its versatility is a much bigger threat than its simple destructive power," said Claire Whist. "It can trigger an explosive blast in those two blades to make high-speed dashes to either side."

"I'm...well aware!"

"It can also explosively strike the air, so by mixing in an impurity, it can set up a scattershot barrier. That wouldn't be a fatal blow, but it would be hard to dodge and definitely slow you down. Don't get careless and lose your balance. If you stop moving, it'll cut you down in a single strike."

“Argh!!”

(Why does this have to happen when I want to talk with Quenser? I want to ask him how I’m supposed to live in this new world and about so much more too!!)

A volley of her own main cannons was not enough to stop her opponent. In fact, the moment of motionlessness after firing would give the Blast Samurai a chance to rush in.

She had to keep her distance to survive.

That was a bad situation when she was supposed to be holding the line to protect their home country.

And on top of that...

“The Zombie Powder is moving.”

The U-shaped part surrounding the back and sides of the spherical main body was not additional armor. It was probably a field hospital. Even from here, she could see an elevator for carrying people up and down. Its design appeared to have focused on that to the neglect of its other functions. It had two ski-like floats for its static electricity propulsion device and its only main cannon was an extremely short mortar-like railgun on the very front, so it was even less creative than the Princess’s Baby Magnum.

That railgun was no threat except at extreme close range and the skis were split into pieces like a chocolate bar to match the bumps and dips in the terrain. The Princess felt no envy toward that Object.

However...

“Listen, Princess. Don’t try to deal with them both at once. The Zombie Powder is a support Object and it can’t do any critical damage to us. Focus on the Blast Samurai for now!!”

“I know that!!”

The Princess clenched her teeth at the old maintenance lady’s advice.

Something was moving along the ground. The surface was crawling with Faith Organization soldiers. Those soldiers in synthetic uniforms charged fearlessly toward the 50m mass of firearms and armor that was the Baby Magnum.

The Zombie Powder was a special Object with a U-shape field hospital on its rear. It was also the reason the Faith Organization would not stop or give up no matter what.

They didn't realize how suicidal their actions were until the bullet had passed through them or the explosive blast had hit them and modern medicine could do nothing for them. When an Object blasted you or ran you over, there was no chance of recovery.

If any of the soldiers did notice the horror of their situation and came to a stop, another one would grab them by the shoulders.

The reluctant soldiers were dragged back to the hospital where their mind was destroyed just the right amount to throw them back out onto the battlefield.

Hence the double meaning of the Zombie Powder name.

This was not just a battle between foot soldiers. Quite a few soldiers and trucks recklessly charged directly toward the Princess. The Legitimacy Kingdom's defensive line was being pushed back, but the Faith Organization did not look at all happy to the Princess. It almost looked like they had a vague idea what was happening to them and wanted to die of their own free will before their mind was fully destroyed.

It reminded her of army ants.

They were a great threat, but it didn't feel like she was battling humans.

(How far is the Faith Organization willing to go!?)

"Claire Whist to Baby Magnum. What are you doing? Crush them already. Your top priority is the Blast Samurai. You can ignore the enemy infantry as long as you don't stumble over them. That static electricity is keeping 200 thousand tons afloat, so the high-voltage current will obliterate anyone you pass over. I'm guessing you had already noticed, but that's actually what they want."

"Hey, can I switch off her channel!?"

"The Zombie Powder is designed to anger its enemies like that," said the old maintenance lady. "Don't let the tragedy get to you. Your heroic feelings will cloud your strategic judgment. You can't throw out your own calculations if you want to avoid being sliced by the Blast Samurai's dual swords!!"

"Their home country has fallen, so how do they have so much momentum!?"

"The highly skilled delinquent units that were being restrained before have now been unleashed across the globe," said Claire.

"The rules of the clean wars don't apply to this world war," said the old maintenance lady. "These are the fools who sold their soul to the devil for power. I'm from the Island Nation, so I understand how frightening technology sans morals can be. Let your guard down and it will consume you!!"

Of course, the Faith Organization wasn't the only threat. Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance Objects were taking advantage of the confusion to approach as well. It wasn't clear if they were targeting the Legitimacy Kingdom or Faith Organization, so the Princess had to assume they were hostile.

Just then, the old maintenance lady's mic picked up a tongue click. She had likely had an operator directly whisper a report in her ear instead of receiving it on another channel.

"So that wasn't an instrument malfunction."

"?"

"Um, there appears to be a discrepancy in the altitudes of the Alps. It's almost certainly caused by rapid plate movement. The mountains have grown by 2-3cm in just the past half hour."

Part 4

"The Indian Peninsula has always been solidly under Faith Organization control, but it has never been a monolith thanks to the constant conflict between its multiple major religions, like Shiva or Buddha. According to Royce, a journalist currently deployed there, the Information Alliance is threatening them from the ocean, presumably to drive a wedge between those factions and ultimately tear it apart."

"Moving on to today's headlines, it unfortunately looks like the Panama Canal will never be free of war. The canal is currently on fire, thought to be fueled by crude oil. This appears to be part of a Capitalist Corporations barricade operation to keep the Legitimacy Kingdom from traveling northward from South America. The Capitalist Corporations home country is Los Angeles, in the Central Valley District, so..."

"Subway Online News. Several pipelines and fuel storage bases across the battlefield countries of southern Africa have been destroyed. Capitalist Corporations and Legitimacy Kingdom special forces have been accused of destroying each other's energy infrastructure. As you can see, the sky has been blotted out by dark smoke and the cities are covered by a rainbow-colored film of oil whenever it rains."

"We have heard a few explosions here at Charles de Gaulle Airport. Whoa! Earlier, there was an unconfirmed report of a poison gas attack at this same airport, but- eh? What? Who are you people!? You want us to stop the broadcast? Ehh!? Ksshhh!!!!!"

Part 5

Charles de Gaulle Airport was located only a few dozen kilometers away from the center of Paris.

The airport had been taken by Faith Organization commandos and it had to be retaken before it was back up and running or Paris would be engulfed in flames after armored trucks or rocket launchers were flown in.

“Gyah!?”

“Damn, there are mines. Medic! I don’t care if you’re scared! Get over here!!”

The sound of thick gears turning came from directly ahead. The club flail, an additional piece of equipment attached to the front of a tank, was an extremely imprecise device. The dozens of chains and weights attached to the thick axle forcibly plowed the dirt and detonated all of the mines. This was a race against time and they weren’t about to go through the painstaking process of digging up and deactivating each and every one of the Faith Organization mines.

Something flashed near the corner of the fence surrounding the rectangular airport grounds.

Rapidly installed heavy artillery blew away both the tank and the soldiers and medics spread out around it. The ground was torn up in an unnatural fan shape and shrapnel was thrown through the air. The lethal range was three or four times the size of a small convenience store.

“Bwoh, gwah!?”

“Dammit, I am not dying an emotional death here. My daughter’s college fund is riding on this. And I haven’t been paid any of the retirement money I’ve earned!!”

“Did you see that crater? That must have been a 25-inch gun. Even the tough powered suits were smashed up and thrown into the air. Th-that’s got to be fortress artillery.”

25-inch fortress artillery had a range of about 15km, so it could directly reach Paris. But did the Legitimacy Kingdom force have the firepower needed to push them back when they were having so much trouble with the minefield?

The commandos were a small, elite squad, so they had arrived knowing they would be outnumbered. That was why they had planned to make up for their inferior numbers with mines and artillery. But that also meant they couldn’t have laid out tens of thousands of mines by hand. They must have loaded them in their extra-large artillery and launched them in every direction to rapidly distribute them.

And during all this...

“Wow am I glad I challenged them to that rock-paper-scissors game. Sometimes we actually win.”

“I still think we got the worse job. I mean, those powered suits are only a diversion. Once the suits are destroyed, the soldiers inside get to sneak away.”

“So it’s all about stripping the armor off musclebound macho men?”

“Yeah, the enemy gets to strip them, but there’s nothing worth seeing inside. Probably meant as psychological warfare to bring down enemy morale. Remind me to never get on Frolaytia’s bad side.”

The idiots hung their heads with shadows over their faces.

Heivia and Quenser had changed into their Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms and were now walking through a thick metal pipe with flashlights in hand. The pipe was more than 2m tall, so it felt more like a small tunnel.

While the rest of their forces fought a diversionary battle up top, around 20 Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were traveling underground. They were meant to sneak below the airport and wipe out the Faith Organization commandos in a surprise attack.

They were accompanied by the 7th Special Training Unit’s Elise Montana and Black Uniform Charlotte Zoom. Those two had both mastered close combat even in the Age of Objects. This surprise attack operation needed warriors like that to provide any chance at survival, so the battlefield student doubted he was coming back alive.

“So does this drain pipe really reach the airport?”

“The more than 3000m of runway would be entirely useless if they sank by even 10cm, so controlling rainwater and groundwater is crucial. An entire network of pipes runs underneath the airport. But that doesn’t mean they are all running 24/7. They are only insurance just in case.”

They were on their guard the entire time, but they did not find any mines or other traps. The Faith Organization probably hadn’t noticed the pipes. This was the Legitimacy Kingdom’s home turf, so they had superior intel.

Even Heivia was avoiding chatter for once.

Eventually he pointed upwards.

A ladder led to a maintenance hatch, but they did not push it open just enough to stick out a mirror or fiberscope. A concerning number of their satellites had been shot down, but the information from

the diversion team's binoculars and range finders was being shared with this team's mobile devices. There were 16 "moving human-sized heat signatures" in the airport terminal and three each at the fortress artillery guns set up at the four corners of the airport grounds. But the firing angle did not let those guns fire inside the airport, so they could be ignored for now.

"We're making the surprise attack, but they have us outnumbered."

"We're relying on the element of surprise because we're outnumbered. C'mon, let's go."

They knew it was safe since there wasn't anyone here, but they still tensed as they pushed up the hatch. Quenser watched from below as Elise climbed up the ladder first.

"The real threat is the gas."

"Wait a moment, I'm checking the reading now, so- hyah!? Who just pushed up on my butt while I'm trying to see if we'll die!?"

"So are we safe or not?"

"The reading suggests no gas, but wait, ahh, stop lifting my butt like that!! M-my glasses are fogging up!"

Even knowing her true identity, that busty glasses instructor was still extremely bullyable and she only had herself to blame for choosing to climb the ladder first. Had she really thought the filthy potatoes weren't going to start attacking that peach-shaped pinata hanging above their heads?

"Hey, no fair, Quenser! I want some teacher love too!! Damn, how can such a skinny guy get so thoroughly in the way!?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Teacher's best student is up here protecting her from all of you horny idiots. I am the barrier!!"

If Quenser hadn't made sure he was second up the ladder, everyone would have started hitting the restlessly wiggling sexy pinata with their rifle stocks. It had been a real close call. Really, he was the hero here. A guardian even.

The Black Uniform glasses woman gave him an icy look from below.

"Quenser, I will not get after you for your actions here, but I am recording them."

"What for!? How many extra lives do I have left on that phone of yours!?"

"If the hidden parameters concern you, I would recommend shaping up before you game over.
Memo, memo."

The metal cover creaked open and they rushed out into the first floor of Charles de Gaulle Airport's terminal building.

Bodies littered the floor. The poison gas would have been removed by the automatic ventilation, but the people killed by it were still there. The security guard holding a tiny handgun had probably been a retired police officer or something. Thousands of people were doubled over on the floor and not one of them was moving. An airport firefighter was collapsed on the way to the emergency exit with her only oxygen mask covering the mouth and nose of a short old man. The old man wasn't moving either. And he never would again.

The firefighters must have continued crawling toward the exits while grasping the victim's clothing. Of course, the poison gas had covered the entire airport grounds, so leaving the building wouldn't have accomplished much of anything. But still.

The heroes had failed.

There had been no goal for them to reach.

Quenser bit his lip and hung his head.

The people in the airport would have been civilians. With all the travelers gathered here, there might have been businesspeople and tourists from the Faith Organization among them. The Legitimacy Kingdom travelers may have been stuck here after their trip to Rome for the carnival was cut short.

Had none of that given the commandos pause?

"Damn the Faith Organization."

"No enemies detected among the bodies. The 16 must be elsewhere. If you have time to talk, then get your ammo ready. The battle is about to begin.

They split into two teams: one to secure the terminal and the other to destroy the fortress artillery.

Quenser and Heivia were on the fortress artillery team.

However, they didn't need to walk across the flat open space to the corners of the airport. The outward-facing fortress artillery were filled with explosives, so a single shoulder-fired missile from an angle outside their turning range could blow them up along with the commandos operating them.

To cover everything from the four corners, each one covered 90 degrees. Blow up just one of them and that cardinal direction became a safe zone. Then the Legitimacy Kingdom forces waiting outside could blast their way through the minefield and enter the airport. The Faith Organization would know the enemy was coming, but their guns couldn't turn far enough to aim that way. And the stationary heavy artillery could not be moved by hand like an Island Nation mikoshi.

Leaving the building would actually give away their presence.

There had to be blind spots everywhere with the enemy occupying a building the size of a school with just 16 people. But if Heivia thoughtlessly launched his shoulder-fired missile, the enemy would notice and raise their guard. Their allies sneaking up on the enemy with suppressor-equipped carbines would not appreciate having their deadly game of red light, green light ruined like that.

Quenser didn't have a weapon, so his job was to keep an eye on their surroundings. While their safety was secure, Heivia used a special tool to cut a sufficiently large hole in the thick soundproof glass covering one wall of the lobby, giving him line of sight with his missile.

First they would take the terminal and then they would blow up one of the four fortress artillery guns.

Heivia peered through the sight of his shoulder-fired missile and muttered something under his breath. Quenser couldn't tell if that came from fighting spirit or fear and nerves.

"Come on. Hurry up. I already have them right in the center of my sight. I'll have a lock as soon as I send out the IR and microwaves. Just give me the go sign already, you dumbasses."

"Why are you assuming our people will succeed? What if we start to hear gunfire inside the building?"

"Then I fire this and we get back underground. Succeed or fail, I just wish they'd hurry the hell up."

Ten nerve-racking seconds passed and then another.

But all of a sudden, the tension was gone.

"Huh?"

It began with Heivia. The delinquent noble had been staring through his missile's sight, but then he noticed something. His tone of voice was one of confusion.

Puzzled, Quenser looked over and then realized it was too far away. He quickly pulled out his binoculars and looked to the base of the fortress artillery gun 20km away.

Something was moving there – a human-sized shape.

But it was sliding unusually smoothly for a human. This was not taking steps. Unless this person was using the shuffling technique seen in Eastern martial arts, then this was a communication robot moving on wheels. They were common enough as guides for large facilities with lots of people who spoke different languages.

It was moving and it had a heat signature.

Either wrap it with electrically-heated wires or heat its surface with a hair dryer and it would indeed have the temperature of human skin.

“Charlotte here. There are no Faith Organization commandos here. The moving heat signatures were all guide robots!”

“Elise here. Same here. Come to think of it, weren’t the mines distributed through the air by the fortress guns, not placed by hand? If the guns are remotely controlled, then they wouldn’t need anyone actually here.”

“Shit!” swore Heivia. “Then where did the Faith Organization commandos go!?”

Part 6

“Gnostic Witches reporting in. Local targeting adjustments complete. They were lured in as planned. This is the final adjustment before we begin. Record all of the values for use during the real mission.”

Someone lay on the ground looking through a pair of binoculars at a location well outside the airport. No, those were awfully large for binoculars. With all the electronic equipment and the large battery attached, it was too big to fit inside a business bag.

They remained on the ground with the binoculars to their eyes as they made one last command.

“Do it, Yaldabaoth.”

Part 7

“?”

At the Mont Blanc border 500km from Paris, the Princess frowned behind her special goggles.

Just when she expected the Blast Samurai to rush in toward her, it turned and ran along a straight

line. But not toward the Baby Magnum.

She of course targeted it, but it could easily rush up to her if it resumed using its low-stability plasma blades as boosters. She was too wary to fire a main cannon now.

Then she found the answer.

The Blast Samurai insisted on fighting in close quarters because its high-power plasma could not be stabilized enough by magnetism to be fired across long distances. It was too powerful which prevented it from attacking in the usual fashion.

But what if it had something other than a main cannon's barrel to harness the magnetic force?

Designer Claire Whist sounded nearly dumbfounded as she spoke over the radio.

"The pinch effect. When plasma's electricity is strong enough, it's compressed by the magnetic field that forms around it. This should give it an effect other than those swords!"

"?"

"Electromagnetic induction!! Even an elementary school kid knows you can generate electricity by passing a magnetic material through a coil. Artificial air currents can form a coil out of iron sand and passing a 50m hunk of metal through that at high speed will create an instantaneous blast of electricity. Add the reactor's energy on top of that and it should be able to control the plasma using the pinch effect!!"

"You don't mean...!?"

"Have you noticed anything odd about its secondary cannons...no, about its low-stability plasma main cannons? The exterior shielding has intentional gaps that allow a magnetic field to escape. That makes the entire Object a massive magnetic body!!"

The Princess quickly fired all seven of her main cannons, but it wasn't enough.

The Blast Samurai had reached the needed velocity and launched a pure white beam like it was throwing a javelin. The beam was aimed high in the sky. No, it was aimed at a target 500km away.

Part 8

It felt like the world had been torn apart by the color white, starting from a single point.

“Gyaaahhhh!!!???”

Quenser couldn't even hear his own scream.

Something had fallen from the sky and hit the runway in the center of the flat airport grounds. It lost its shape and scattered in every direction, tearing up, burning, and melting the dirt and asphalt. He vaguely recalled Heivia shoving him behind a pillar, but he was having trouble recalling how that had turned into this.

He very nearly kissed the ceiling.

But not because he had left the floor. All the pillars supporting the lobby had collapsed and the ceiling had fallen nearly to where the boy lay on the floor.

A bitterness hung in the air. It reminded him of the Water Strider and the Extra Arc.

He may have been lucky his lungs and eyes had survived.

“Ugh...”

The gap between ceiling and floor was so short he couldn't even roll over like he was trying to get comfortable in bed. He was stuck on his back until someone pulled him out. His blurry vision couldn't make out their face. He focused on psychological care, trying to keep the claustrophobia from setting in.

(Who...is this?)

“Hey, Quenser!? Are you still alive, you bastard!?”

“Heivia?” he weakly muttered before sitting up. “Oh, were you who saved me?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

Apparently it hadn't been Heivia. But he looked around and didn't see any other surviving soldiers in the vicinity.

His radio was only receiving a noisy signal.

“Charlotte here!! Ksh! Based on the damage, that blast was likely an Object's low-stability plasma cannon! But the enemy Object's location is unknown!! Kssh!?”

“Narumi was carbonized... Kssshhh, we have several injured and I recommend we evacuate them. The crater is shallow, ksh, so we should be able to escape safely if we head back underground!”

The fence surrounding the airport grounds had been knocked over and the sea of flames had spread its damage beyond that. The surrounding minefield had to be burning too. That meant the damage likely covered a diameter of more than 20km.

This had been their aim from the beginning.

Hold the Legitimacy Kingdom’s attention on the airport for as long as possible, take out as many Legitimacy Kingdom forces out as they could, and make it look like their own people had been killed too to give them greater freedom and safety behind enemy lines.

That meant all of this was just a means to some other end. The Faith Organization commandos had been given freedom for some other task.

Where were they headed?

They didn’t need to lay out the evidence for that one.

“Frolaytia...”

Quenser grabbed his radio again while leaning against some rubble.

“Respond if you’re still alive, you incompetent commander! This is always what happens when we obey your orders!! The Faith Organization commandos are using this chaos to infiltrate Paris itself. Pay special attention to the transport routes for military doctors and medical equipment that reeks of ethanol! As well as all civilian media and communication companies!! I don’t know how they fired it over such long range, but we can’t let them launch a low-stability plasma cannon blast into the center of Paris!! Our home country will be decimated!!!!!!”

Part 9

“Mom! Dad!”

A 12-year-old girl with her hair worn in a single long braid waved at a couple in the city. She was wearing a miniskirt below a baggy sweatshirt, which at first glance gave the awkward impression she wasn’t wearing anything but the sweatshirt.

Her name was Catherine Barbotage.

Her body had been thoroughly modified as a Legitimacy Kingdom Pilot Elite, but she had since left

military duty. With no family to live with, she had given up her Blueangel last name and been adopted by the Barbotage family for a second life in Paris.

It was hard to imagine how those two parents had managed to raise a serial bomber like their son. A middle-aged man called over to the girl in a calm and gentle tone.

“Catherine, I know you’re excited, but slow down and look where you’re going.”

“Eh? But you’re too slow, dad.”

It was a day off for them.

On Saturday nights, the Barbotage family might get carried away and not get to bed until the following morning, but they always went to worship at a small neighborhood church on Sunday afternoon. Catherine had trusted in her own combat skills more than prayer when bullets were flying on the battlefield, so she mostly just saw it as a pleasant stroll through the neighborhood.

(Does this mean big brother went to church on Sundays? Hm, I find that hard to imagine.)

It wasn’t celebrated as much as in the Faith Organization, but it was still carnival season. There were more people out than on the usual Sunday. The supermarkets in the area were usually closed on the weekends, but today they had their shutters up and were selling sweets and snacks until late at night.

Catherine viewed the decorative advertisements that resembled something from an Island Nation festival.

(Chocolate, huh? I wonder if big brother will be visiting us for Valentines.)

An unpopular idol was shouting something on the LCD monitor installed on a building wall. That was probably an evening variety show. The on-site reporter, who didn’t have a regular seat back at the studio, was speaking excitedly.

“This is Monica, the battlefield idol reporter who can both sing and kill! Today, I’m doing an all-you-can-eat walking report on Champs-Élysées. Yes, this is one perk of the business that only comes once a year. That’s right, it’s Valentines, the time of year when girls are surrounded by sweets. Everywhere I look I see 5-star patissiers awaiting my arrival!!”

Paris was unnaturally peaceful this afternoon. Everyone was smiling on an informational program that didn’t provide a single scrap of information about the war raging outside.

To Catherine, it felt more like a doctor hiding the prognosis from a terminal patient. Her unique

senses picked up the scent of death on the air.

But the rest of the Barbotage family got all their information from TV and the newspapers, so the mother crouched down and smiled at the girl. She doted on the girl because she had always wanted a daughter.

"Oh, look, Catherine. The store is open today. How about we grab something for dinner on the way back from church?"

"I like the ginger pork you make better. And I like it with pilaf more than bread."

Just then, Catherine spotted something out of the corner of her eye. The gentle flow of pedestrians was interrupted by a quick-moving group that had stepped out of a black bulletproof car parked on the curb. A girl wore an old-fashioned dress straight out of a fairy tale and she was surrounded by several dangerous-looking maids who looked ready to kill at a moment's notice. The maid with an eyepatch kept her voice low as she gave some instructions.

"Hurry!! Shelter 9 will be closed soon. Sealing the door is meaningless if you aren't inside!!"

"Karen!! I will fight too. What good is the Vanderbilt family if we nobles will not stand up when the country and its people are at risk!?"

"Do not let the belligerent atmosphere affect you. Your role is not to pick up a gun and display such one-sided righteousness. Your power lies in your philanthropy and diplomacy to cross the boundaries between world powers and bring together the world's pacifists. And if anything were to happen to you, the people would be incensed. We might serve the Winchell family, but we do not want that. If you wish to avoid plunging the people into an endless hell of blood and bullets, then please understand the role you are meant to play. Now, Shelter 9 is this way!!"

All in all, it took less than 30 seconds.

No one paid any heed to the group that crossed the large road and vanished down a narrow alley. The Legitimacy Kingdom was all about chivalry, so that antique dress and the maid uniforms were common enough sights here in Paris.

"..."

"Catherine?"

"Mom, you go on ahead. I'm going to feed the pigeons."

She didn't have time to listen to her adoptive mother telling her she wasn't supposed to feed the

animals in the park.

There was a soldier here.

The person was not wearing a camo uniform and she wasn't carrying an assault rifle or shoulder-fired missile, but the sharp look in her eyes said it all.

She was an adult woman in her late 20s or early 30s.

But a closer inspection revealed her right eye was a detailed prosthetic. This was not an ordinary model; it was designed for military spies. It moved in sync with the left eye to help her blend in and the fake pupil even dilated and constricted. It probably used magnetism.

(Based on her gait and eye movements, she must be Faith Organization. But she isn't an ordinary soldier. Maybe an intelligence agent and maybe a commando. No, I know the answer. She isn't using a radio and has cut off all EM signals, so the countdown has already begun. Is she going to blow up crucial infrastructure, or just throw a case of gas into the crowd? Whatever it is, she's here to do something in Paris. If this is her final preparations before the attack, then the attack should be in less than half an hour.)

Catherine Barbotage was hesitant to swipe a gun from a passerby.

Instead, she pulled out her handkerchief, neatly wrapped that around the grip of a thick Phillips screwdriver lying on the ground, and stabbed it twice into the side of the undercover soldier as she passed by.

Catherine had made the attack, but she was the one to grimace.

She hadn't felt it pierce flesh.

"!?"

They both made and blocked a few quick arm and leg attacks before backing away from each other. Catherine had grabbed the collar of the woman's blouse to throw her, but the collar had instead torn away, revealing the glint of synthetic fibers below. She recognized that formfitting material.

It was green, the Faith Organization's color.

That was a Pilot Elite's special suit.

"The same as me!?" said Catherine, switching to a backhand grip on the screwdriver.

She heard several footsteps and found she was surrounded by several people. She could see four, but she assumed there had to be more in total. If all of their bodies were artificially boosted to Elite standards, then every part of them would be customized. Increased muscular strength and oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood was only the starting point. Their blood vessels, muscles, and nerves would of course be strengthened, but knowing the Faith Organization, they would have been given special traits and talents like perfect pitch, spatial cognizance, or atmospheric pressure sensing. Some of those abilities were practically occult, like sensing the weather and predicting death.

Catherine still saw the lazy Sunday afternoon out of the corners of her eyes. A small child ran around with a balloon, an old woman was taking her dog for a walk, and the Barbotage couple were watching her in ignorant confusion from a short distance away.

They were all in range of a stray bullet, so Catherine could not back down. She re-judged her distance from the enemy with screwdriver in hand.

“So you too have abandoned your humanity.” The woman did not say anything out loud, but the movements of her lips passed a death sentence. “If you had noticed before your attack, you could have fled without looking back. That might have saved your life.”

In a populated area, an opponent like this could be more dangerous than a tank or attack helicopter.

Catherine Barbotage was the same, so she knew that all too well.

But these people differed from Catherine in one key way. They felt no qualms about using guns in a safe country.

Part 10

They couldn't find them.

They had gathered their 8-wheeled armored trucks and searched the shortest route from Charles de Gaulle Airport to Paris, but Quenser and Heivia hadn't found anyone suspicious. They were about to arrive at the entrance to Paris.

“What the hell are we supposed to do now!?”

The Legitimacy Kingdom military had surreptitiously set up a checkpoint they hoped wouldn't alert the city's people that anything was wrong and the soldiers there were shocked to see the potatoes arriving. It didn't look like they had found the commandos and prevented their entry.

The Faith Organization had the upper hand.

“I'll be borrowing this.”

“Wait, Major!? Hey, you there! Put together a bodyguard team immediately!”

Frolaytia grabbed a large anti-materiel rifle and hopped out of the truck, so her secretary-like aide quickly called in some of the surrounding infantry.

But there was a good reason for even their commander to join the search.

The Faith Organization commandos had to have some kind of target in mind. If the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers couldn't catch up to them and stop them before the attack began, an ultra-long-range plasma attack capable of turning 20km to scorched earth would fall into the center of Paris.

Their mobile devices must not have been working with all their satellites shot down because fluffy blonde Elise Montana spread out a paper map before explaining the situation.

“We can safely assume the Faith Organization commandos are inside Paris. We can start by getting inside and raising the security level. Then we will request a siren be sounded to inform the people.”

“They would notice that!!”

“If they could attack right away, they would have done so already. They haven't, which means they have some reason for waiting. Our top priority is to flush out the shadows lurking in the city. And no matter how much these spies have trained with VR goggles or in a fake city built out in the middle of nowhere, they will make a mistake if caught up in an irregular accident their training didn't cover. So hurry.”

That last sentence was directed at the checkpoint guards who blocked the main road into the city. One of them nervously spoke into their radio and a deep, low noise began to play from all the disaster speakers installed throughout the city.

Heivia drove into Paris behind the wheel of an 8-wheel armored truck and used the side mirror (forcibly attached to make it street legal) to glance back at Frolaytia who was waving with the hand not resting an anti-materiel rifle on her shoulder.

“Our supposedly peaceful home country has an air raid siren going off and all four world powers are gathering Objects here.” Heivia impatiently clenched his teeth. “It's exactly the same. We're on track to be a repeat of Rome.”

“That's probably what the Faith Organization wants,” calmly noted Black Uniform Charlotte Zoom, making Heivia wonder whose side she was on.

Meanwhile, Quenser frowned.

"But what's keeping the Faith Organization from attacking now? We know they got into Paris ahead of us, so they should be free to act."

"The Round Table." Heivia sounded disgusted. "Don't let the courageous name fool you. It's actually a set of 10 underground shelters distributed across Paris. Board the elevators behind barriers cleverly hidden around the city and you're in for a freefall straight down a 5000m shaft. I think it only takes 180 seconds to reach the bottom."

"I've never heard of that."

"Of course you haven't. A smalltime regional king wouldn't even know about it. Did you forget I'm heir to the great Winchell family? I know all sorts of dirty secrets about Paris. For example, the Legitimacy Kingdom only gives a crap about bloodline and history, so they never even tried to ensure the millions of commoners here would be safe. They just made sure a few dozen from noble bloodlines would be saved. God, just makes me want to punch them."

Devastating losses would be answered with more devastating losses.

The Faith Organization no longer cared who was responsible. They just wanted to take someone else down with them.

If Rome could never be rebuilt, then they would do so much damage to Paris that it would never recover either. No, if they could pull it off, they would also want to cross the ocean and take out the Information Alliance's New York and the Capitalist Corporations' Los Angeles. So they had decided blowing away the surface of the city wasn't enough.

Quenser couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"So...what? Are they in Paris surveying the city?"

"I bet they're seeing where they can plant their explosives to do the most damage to their 10 targets and crush those VIP chickens under the collapsing bedrock. You love that kind of thing, don't you?"

"Then they might be using elastic wave exploration," groaned Charlotte Zoom. "You open a long, narrow hole in the ground with a metal spike, shove explosives inside, and create a powerful vibration underground. By picking up the reflected waves, you can figure out the quality, quantity, and deviation of underground materials. ...And with that kind of delicate work, you want a peaceful city more than a pile of rubble that could trigger a secondary explosion at any time."

The asphalt and stone pavement looked solid, but a hole several meters deep could be automatically created in just a few minutes using specialized electric-powered equipment. In a city, they would have to locate and account for any other vibration sources, such as sewers and boilers, but that wouldn't require all that much more time.

Also, it didn't particularly matter to Quenser's group if that work was done correctly or not.

If the Faith Organization commandos ended up with a completely mistaken idea of where the shelters were located, they would still be ordering an ultra-high-temperature plasma blast from the distance. The emperor trembling in his new clothes deep underground might survive, but the more than 3 million people living on the surface would all be engulfed in flames.

"The Faith Organization can go to whatever hell they believe in. If it hurt that bad to see Rome drowning on lava, why would they want to force that pain onto us?"

"Wouldn't you feel the same way if it was done to you? Not that sharing that experience is going to help us get along."

All of a sudden, Quenser ducked down on instinct.

A fighter with a distinctive silhouette had just flown by directly above their armored truck. Several of them had.

They had lost air superiority over their own home country.

The Black Uniform woman's eyes widened.

"Zig-27s!? Those were Capitalist Corporations fighters!!"

"Shut up! Quit explaining how screwed we are and do something to avoid it! Get outta the truck unless you're interested in having your bones roasted to a nice crispy brown. The bombs will hit in 3!!"

Quenser was hesitant to jump after seeing the asphalt rushing by below, so his awful friend roughly grabbed his collar.

Heivia and the others opened the still-moving armored truck's doors and hatch and forcibly rolled on out. They didn't have time to escape indoors, so they got down on the street and covered their heads with their hands.

Aerial bombs dropped from almost directly overhead.

Red hot shrapnel broke all the nearby building windows. The truck was flimsier than a full-on tank, but it was still a sturdy vehicle. Nevertheless, its eight wheels flew off in different directions.

"Gahhh!!"

“Kh...this is our home country. What are our Objects doing?”

Needless to say, those fighters couldn't have been flying overhead if any anti-air lasers were aiming their way, yet the Capitalist Corporations squadron of 4 Zig-27s made a sharp turn in the sky.

Elise waved something in her hand while down on the ground with her other hand over her head and her butt sticking up in the air.

It was a radio.

“N-no response.”

“...”

“Communications are down. But not because we're being jammed. Th-the home country defense Objects were taken out at some point!! Something bad is happening out there!!”

Part 11

The Strait of Dover, located between Great Britain and the west end of Eurasia, was about 39km wide. That was downright cramped for a part of the ocean and it had even been used for events where people attempted to be the first to swim across, ride a balloon across, or whatever else.

In this case, it may have been praiseworthy that the Object didn't scrape up against the edges.

A dull roar reverberated across the ocean as history was made.

This extraordinary Object measured more than 20km long. It was also the central and most populous portion of the Information Alliance home country of New York in the Chesapeake District.

Its name was Manhattan 000.

A combination of factors was to blame for no one noticing something so large approaching. For example, the Legitimacy Kingdom's satellites had all been destroyed in advance. And let's not forget the nightmarish fact that the Manhattan 000's colossal cannon had a greater range than the Legitimacy Kingdom's ground radars.

Also, that cannon was an electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon that directly launched JPlevelMHD reactors.

Also also, it could detonate a reactor in midair in advance and then fire its laser beam cannons to

accurately pierce an enemy Object with a laser bent using the same principle as a mirage.

Anyone in position to notice its approach would be eliminated before they could do the noticing.

It had not permitted any observers – not surface facilities, not airborne early-warning system aircraft, not submarines, and not even mobile bases.

By blinding any eye that might see it, even that colossal Object could approach while effectively invisible. It only aimed for radar facilities and wired or wireless communication infrastructure bases, but the phone company's server center was located inside the safe country. It was obvious what would happen if an Object's laser beam or coilgun fired on that.

It didn't care. This had already developed into a world war.

The other two world powers could have ignored it if the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization would simply duke it out between Paris and Rome, eliminating each other's Objects. But they could not let the flames of war in the musty Old World spread to the peaceful New World.

The Capitalist Corporations had their home country in Los Angeles and the Information Alliance had theirs in New York, so they were strongest in the New World located across the Atlantic.

This was not just the four world powers randomly attacking whoever was within reach. Clear lines were being drawn in this world war. And this wasn't just about the home countries. Battles with little chance at a quick resolution had started up all over the world with no distinction between safe country and battlefield country.

"Hm, hm, hm, hm"

A girl's oddly cheerful humming could be heard in a strange city where all the residents were enclosed in what looked like rectangular pieces of hardened jelly.

"This won't work if they shoot down the electromagnetically-launched reactor in midair. 205. Good, good. That won't be a problem if I take out all the Objects waiting around Paris with my bending lasers"

She was Martini Series #29.

A young girl with blonde hair and brown skin didn't seem embarrassed about wearing only a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson oil paper while out on a Manhattan street.

In fact, a thrilled tremor ran up her spine.

That little monster had her butt seated inside a giant swim ring filled with a special liquid that slid along like a curling stone. She wore a pair of VR goggles backwards on her head and held a notebook-sized game console in her hands. That genius girl in charge of Manhattan security was named Melly Martini Extradry. And she giggled.

As the head of New York security, the Manhattan 000 belonged to her.

She got help from the Capulet, a massive AI network with its core's location shrouded in mystery, and the two of them would shoot down each other's ideas while piloting the Object, but Melly was ultimately the one in control.

"Lisbon, Madrid, and London have all been disconnected and silenced. Now I can focus on Paris. 824. Are you ready, Legitimacy Kingdom? I'm about to put you in checkmate."

Part 12

"I see you're crazy as ever, Information Alliance."

Mariydi Whitewitch spat out the words while gripping her Zig-27's stick in the sky above Paris. She couldn't have pulled off this pleasure flight if the defense Objects equipped with anti-air lasers hadn't been destroyed, but she wasn't about to feel thankful.

At more than 20km across, the Manhattan was absurdly large. They weren't holding anything back. They had sent their secret weapon to the front line where it continued to blow up ground military facilities from the sea. Even though some of those contained both military and civilian facilities.

"Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. You're the one who said we could end this global chaos if we did enough damage to Paris fast enough. So harden your heart."

"I'm aware of that!"

This world war was Paris and Rome's business.

The Legitimacy Kingdom had held an operation within Rome without the Faith Organization's permission and the failure of that mission had destroyed their home country. Or so the story went.

At this point, that was only an excuse. The Faith Organization didn't want to fall into last place, so they were probably just attacking the closest enemy.

They had left the truth behind and no one seemed to care.

To repeat, the Faith Organization was just mad that Paris was sitting there so pristine and

untouched while Rome had been utterly destroyed. So they were desperate to change that.

That meant the solution was to even out the damage done to both sides. And why bother waiting for the Faith Organization to begin their attack? If Mariydi's squadron flew in and bombed the hell out of Paris first, they would lose their justification for a world war. The Faith Organization was only interested in the total amount of damage done to Paris as a whole. They didn't have any specific people or buildings in mind.

(So if we go in first and attack only military targets and unmanned but critical infrastructure, we can give them the damage they want while keeping civilians casualties to a minimum. That isn't a job for an Object. You need us and our ability to precisely choose and attack specific targets. We haven't done anything wrong here. Not a thing!)

"Ice Burn 4. Wow, Moss Green's paratroopers are jumping!"

The Manhattan's ultra-long-range attack had destroyed the defense Objects, so Mariydi's squadron had gained air superiority without needing to lift a finger. A large, slow Capitalist Corporations transport craft flew across Paris and opened its rear cargo door. That would be carrying 380 elite PMC soldiers equipped with parachutes.

That first wave would secure the surface.

Or it would have if a blinding white beam hadn't sliced the transport craft in two. That was an anti-air laser. Mariydi quickly adjusted her grip on the stick.

"Ice Girl 1 to you assholes in the Information Alliance!! One of the Objects was only pretending to be dead!! I have visual confirmation of the Legitimacy Kingdom Excalibur's survival. Enough shoddy work!! Take them all out this time!!!!!"

"Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. At least the Legitimacy Kingdom had the good taste to name it after a legendary sword. Anyway, we need to reduce altitude. Okay, everyone, try not to get tangled up in a clothesline covered in lingerie!!"

Part 13

A transport craft exploded in midair, becoming a fireball trailing black smoke.

The smaller dots scattering from it may have been human torches with their parachutes burning.

Heivia threw up his hands and gave a meaningless roar.

"That's what you get, you shits! That fall's gonna last at least 30 seconds, I'll bet. Plenty of time to suffer and regret your actions before you die! No one's gonna pretty you up for a funeral, you greedy

assholes!!”

“Uh, Heivia? Their uniforms and parachutes are still on fire. Th-the city is going to burn!!”

The wind carried the charred remains of a Capitalist Corporations soldier so it fell right next to Quenser’s group. It made a wet splat and made a puddle of filth, but the fire was still burning. It probably used fuel or something like that. When Quenser looked into the distance again, he could see several pillars of dark smoke rising into the evening sky.

He was at a loss now.

“Where do we even start with cleaning this up? There’s the Faith Organization commandos, whatever silenced the defense Objects, and the Capitalist Corporations fighters and transport ship full of paratroopers. Am I forgetting any other problems we have to deal with!?”

“This does not change our initial plans,” said Charlotte Zoom. “Our top priority is the Faith Organization. If we do not stop their commandos from acquiring targeting information, Paris will be burned to the ground with a plasma blast. A single shot covers a diameter of 20km!”

With fire truck sirens blaring all over the city, the Black Uniform urged the rest of them to resume their mission. Hadn’t Elise Montana said sounding an alarm from the city’s disaster speakers would cause those professional spies to panic and give away their position?

They heard a gasping shriek.

A few members of a TV crew were collapsed on a major Paris street. The smell of blood hung in the air. The shriek appeared to have come from a young female reporter who had fallen onto her butt.

Someone whose skin had fused with a melted parachute and military uniform was aiming a carbine her way.

“Oh, no you don’t!” shouted Heivia, raising his assault rifle.

“Monica!!” shouted Quenser from the other side to draw the badly burned soldier’s attention. That eliminated the possibility of him taking Monica hostage.

The soldier didn’t do anything fancy. He didn’t acrobatically kick off the walls.

It looked like he only walked diagonally forward.

But he managed to accurately avoid the short burst of bullets fired from Heivia’s assault rifle.

"The hell was that!?"

"He must have learned that in the Northern Restricted Zone," said Elise. "They train you way better there!!"

People assumed an object's movement was a continuous thing and they would correct their aim for an extrapolated future position of their target without even noticing it, so by keeping your movement one step to the side of that extrapolation, you could avoid the enemy's aim.

As soon as Elise shouted her conclusion, the soldier rushed in toward them. It was a perfectly reasonable speed for a human, but he had intentionally slowed his earlier movements to mimic an immobilizing injury. After assuming the man was injured, it took Heivia a second too long to switch gears.

By the time he did, the soldier was within knife range.

Elise's rifle moved in to block the flash of silver. She caught the blade on the stock, stomped on the soldier's foot with her boot's heel, spun her rifle around, and pressed the muzzle against him.

With a sharp gunshot, her bullet punched through the burned soldier's chest.

Heivia felt the need to praise someone else's skill for once.

"Damn. They knew what they were doing when they made you an instructor for the 7th Special Training Unit, didn't they?"

"We were lucky he was so badly burned. He would have won if he was in top form." Elise Montana urged them to keep their guard up. "Anyway, they're coming!! We need to hide now!!"

Quenser picked up Monica and hid below a nearby overpass. A Capitalist Corporations Zig-27 flew by overhead and a straight line of machinegun bullet holes were blasted in the asphalt ground. If they had been out in the open, they would have essentially exploded and been splattered across the wall.

Meanwhile, Monica had entered dreaming maiden mode in her childhood friend's arms.

"Sigh..."

(He was wearing the remains of a parachute, so he must have been a Capitalist Corporations paratrooper, not a Faith Organization commando.)

"Damn, then this was just a waste of time!!"

"What? Servant!! How can you rescue such a beautiful lady and then call it a waste of time!?"

A dry gunshot reverberated through the air.

It came from quite close by. Monica cowered down in fear, so Quenser left her in the relative safety below the overpass and checked outside. He saw someone fighting on the opposite bank of a river that had been made into something like a park. One was a small girl with a blonde braid and the other was...a woman with a highly detailed prosthetic eye?

The woman wielded a very small handgun. The barrel had a built in suppressor, so the loud volume of the gunshot suggested she hadn't covered the ejection port with her hand. However, this was not a model issued to ordinary soldiers. Nor was it the kind a normal person could purchase. Did that mean she was one of the Faith Organization commandos on a secret mission?

They were supposed to kill the commandos once they found them, but Quenser raised his voice instead.

"Catherine!? What is she doing!?"

"Damn, I can't get a shot with the metal railings and trees in the way!!" complained Heivia.

"Then get close enough that you do have a shot. Hurry!!"

If this was the result of panicking the commandos to flush them out, then it had been a bad plan. Quenser would have to spank Elise later. That 12-year-old girl had been enjoying her second life this Sunday afternoon, so he doubted she would have been wearing a heavy bulletproof jacket below her clothing. And if the commando really was panicking from the alarm or the scared crowds, no one knew what she might do.

Fortunately, the river between them was shallow and there were some stepping stones sticking up from the surface.

But Quenser took a panicked step forward, a terrifying new development played out before his eyes.

Two people leaped across the river toward him by kicking off of the flower beds and benches in what looked like a triple jump. They weren't wearing any extra equipment like a powered suit, so this feat made him question if they really were carbon-based humans like him.

Catherine forgot all about her own fight to shout over at him.

"Don't, big brother!! The commandos are freaks like me!! They've been customized to the point they could lift a light truck!!"

(Shut up!! The next time you call yourself a freak, I'm giving you such a talking to!!)

With a short burst of gunfire, Heivia shot down one of the two leaping commandos, but it was hard to know if that had been a lethal blow or not. And the other one was untouched.

She crashed right into Quenser.

His forward momentum was forcibly twisted so he and the Faith Organization assassin crashed into the river to the side of their paths.

"Gwah!?"

A student like him had no chance in a close quarters combat. He grimaced from the pain of getting water up his nose, but got to work with his hands. He pulled out a pen-like electric fuse and jabbed it into the commando's chest like a stake.

The woman easily grabbed his other hand.

Her other hand held a glinting combat knife.

(Dammit. If I could just reach my radio, I could blow a hole in her chest with the fuse, but she isn't going to give me the chance!!)

That was when he heard a sound like a popping water balloon.

The assassin had a hole the size of his fist in her chest.

"Hit 1 - confirmed down. Get up, Quenser," said a familiar voice over his radio.

(Did Frolaytia do that!? She was carrying an anti-materiel rifle!)

Did it not matter if they were in the water as long as she had a line of fire? That demonstrated considerable skill even with the support of various sensors.

The color red had splattered in front of his face, but he only felt relief.

There were good people in the Faith Organization?

Quenser's own words filled him with bitterness, but Catherine came first. He couldn't be wasting time here.

"Pwah!"

He pulled his head above water and glared across the river. The situation had changed. The prosthetic eye woman had knocked Catherine Barbotage to the ground and aimed her small handgun down at the girl.

"Heivia - or Frolaytia!! Someone give me sniper support!"

"That would be difficult," said Frolaytia. "The water helped shield you, but if I shoot her that close to the girl, the shards of her equipment and bones will hit the girl."

Heivia had also said he couldn't get a shot right away.

Quenser's only option was to shout in despair while dripping with river water.

"Catherine!?"

Part 14

An Information Alliance officer named Wraith Martini Vermouthspray crossed her skinny legs and spun the pen-shaped device in her hand.

"Attack immediately."

"Are you sure, ma'am? Getting inside Paris unnoticed wasn't easy, you know?"

"This is worth it."

Part 15

With a dull crash, a garbage truck drove in from the side and ran into the prosthetic eye woman standing in front of Catherine.

The company logo painted on the side said Battlefield Cleanup Service.

Quenser gasped.

(What are they doing in Paris? Aren't they officially a Capitalist Corporations PMC!? And I thought

the report said no one could find any sign of the company ever having existed!!)

But now wasn't the time to worry about that.

Several suppressed gunshots followed. Catherine had immediately leaped behind the garbage truck, but the prosthetic eye woman fired Quenser's way to pin him in place while she tried to escape onto the street. And she also grabbed something the size of a backpack from a fallen commando.

"There's more to this!!" shouted the student boy.

"Then quit talking and do something about it, Quenser!" shouted Heivia. "Charlotte and Elise, you two circle in from behind. And you stay where you are, Catherine!! We don't want you getting hurt!!"

The stench of flames and smoke hung in the air.

The Paris cityscape was gradually falling apart. They had to end this before it fully collapsed.

They heard a muffled explosion.

This wasn't just a gunshot. It was bigger than a grenade.

There was nowhere to hide on the narrow street. Quenser ducked down in fear, but he felt no pain. This explosion had sounded different from the previous ones.

Heivia was the first to realize why.

"Was that their elastic wave exploration thing? She just drove the stake into the ground to scope things out underground!! And in this position, she'll find Shelter 9!"

Once the computer completed its analysis of the reflected waves, she would know where they had to attack to crush the royals hidden in the shelter 5000m below the surface.

Once those preparations were complete, she only had to point out the location to their Object and the plasma blast would be coming.

But that blast wouldn't just kill the chosen members of the privileged class. The damage would cover a diameter of 20km, so all the ordinary people in the city would be engulfed by the fireball and vaporized.

"Damn you."

Heivia took a step further but was knocked back by a dry gunshot.

She was very close.

The impact had gotten to him even through his bulletproof jacket. Heivia had been distracted by his impatience and now he was collapsed on his back forced to give instructions by gesturing. He couldn't speak, but he was telling Quenser to continue on.

The student hid behind a metal dumpster, molded his plastic explosive into an egg shape, and stabbed a fuse in. He tossed it out ahead and filled the narrow space with an explosive blast and shockwave before rushing in himself.

The prosthetic eye woman wasn't there.

However, some rust had fallen from the emergency stairs on a building wall. He could tell that wasn't just the explosion. There were signs of the chain link gate's hinges having moved and a footprint in the rust powder on the steps. Someone had forced their way onto some stairs no one had used in a long time. Quenser radioed Charlotte and the others in case he was taken out and then ran up the stairs.

He arrived on the small building's rooftop.

The prosthetic eye woman had her back to him and had just reached into the backpack to pull out a pair of binoculars larger than a next generation game console. They were large enough to fill the entire backpack. That wasn't normal, so he guessed it was designed to instruct the Object to attack whatever she viewed through them. She wasn't just going to destroy a piece of Paris; she was going to blow herself up along with it.

If she hit the switch on the side of the binoculars, Paris would be reduced to rubble.

Unfortunately, Quenser had audibly gasped when he noticed.

She turned around and fired her small handgun at him, so he was forced to jump to the side and throw a round plastic explosive that didn't even come close to reaching her.

It did, however, reach the industrial air conditioning unit on the roof.

When he detonated it, the unit's exterior and hoses were shredded and thrown through the air, a chemical coolant sprayed out as a white smoke of well below 0 degrees, and everything it touched froze solid, including the concrete and the metal pipes. White frost like inside a store's ice cream freezer covered the prosthetic eye woman's clothing and fingers.

She didn't bat an eye.

She kept her gun aimed directly at him and spoke.

"You chose your target poorly."

"Did I?"

The first bullet hadn't hit the boy, but he was down on his knee and she was confident the next one would kill. She tried to do just that, but then she noticed something. She looked down at her binoculars instead of her enemy.

Those binoculars were clearly equipped with a delicate computer and a large battery and now it was coated with white frost.

Needless to say, precision equipment was vulnerable to extremely low temperatures.

"It can't be..."

Quenser rushed in before she looked up again.

It didn't matter if the device was really broken or not. He had successfully gotten her eyes off of him for a moment while directly in front of her. Her immediate gunshot missed him and he tackled her with his full weight behind his shoulder.

Their feet left the ground.

A moment later, they slammed into the hard concrete and rolled along the roof together.

The large binoculars slipped from the woman's hands and bounced along.

But Quenser couldn't relax yet.

He couldn't defeat a commando in an honest fight. And if his adorable stepsister was correct, this special soldier had been modified just like Catherine and Putana. She managed to get on top of him and then aimed her poorly-silenced handgun at his face.

He shoved a pen-like electric fuse directly down the barrel. It was too late for her to panic now. The fuse was a delicate explosive itself, so if she pulled the trigger the gun would blow up. And he would detonate it for her if she didn't pull it.

He used his other hand to hit his radio's switch and blow up the gun.

The countless metal shards hit both of them equally.

She held her mutilated hand with her other hand and screamed.

"Gahhh!!"

Quenser's face felt hot.

He couldn't even imagine how much damage he had just taken.

(I need to protect Paris.)

Half his vision was blocked by a sticky dark red, but he still saw the woman roll off of him while holding her bloody hand and unsteadily crawl toward the fallen binoculars.

(I need to protect all the people living here.)

He had only blacked out for a few seconds due to the metal shards he took to the forehead, but his lack of reaction seemed to have convinced her he was dead. Or maybe she had lost too much blood to think straight.

He couldn't let her reach those binoculars. He had to protect all the people living in Paris.

No matter what.

"!!"

He had to do whatever it took.

He clenched his teeth, got up, and grabbed a TV antenna lying on the roof thanks to the explosion. The metal pole was thicker than his index finger and he grabbed it like a stake and rushed toward the woman's curled up back as she tried to collect the binoculars.

He stabbed her with it.

The special suit she wore under her clothes apparently had a lot of gaps, giving it poor bulletproofing.

She roared with anger and spun around to face him, but he shoved her away with both hands. The antenna rod must have done more damage than he had thought because she failed to prepare for her landing and hit the roof hard, her own weight driving the rod deeper into her back. The tip burst out from her chest.

But.

But even then, she didn't die.

She was lying on her back and coughing up blood, but she still clawed at the concrete roof. Her fingers found the large binoculars and a definite smile formed on her bloody lips.

The flip of a single switch would blast a scorching hole in Paris.

"Ohhhhh!!!!!" yelled Quenser.

He grabbed the metal antenna rod piercing her body and used the full strength of both his arms to stir it around, widening the dark red hole and finally pulling the entire rod out from her gut even though it had originally entered through her back.

"Die! Just die alreadyyyyyy!!"

Her body convulsed on the roof.

Quenser clenched his teeth but failed to suppress the scream that erupted from his throat as he stabbed the tip of the slick antenna back down into her. This time, into the face. And not just once – over and over. He kept doing it until she had stopped moving altogether.

"Please! Don't destroy our cityyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!!!"

Her face was no longer recognizable.

The hemispherical prosthetic eye was now lying on the roof next to her.

He realized her convulsing had stopped.

Biological death may have occurred well before this.

"Pant, pant."

He threw aside the dark red antenna rod and fell back on his butt. There was no human dignity left

in that mutilated corpse. It looked like a wild animal had feasted on it. He couldn't believe he had done that. But he had a feeling a mirror would reveal he was covered in her blood. He couldn't have looked more like a deranged murderer.

"Ha...ha ha."

His psyche had been pushed to the breaking point.

But he had still managed to preserve their usual city.

It hadn't been destroyed.

He had managed to protect the few million residents of Paris. Heivia, Frolytia, Monica, Catherine, and everyone else were still alive. As long as those binoculars didn't send out their signal, the long-distance Object strike would not occur.

The hero had prevailed.

If he didn't cling to that fact, his psyche really would shatter.

Or so he thought.

But then he noticed something on the roof. It had apparently fallen from the woman's clothing. Those were her dog tags. Apparently even a commando on an unofficial mission didn't use a fake name on those. Maybe because this was only a short-term mission and not a long-term espionage job. Or maybe the Faith Organization had been in such disarray after the destruction of Rome they hadn't been able to prepare the best equipment and fake IDs.

He stopped breathing when he saw what was written there.

Faith Organization Marine Commandos - Gnostic Witches Unit.

Cheddar Affi-

"!!!!!!"

He found himself straining his neck to avoid looking at a truth he didn't want to accept.

His fingers felt something else on the filthy roof.

"It's an Asian amulet. You aren't supposed to open it."

"Thanks. I hope it brings me good luck."

That conversation replayed in his mind, but the amulet Carat had given him was still in his pocket.

Then what was this?

Why was an identical amulet sitting on the bloody rooftop? Where had it come from?

"So what's your name?"

"...Carat Affinity."

He slowly looked both at the unusual amulet and the mutilated corpse.

"That...can't be true."

Come to think of it, he had never asked that boy which world power he was from. He had rescued the boy without thinking, so he knew very little about him.

Feeling the amulet between his fingers was enough to know it had a flat piece of wood or thick paper inside. He used his trembling fingers to untie the string keeping the small pouch closed. First, the one he had. A strange but simple pattern had been drawn on it crayon. A tall cross had been drawn with a line connecting the top to the right and another line connecting the left to the bottom.

Were those four lines supposed to form a compass needle?

The words "together by chance" were written directly below that. It was a popular phrase that different people found different meanings in. The pattern was not a square or a diamond, but the four lines gathered together to point in a specific direction like a compass. It may have been dedicated to the idea of people from different countries and factions coming together by chance to work together and help each other out.

Or maybe there was no deep meaning behind it at all.

Maybe it was just a neat pattern someone had come across while playing a matchstick quiz. Even the phrase might have been something someone saw while searching an online thesaurus or messing around with a machine translator. But Quenser still sensed the unique sensibilities of a small child. It carried a magic he lacked now that his hands were soaked with blood.

"No, it can't be...it can't!!"

He was breathing heavily now.

He untied the other amulet lying on the roof. He wanted so badly for the exterior to be the only similarity. He prayed for a difference, even if it was just a single line.

His prayers were answered.

The scrap of paper inside was different from the one he had.

Something else was written below the "together by chance" phrase: Good luck, mom.

"Gh, ah...gah!!"

He couldn't breathe. His stomach acid was pushing up into his throat.

Looking away and refusing to accept the truth earlier had been a mistake. The dog tags rushed into the center of his vision now.

Faith Organization Marine Commandos - Gnostic Witches Unit.

Cheddar Affinity.

His numb mind finally remembered how nauseous he was. He managed to turn away from the mutilated corpse, but that was all. The contents of his stomach traveled back up his esophagus and spewed out onto the roof.

"Oh, gh!? Gweh, abh!!!!!"

What had he done? Who had he killed?

Could he really call this - this! - the work of a hero?

There had to have been a chance to stop himself. What had he seen in Rome? Sarasa Gleamshifter had been perfectly reasonable. She had already proven for him that there were good people in the Faith Organization.

Yet he hadn't questioned his actions here.

...

In a dark, enclosed world, Quenser Barbotage finally realized he was being dragged somewhere.

By who?

Where to?

"He has what we're looking for."

"Ugh, are you sure? He's covered in blood."

"Cast out your doubts, thoughtless maid. He was lying next to that corpse. I'm sure he has at least begun to question this world war. Why else would the hero who saved Paris have collapsed in guilt next to the very enemy he killed?"

His world gradually opened up.

No, that question had directed his mind outwards once more. He still had enough defiance and rebellion to not want to let that stand.

A small girl spoke coldly next to a silent young man named Frank.

"Back with us now?"

"..."

She wore a black uniform, but she was not one of the Legitimacy Kingdom's Black Uniforms. She was from the Information Alliance. She was Wraith Martini Vermouthspray, a product of their genius girl project. She must have needed something to habitually fiddle with because she was twirling a pen-like device in one hand. He recalled that she was a special commander known as the Stopgap Grim Reaper who swiftly regathered a unit that was left hanging after its commander made a mistake (while actually using the surviving soldiers to buy time).

She was not alone.

Several mercenaries in maid uniforms stood around her. They belonged to the unidentified PMC they called the Battlefield Cleanup Service. Their blonde-haired brown-skinned leader was named Wydine

Uptown.

Wraith peered down at Quenser's face which had to be a mess of exhaustion and confusion.

"This world war will never end if we simply follow the orders of each world power's higher ups. Things are currently splitting between the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization in the Old World and the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance in the New World, but who knows how long that will last. The world war is growing more confused by the moment. This stained glass world is going to shatter even further. We hope to take action and end this before the flames of war continue to spread. Are you interested in joining us?"

"Are you serious, Information Alliance? You're one of the people who attacked Paris once we were defenseless."

"We are," admitted Wraith. And then, "I don't trust the Information Alliance any more than you do and that efficient but worthless world power isn't in command here. Feeling more interested in trusting us now?"

He noticed a strange decoration added to the unit insignia on Wraith's shoulder. It was a compass needle formed from a tall cross with the top and right points and the left and bottom points connected by lines. It had been hastily added with spray paint. The compass was positioned above and left of the insignia, so it wasn't overwriting that. The insignia was positioned perfectly in the right angle there.

"Everyone who has gathered in opposition of the world war is doing this," bluntly explained the girl.

The Stopgap Grim Reaper was a special commander who regathered units that had fallen due to a military scandal. Was Wraith doing that on a global level now that she had left the Information Alliance?

"We're calling ourselves Together By Chance. We have gathered together by chance to cast off our ties to the world powers and join forces to end the world war."

Quenser felt the contents of his stomach rising.

This could not be mere coincidence. Had Wraith and the others named their group after seeing the amulet that had so devastated Quenser?

But at this point, a more fundamental question occurred to him.

Where were they?

It looked like a dirt and mud airfield forcibly built in a vineyard. Some Capitalist Corporations Zig-27 fighters were stopped alongside the runway with low pressure tires installed. There were also a few Legitimacy Kingdom S/G-31 delta wing fighters. The Ice Squadron and Burning Squadron insignia on their wings had the same compass needle pattern painted next to them.

The place appeared to be mostly made from the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's infrastructure, but it may have been more than that. The Legitimacy Kingdom's Frolaytia Capistrano and the Information Alliance's Lendy Farolito were viewing the same tablet and analyzing some intel. Staccato Raylong, better known by the codename of Burning Alpha, was teasing a 12-year-old pilot girl who responded with open anger. Heivia and Myonri were trading rations with the soldiers from other world powers for a taste test. Black Uniform Charlotte Zoom, the 7th Special Training Unit's Elise Montana, and some others were discussing new rules and working out a schedule for the day to come. There were even some volunteers from the Faith Organization. Quenser caught sight of Millia Newburg, the intelligence agent who could go undercover anywhere, Sarasa Gleamshifter and more of the Valkyries who handled public morals and executions for the Faith Organization police, and Putana Highball who had once been a Faith Organization Pilot Elite.

The Legitimacy Kingdom, Capitalist Corporations, Information Alliance, and Faith Organization were all present.

Except those categories no longer existed here. These were the people who were sick of the world war after seeing all the bloodshed and chaos in Rome and Paris.

Together By Chance.

They had only happened to be in the same place at the same time, but that was enough. People who never should have had anything in common had gathered together and agreed to work toward a single goal.

Some of them were more than just soldiers. There were the triplet Martini Series genius girls and several Pilot Elites like Catherine and Putana. Prisoners with a criminal past like Azurefear and Louisiana were also present. Those geniuses were a step away from being entirely mad, but their opinions were being gathered by Claire Whist, an Object designer wearing a lab coat over a bikini.

The eyepatched maid was Karen who usually served the Winchell family. Sogia, Sanya, and the rest of the infamous Unicorns were protecting the daughter of the Vanderbilt family and Princess Staivia. Those two would be more useful when it came to international law and political power than in actual combat.

And to top it all off, Quenser heard the sound of a cloth being pulled away. The old maintenance lady had removed a hard painter's mask from her mouth. The Baby Magnum and the Rush now had the same compass needle pattern painted large alongside their unit insignia.

"We barely have more than two mobile maintenance battalions' worth of personnel and equipment and just the two Objects. That means we have a unit of around 2000," calmly stated Wraith. "But

that isn't near enough to seriously challenge the Information Alliance's Manhattan 000 and the rest of those intent on continuing this world war. We need as many people as we can possibly get - every last one counts. So help us, Quenser. We need your daring and cunning here."

The boy looked down at his hands.

They were weak and still covered in a rusty-smelling liquid. He had almost certainly sent that boy's mother to the depths of hell and the boy would feel like the same had happened to him. It had been one-on-one, so Quenser couldn't blame anyone else. If he simply trusted in being a hero and continued on as before, that would happen again. So what could he trust in now? He would fight to stop this shitty world war. Tear-jerking stories of heroism were fine, but how was he supposed to find something that let him really believe in them again!?

"Quenser, what did you see in that war? What did you do in it?"

"..."

"Can't bring yourself to answer, huh? ...Neither can any of us. We all made serious mistakes in this world war and then didn't even have the decency to die for it. It's the pure and the good who die first in this hopeless world, so if we want to save anyone, we have to do the wrong thing. And if we don't do anything to change that, it will only get worse. We've seen too much of it already. We don't have room for even a drop more."

So they would wipe everything clean.

They would stop hanging their heads and taking it. They would fight in order to atone for their sins and look to the future once more.

They would start over from where they were.

None of them could say when it would be, but one day they would reclaim a world where everyone could trust in heroism and live happy lives.

So they couldn't let this world war manipulate them any longer.

No matter what.

"Wraith."

"Yes?"

"Hand me that spray paint."

They had to end this colossal mistake as soon as possible.

With the sound of spraying gas, Quenser added on to the unit insignia on his shoulder. He drew a long cross, a diagonal line connecting to the top to the right, and another diagonal line connecting the left to the bottom. He was not rejecting the Legitimacy Kingdom. The cross was situated on the insignia's upper left, showing that he would respect his and everyone else's birthplaces while they looked to a shared vision of the future.

Together By Chance. Maybe he didn't have the right to bear that signal while covered in so much blood.

(But...)

Everything seemed to come into focus for Quenser Barbotage.

He could see something clearly now.

(But if I can stop this, I have to do it.)

"Where are we starting?"

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray smiled at his question.

The fact that she had invited him here meant she had given him more trust than he felt he deserved. She had trusted he could grit his teeth and get back on his feet no matter how badly he had been beaten.

"This world war began with the destruction of the Faith Organization home country of Rome," began Wraith. "In a true display of 'courage', those chickens in the Faith Organization proved they were more afraid of being the only losers than they were interested in pursuing the truth, so they lashed out, blamed the Legitimacy Kingdom, and launched a misguided reprisal. But we'll never reach the people who are truly responsible if we waste our time on them."

"But Bad Garage are already gone. We defeated them."

"Are you suggesting resentful Bad Garage arrived at their environmental destruction by Objects theory all on their own?"

"..."

Quenser had a feeling they hadn't.

They had pursued the research paper written by 9-year-old Elina Silverbullet in the Tunguska District in order to lend more credence to their theory. That meant they had not been confident enough in their own research.

“Someone fed them that knowledge in the first place.” Wraith slapped a stack of papers against Quenser’s chest. “We discovered this in Bad Garage’s hideout. Or more accurately, we acquired it by having a computer reconstruct the fragmentary text on the burnt remains left in their fireplace. They abandoned that place well before meeting Elina. The real villain sent them a few research papers while also fanning the flames of their emotions. The terrorists of every era are always sadly reliant on their backers. The information being fed to Bad Garage was cherrypicked to manipulate them. A clever move by the villain, I must say.”

“Who was it?” cautiously asked Quenser.

If they screwed this up and attacked the wrong person, they would never get a second chance at it.

“Who was smirking in the shadows while masterminding an attack on Rome, starting a world war, and sending the world straight to hell?”

“We already have that answer. It was right there in the documents their fireplace failed to burn properly.” Wraith’s answer was a short one.

“The Island Nation.”

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