

Chapter 6: -----Determination----- >> Mission to Rescue the Entire Earth

Part 1

It was 4 AM.

Some might call that early morning instead of late night, but it was still too soon for dawn.

Nevertheless, an excessively bright and large explosion at the peak of Mount Fuji swept away all the darkness.

“Laser fortress gun is confirmed destroyed and Mount Fuji’s height has been reduced by more than 2m!! That was the Manhattan’s electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon recorded in our previous battle report. It uses a giant railgun to launch a JPlevelMHD reactor that blows away its target with a blast of tens of thousands of degrees Celsius over dozens of kilometers. The center reaches a temperature of...100 million? M-Mount Fuji’s surface has been glassed by the high temperature!!!!!!”

The cruiser operator’s shouted report explained the highly unusual mountaintop sunrise they had witnessed.

The entire ship rattled and the inertial force nearly tossed the crew to the side thanks to the rapid atmospheric disturbance producing an artificial storm with a massive pressure difference. Frolaytia braced herself against the sideways movement of the ship and checked the monitor to see several unusual streaks of light near the mountain summit. Unnatural lightning had to be striking there.

This Object’s range and power were both off the charts. If one of those was dropped into Tokyo Bay, the entire Together By Chance fleet could be wiped out. And the Manhattan could do more than just that.

That was just one of the many cards in its deck.

It had positioned its 20km self in the only exit from the bay, so it was not going to let them escape.

Frolaytia toyed with her kiseru.

“The Capulet AI network and the Juliet that manages the Rush are compatible, aren’t they? Could your Pilot Elite stage a cyber attack against the Manhattan 000?”

“It’s called the Gatling 033. And things are different from last time. There might be some online vulnerability in the Capulet, but it will have already been manually fixed. Generally speaking, cyber attacks are one-use things.”

The question was why the Manhattan – no, the Information Alliance – wanted to fight here.

Frolaytia Capistrano and Lendy Farolito listed off the possibilities together.

“Possibility 1: Some Together By Chance members came from the Information Alliance. This could be meant to purge those who disobeyed their orders and left the military...all in order to get them to obey the will of the world powers.”

“Possibility 2: They may also want to preserve the world war that has torn apart the world powers, so they want to eliminate Together By Chance since our goal is to end it.”

Both options meant battle, but their position in that battle changed entirely. Did the Manhattan want to preserve the world powers or doom them? Unfortunately, either option made sense for the Manhattan. It would benefit greatly either way.

A tense moment followed.

Lendy Farolito used her chin to gesture toward the radio, so Frolaytia Capistrano accepted the transmission from the front lines with an exhalation of smoke.

(Why do I always get stuck with the worst jobs? I bet this dumbass idol lover climbed the ranks by crushing her rivals under all the annoying work.)

“Listen.”

“Melly Martini Extradry? Did you bring the Manhattan all the way out here as a spokesperson for the Capulet?” asked Frolaytia.

“We have already achieved our goal in this world war. The Legitimacy Kingdom, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization’s social and mental support pillars have been destroyed. Thus, the old world powers paradigm no longer holds meaning. Lay down your arms. We have ended this war already. The Information Alliance has survived the world war as the only worthy power, so the time has come to rule the entire planet on our own.”

(Has she completely fallen to the AI network? No, it’s too soon to decide she’s a Martini Series gone berserk. She is technically benefiting the Information Alliance as a whole here.)

They had contacted Melly before, but she sounded like an entirely different person now. She was probably reading from a script, which also explained the lack of three digit numbers.

Those numbers were apparently tags that helped her recall the memories later, so did that mean she didn’t consider this worth committing to memory?

Frolaytia bit the mouthpiece of her kiseru.

She strongly told herself now was not the time to let her emotions show.

(So it isn't even Possibility 2? She doesn't care what the rest of the world powers want. She isn't listening to anyone else!)

Lendy erased all the text covering her whiteboard and added a new message in large black writing at the very center. She made certain not to make any noise as she did so.

The rest of the world powers mean nothing. Wants to end it with only IA surviving?

Using the world war.

Probably going around breaking pillars needed to support other world powers.

Frolaytia nodded.

That wasn't enough to take control of the conversation, but having someone else visualize the information helped organize her confused thoughts.

Melly Martini Extradry continued speaking.

"The war is already over and we are merely declaring victory. Again I tell all surviving soldiers to lay down your arms. Obey any further instructions from us and await the restructuring. We do not wish for any unnecessary bloodshed. I repeat, as the new managers of this world, the Information Alliance does not wish for any unnecessary bloodshed."

The war was already over?

What had happened in the rest of the world while Frolaytia and the others were fighting in the Island Nation?

Had they been left behind by history like a soldier trembling in the deep jungle and cut off from all outside information?

If the Legitimacy Kingdom no longer existed, could Frolaytia find a strong enough reason inside herself to continue fighting?

But then...

"Now hold on there. If you really had us so thoroughly checkmated, you wouldn't need to come tell

us all this, would you? It's pretty obvious you're bluffing and hoping we'll fold."

This didn't come from Frolaytia Capistrano or Melly Martini Extradry.

It was Quenser Barbotage.

Melly's self-centered announcement came to a stop, so it was possible the Martini Series and the Capulet were of split opinions.

The ordinary boy's voice spoke over the radio again.

"This isn't over yet."

He did not hesitate.

He was part of the group that had gathered to end the world war.

Frolaytia and Lendy were as well.

"Three of the table's legs have been broken. Leave it like that and maybe there is no stopping the world from collapsing. But there is one way left of restabilizing it. We stop using the legs. Maybe we'll nail it to the wall and maybe we'll suspend it from the ceiling, but we don't need you anymore."

So no one stopped him.

No one could stop that battlefield student with no real authority of his own.

And eventually...

"Are you saying you will kill us - 251 - and end the world war? Ah ha ha. The Manhattan 000 is no more than a tool. The Capulet and the Martini Series are only pieces of the AI network, so you haven't even seen the core of the Information Alliance for yourself."

There was more than tension in Melly's voice.

There was also a strange elation that didn't fit the circumstances or her appearance.

No one had noticed what was so wrong with the world, but now she had found the one person who had. Her young spine may have been tingling with excitement.

"Yeah, last time the Capulet AI Network said she was the camouflage used to hide the Information Alliance's true representatives." Quenser punctuated that with a snort of laughter. "I guess it would be mean of me to suspect those 'true representatives' don't really exist. But if they haven't shown themselves with all this going on, they might as well not exist. Maybe they're programmers or analysts, but I'm betting they aren't the warfighting type. At the very least, they can't influence our field out here."

"So - 979 - are you saying you can kill me?"

"I'm shouting it. You apparently get off to walking around the camera-filled city in nothing but body paint, but courage and taking on greater risks don't actually increase your strength. Once the truth is out, you're the one who'll be in tears."

Thus, he wasn't interested in how deep the Information Alliance rabbit hole went.

Quenser Barbotage wasn't going to let the information deceive him any longer. He was already facing the actual enemy he needed to defeat.

And he made one final statement.

"Maybe the Capulet AI Network really doesn't have a center point. But I'm the only one in the world who knows where to find your weak point - the breaker you intentionally had made. You're the one who taught me there that you're like a billboard and anyone who realizes the truth is given great riches to ensure their silence. Isn't that right, Capulet?"

Part 2

It was 4 in the morning at Tokyo Bay.

The time had come to end the world war.

Quenser Barbotage and the rest of Together By Chance's final target was history's largest Object, the Manhattan 000. If they could get through this, Quenser could shut off the only breaker for the massive Capulet AI Network that was trying to break free of the four world powers paradigm and rule the world with only the Information Alliance.

They could no longer use their armored truck now that it had fallen into the underground space that was in truth a human factory used to support the Island Nation's population. Quenser and the others climbed back to the surface where they stole a civilian vehicle and drove back to Ichigaya. The fire must have never reached the ammo dump, so they took military vehicles from the garrison and returned to Tokyo Bay with that. They had 8-wheeled armored trucks, rocket launcher vehicles, and even actual tanks, but it all felt so inadequate.

At 20km long, the Manhattan 000 was absurd even for an Object. Was there any amount of gear that

would make them feel safe against that?

"The Anastasia Processor," muttered Wraith Martini Vermouthspray aboard the military truck she rode with the taciturn young man.

They drove toward the ocean.

However, Quenser's group aboard an 8-wheeled armored truck was not taking the ordinary road back east along the Sobu-Chuo Line to reach Ariake or Odaiba. The Manhattan 000 was positioned at the southern entrance to Tokyo Bay, which meant it was near Kanagawa, at the Tokyo Bay exit of the Uraga Channel. Needless to say, heading out onto the open ocean would just get them blasted. They would leave those forceful tactics to the Baby Magnum and the Rush while they circled around to the rear.

"We're already in Yokohama," said Heivia from the same armored truck's roof. "Damn Island Nation isn't even putting up a resistance anymore."

"Yeah, all the bridges and overpasses are still up. Maybe they realized this isn't their fight anymore. They'd need a death wish to attack us over the Manhattan."

Quenser's group followed the Keihin-Tohoku Line south and then hid among the buildings to reach Yokosuka. Driving the armored truck full speed from Tokyo, it took 30 or 40 minutes. Mariydi and the other pilots had taken out the port when they attacked, but that didn't mean there was no usable equipment or facilities there.

They entered the off limits area of the Port of Yokosuka, a shared government and civilian port.

Heivia whistled when he checked inside.

"This hangar was entirely untouched. They've got patrol boats, amphibious coastal mine layers, and air cushion landing craft."

"We'll be fighting at sea, so let's pull out everything that might be usable. If you can't find anything, use your head. If you can't think up anything, then we'll be stuck swimming through the cold February ocean the old fashioned way. Hurry!"

The Manhattan 000 was not just a massive barricade.

It was equipped with a wide variety of weaponry and was heavily fortified with sensors and radars, so they had to assume its eyes and ears were better than theirs. Myonri let out a small cry as she messed with the radar aboard an air cushion landing craft. Someone must have pointed out the Manhattan 000 might detect her signal.

Without panicking or making a fuss, Quenser brought his radio to his mouth.

He had never expected to make it the whole way unnoticed. They had only wanted to reduce the risk of being fired on during their approach as much as possible. Getting this close to the Uraga Channel without the skyscrapers around them being vaporized meant a lot.

So now he sent a transmission straight to #29 of the genius girl project.

"Melly."

"Yes? 115."

She was back to her usual way of talking.

There was a clear difference between the announcement she had made to Frolaytia and Lendy and when she was speaking with Quenser. Maybe this was how she sounded when not reading off a prepared script.

"I want to confirm one thing before we start. What happens to the people of Manhattan? They won't be thrown into the ocean to drown if we sink that, will they?"

"Those ordinary people couldn't endure the g-forces of Object movement. 502. So during combat, they are preserved inside transparent cubes. They can float around frozen inside there for three years after being thrown out into the ocean."

"I see," said Quenser. He had ice in his voice. "Without them as hostages, you've thrown out your last hope. We won't hesitate now."

The potatoes boarded patrol boats and amphibious armored trucks and set out into the sea.

The Manhattan 000's first shot arrived at the same moment.

The Port of Yokosuka was reduced to charred earth instantly.

The electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon launched JPlevelMHD reactors as disposable tools and detonated them at the center of the attack area to create a massive crater. The location Quenser and the others had just vacated had been flattened, buildings and all, and a large chunk was taken out of the ground, allowing seawater to rush in.

A gust of wind slapped Quenser in the cheek. It had carried some water with it. That one blast stirred up the atmosphere, creating a sudden storm.

Heivia took a look around.

“So where are we?”

“At the Uraga Channel’s exit. Although we’re closer to Sagami Bay than Tokyo Bay.”

They didn’t have time to look back.

Its attacks could fall on the ocean as well. If they didn’t split up in a hurry, they could all be wiped out with a single attack.

“To honor your courage, I’ll open up one of Manhattan’s aquariums for you. 515. You’ll be stripped bare and submerged in a gelatin pool that gives you the oxygen and nutrients you need to survive while people gawk at you like some kind of endangered species.”

She made it sound so simple, but that told Quenser she really intended to do it.

An age where a single person could rule the entire world like this would mean a society where no one could question them no matter how grotesque they were.

The world would be remade to satisfy an individual’s interests.

So Quenser gave a warning.

“Melly.”

“And if you do die, I can sterilize your body and stuff a drying agent up your nose inside an oxygen-free space. When the human body’s moisture falls below 50%, the putrefying bacteria can’t function, so you will be forever preserved. 169. I’ll open a museum for you. And each and every one of you will be accurately labeled as too stupid to live. Your shame will be displayed there for all eternity.”

“That bad joke will come back to haunt you. Have you never heard of the brazen bull? The man who proudly presented his new execution device to his leader became its first victim when he was thrown inside and the fire was lit below it. The same will happen to you.”

In the pouring rain, Quenser and Heivia were both aboard an air cushion landing craft designed to carry a tank. Myonri and Azurefear were with them.

“No, why do I always get stuck with them!? Wait, please wait! I want to board that patrol boat! Please don’t leave me with them!!”

“Myonri, we need to have a chat later.”

Quenser made a mental note of that.

Meanwhile, a very different hell was playing out on the boat.

“My brother□”

“Gyahhh!?”

“Catherine Barbotage and I got separated at some point, but the way she honestly expressed her feelings convinced me a brother and sister need so much more physical intimacy than we have enjoyed. We need to flirt while we fight like those two do! And no time like the present to start!!”

“Please realize there’s something severely wrong with anything that combines flirting with fighting!!!!!!”

Heivia pushed his annoying sister’s face away with one hand while yelling at her. Quenser didn’t care all that much, but he was mildly curious how Azureyfear was doing so well. Hadn’t Sladder Honeysuckle shot her back in the Tunguska District?

“I’m down with picking a fight with that thing, but how are we gonna do this, Quenser!? For that matter, how many reactors does the Manhattan even have? It launches the damn things like disposable shells. I’d find it hard to believe it just has one of them installed at the very center like an Island Nation hinomaru bento!!”

They were about 10km away. That might seem like a lot when thinking in terms of foot travel, but for the 20km Manhattan, that was only half its own length. Just one step to either side and it could crush them.

The lighthouse wharf, the yacht harbor, and all the other life-sized obstacles sticking out into the ocean from the Manhattan looked like the small teeth on an electric saw’s chain.

“That thing can make full use of its 20km length, right? It must be full to bursting with energy on the inside. That’s a strength and a weakness both. We should be able to do a lot of damage if we blow up the reactor itself, the pipes or cables used to transfer the energy, or the various safety devices.”

The ocean itself shook as the Manhattan 000 turned.

It turned to face them like someone swatting at a fly.

An actual attack would be coming next.

Except they had a more imminent threat to worry about.

“Eh?”

Myonri looked so far up she strained her neck.

She was looking up at a 30m tall wall. The Manhattan had created the large wave just by shaking itself like a surfboard.

Heivia shouted into his radio.

“Angle yourselves toward the wave!! Pulling back out of fear will get you capsized!!”

That was correct in theory, but how many of the boats could actually make use of the advice? Quenser and Heivia’s air cushion landing craft managed to pass through the tunnel-like wave before it crashed down (it helped that the air cushion meant it was not in direct contact with the water), but...

“Kh!!”

“Stop! Do you want to die!?”

Quenser reached for the edge of the boat, but Azureyfear forcibly stopped him.

A nearby patrol boat, which was supposedly designed for ocean use, was smashed to pieces and swallowed up by the dark ocean. The Manhattan was attacking them using the waves. So many soldiers hoping to end the world war had to have been aboard that boat, but there was nothing anyone could do for them.

This wasn’t over yet.

The Manhattan 000 hadn’t even fired on them yet.

“Eek, eek!”

Not even the high-speed Simple Is Best had affected its surroundings this much. Myonri clung to the wall to avoid being flung out into the rising and falling ocean and she tearfully shouted for assistance.

“Baby Magnum!! Princess!! Please come here!! We’ve already engaged the Manhattan 000 in-”

There was no response.

In fact, Myonri never finished her sentence.

Why wasn’t the Manhattan 000 firing on them when it should have been able to at any time? She had belatedly realized the only possible reason.

A bright light shined in the distance.

The shockwave slapped them in the face a moment later.

But they weren’t about to complain about the pain. When someone’s life was spared, it meant someone else’s life was being targeted. That coldhearted rule of fighting on the losing side bared its fangs here.

They heard a shouted report over the radio.

“I-it’s been destroyed... The Baby Magnum has been destroyed!”

It only took one shot.

Everything the Manhattan 000 did was over the top.

Part 3

(This battle is going from bad to worse.)

Mariydi Whitewitch hated how coldly calculating she could be at times like this.

She only clicked her tongue while piloting her Zig-27 fighter. Not even the hard rock playing from her phone could preserve her good mood. The special oxygen tube extending toward her mouth like a headset continued to provide the optimal amount using the data sent by the small mic attached to her throat, but that couldn’t prevent the tingling displeasure in the back of her head.

(The Information Alliance Object is our top priority! If we lose our only remaining Object, we’ll have lost any method of sinking that monster!!)

The enemy was the center of New York itself. Dropping aerial bombs from a fighter wouldn’t even scratch it. In fact, she wasn’t sure a bomber’s FAE bombs or bunker busters would be enough to

damage the depths of that thing.

"It's no use. The lasers are already coming. I can see them because of the raindrops. Burning Alpha, I- ahhhhh!?"

"Eject, Plus Del- arrrgh, goddammit!! This world war can go to hell! That kid was only 17!!!"

She heard a loud explosion followed by a wail of sorrow from Burning Alpha.

But this wasn't an issue of poor skills. That fighter had been hit by a blast of wind or something just beforehand.

Mariydi softly bit her lip. As a squadron leader, she knew all too well how painful it was to fail to protect a member of your squadron.

They needed something - anything - to turn the tide.

They were not the only ones taking damage. Everyone was exposed to the threat of death out here. If they didn't find some way to escape and soon, someone else they cared about would die. It could be a member of Ice Squadron next time.

And the crucial key to surviving this was...

"Information. Okay, fine!"

"Ice Sword 2 to Ice Girl 1. What are you doing!?"

(I hate those Objects from the bottom of my heart for getting paid so much when they aren't even putting their life at risk, but my squadron will die without their help here!!)

She had no intention of answering her squadron member's question. Because if she did, all three of them were sure to follow her toward near-certain doom.

Mariydi adjusted her grip on the stick and felt the powerful g-forces lifting her stomach. It must have affected her ears too because the hard rock sounded briefly distorted. Her Zig-27 rapidly lost altitude and then flew straight toward the Manhattan while skimming just above the ocean.

(Damn, did I catch on something? Is the Manhattan manipulating the air currents to protect its urban areas from its own movements?)

A fighter canopy had no wipers. Drops of water were kept off with water-repelling chemicals and

with the fighter's own speed.

She soared through a city of skyscrapers at Mach 2.

Something like transparent vines were tangled around the buildings. 3m cubes also covered the ground. She knew they were protecting the buildings and people from the rapid movement, but the bizarre image still sent a chill down her spine.

(Modern military fighters have multiple sensors attached around the undercarriage to assist takeoff and landing at night and during stormy weather. I should be able to find something if I run a careful scan of the Manhattan with those: locations of main and secondary cannons, layout of underground cables from the heat distribution, number and location of reactors, and so on. I don't need to find everything. Just a few of them should help fill in the rest of the blanks like with a crossword puzzle!!)

The Manhattan's great size meant it actually had trouble targeting something less than 10m above it. The cannons couldn't track it and the buildings got in the line of fire.

The Zig-27 flew straight through the metropolis.

Anything not fixed in place must have still been affected by the inertial forces because she saw a large propane tank fly by next to her. The glass shards raining down from above suggested she had applied too much pressure to the smooth skyscrapers. Sucking those in through the air intake would lead to engine trouble.

Once she flew out over the ocean on the other side, the colossal Manhattan gave a groan.

"!?"

That moment stretched out toward eternity as she sensed death approaching. Everything seemed to freeze around her as that fact dawned on her. But this wasn't like the close calls of the past. The frozen time of impending doom did not end a moment later. She was trapped in a cage and moving the control column now wouldn't allow her to escape the Manhattan's shot.

Her fighter shuddered from within. The jet engine may have absorbed some invisible town gas while she flew through the city.

She smiled a little.

And then she focused on her radio instead of the control column.

"Ice Girl 1 to Ice Squadron. Obey Burning Alpha's orders from here on. It was a pleasure flying with you all."

"Ice Girl 1!!"

"Burning Alpha, I hate everything else about you, but you do have some skill. Enough to look after the squadron I value more than my own life. I will never forgive you if you let them die. Got that?"

A moment later, time sped back up and the Manhattan's anti-air laser beam vaporized the Zig-27.

Part 4

Once one piece of the puzzle crumbled, the rhythm of the entire battle collapsed.

Just like a crack only a few millimeters long causing an aircraft made from tens of thousands of precision parts to break apart in midair.

The white beam looked like a welding torch burning the predawn sky.

Former Elites Catherine Barbotage and Putana Highball brushed their rain-wet bangs aside with a hand and shouted while operating personal amphibious motorbikes used for ocean patrols.

"Someone was shot down!!"

"We can't let that happen again. Let's make a more direct attack."

The two amphibious motorbikes tore through the oceanwater to approach the Manhattan. Of course, that was a 20km collection of firepower. Even if it had trouble aiming at anything too close, it could still crash into them or attack them with waves. Close in was not a blind spot. In fact, it just put you in range of its most deadly attacks.

Scrap materials were floating everywhere. All of them must have belonged to sturdy warships originally. They had to skillfully swerve around those to avoid hitting them.

There were other things caught on some of the metal panels, like a scrap of a military uniform or even a severed arm.

That wasn't the end result of making a mistake.

That was the end result of doing everything right. The Manhattan 000 wasn't really a weapon anymore - it was a human slaughterhouse. Charging at it was not an attack - it was diving headfirst into a woodchipper.

However...

"It might be impossible for normal people, but not for us. Because we have been thoroughly modified as Elites," muttered Catherine under her breath.

In her opinion, the Manhattan crashing into them was a more fearsome attack than the cannons. But at the same time, that required the Manhattan to approach them. A normal person would be obliterated along with their boat, but that might change with an Elite's thoroughly boosted muscles and reflexes. They would have a chance to jump onto the Manhattan's coast just as their amphibious motorbikes were being destroyed.

Metal containers rained from the sky. Anything not fixed in place properly on the Manhattan would be thrown into the air by the inertial forces. Any one of those would be enough to kill them instantly.

Catherine heard a bubbling sound reminiscent of a fizzy drink. It came from the ocean below. The Manhattan may have used extremely small air bubbles to move its large size so quickly. Which would mean it was now close enough for those bubbles to reach them.

However...

"...? Be careful. I sense some 'eyes'. Rising rapidly from below!!"

Immediately after Putana's shouted warning, the ocean surface parted and several spear-like weapons burst out. Were those high-tech torpedoes fired from the submerged portion of the Manhattan? It felt more like having a machinegun firing up at them from the ocean floor. Putana and Catherine barely managed to avoid them by twisting the handlebars to snake along in an S-shape, but that wasn't the end of it. After shooting up to a height of 10m, the explosives inside the spears detonated them and they each scattered more than 800 small metal balls in every direction like a deadly umbrella.

"That's just cruel!!" Catherine clenched her teeth.

These weren't all being controlled by a complex AI. These were unmanned weapons controlled by simple circuitry that reproduced the movement of swarming insects through basic yes or no questions.

Still, they were nearly at the Manhattan's wharf. After being exposed to so much danger for an extended period of time, their minds had to be such a mess of adrenaline and endorphins that their sense of pain wasn't working properly, so they would have to check for injuries after arriving on land.

"I hope they don't have a weapon that concentrates all the city's exhaust gases and polluted water."

Catherine suddenly realized Putana was looking a bit higher than straight ahead.

Puzzled, the younger girl looked in the same direction.

“S-so many ‘eyes’...”

At first, it looked like a sandstorm.

Or like a swarm of hornets covering the horizon.

But it was neither. That was the hundreds of thousands of drone weapons launched by the Manhattan. Each one was only the size of an open parasol, but with that many, they looked more like an Eastern dragon flying through the sky.

“There are too many ‘eyes’. We can’t avoid them all!!”

No plan or instructions could help them now.

The two girls were soon swallowed up by the swarm of light metal and silicon weapons.

Part 5

“Oh, dear. This might be our worst mistake yet. I think we joined the wrong side of this fight,” said Alisa Martini Sweet inside their amphibious armored truck.

“B-but it’s too late to change sides now,” protested the ordinary young man, trembling.

“Gh!?”

“Oh, did that hurt, Alisa? S-sorry!!”

Everyone knew he couldn’t relax his grip while pale and trembling like that. Even the timid young man himself.

Alisa Martini Sweet’s right arm had been broken when the force of several simultaneous blasts had rocked the floating armored truck hard enough to slam her against the wall. This wasn’t a hospital and it had no real medical equipment, so they had made do by removing the extendible stock from a submachinegun and wrapping a bandage around that as a makeshift splint. For some reason she stubbornly refused to take the general-use painkiller used by the military (which was a lot stronger than the commercial variety).

The triplet was pale and sweating but also thinly smiling for some reason.

In fact, she had a string of drool dripping from her corner of her mouth.

"Yes, yes. Heh heh heh," she laughed, breathing somewhat heavily. "A single broken arm is a small price to pay for all the attention it gets me. Too bad, Orsia and Rica. He's mine today!"

"Bff!? What is wrong with you?"

"Look, I can prop my boobs up on my arm sling. Behold the power of the biggest boobs in the family."

"Again, what is wrong with you!? You're just going to hurt your broken arm that way! A-anyway, no one likes someone who goes back on their word. We chose this path, so we just have to stick with it to the end!"

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Then Rica Martini Medium, who had her upper body sticking out of the hatch in the ceiling, gathered their attention by kicking the ladder she stood on.

"I've found her. The Legitimacy Kingdom Pilot Elite is floating in the ocean. Dunno if she's alive or not, but we can still collect her and earn their favor."

"(Medium, what if we turn her over to the Information Alliance as a gift instead?)"

"(Dry, don't be ridiculous. An Elite without an Object is fairly worthless. The Manhattan 000 is too powerful, so she wouldn't be much use in the fight anymore. And if she's dead, she might not even be worth slicing open to study. ...Besides, I seriously doubt our kind friend down there will agree to that kind of coldhearted negotiation.)"

That was a no then.

And they would get nothing if there was no one left to negotiate with, so they would have to continue resisting and protect everyone from the Manhattan 000's deadly attacks.

They were willing to sacrifice their own lives, but they could not let that helpless and ordinary young man die.

For now, they had to retrieve that Pilot Elite.

The young man nervously tapped the control lever.

“U-um, should I bring us in closer?”

“She’d be reduced to mincemeat if the propeller caught her, so no. We’ll climb up top and find something to use as a net...or if we can’t find one, a long stick will do.”

On the triplets’ guidance, the young man climbed up onto the amphibious armored truck’s roof and noticed the occasional glimpse of a distinctive blue coloration between the waves.

But could they reach her from here?

She was too far to crouch down and reach by arm, but then Orsia Martini Dry handed him something.

“Here, use this.”

“A-an anti-materiel rifle!?”

“It’s a fishing rod□ Or maybe a hand net? I say it’s 50/50 she’s alive or dead, but stretch out and reach the tip toward that Elite. You’re good at goldfish scooping, right? You always win it for us.”

That weapon could shoot down the more thinly-armored varieties of attack helicopter in a single shot, but this was about all it was good for in the fight against the Manhattan 000. The young man was left speechless by the overwhelming scale of it all, but he still took the anti-materiel rifle, crouched down, and reached it out toward the dark ocean.

Noticing something, the triplets exchanged a nod and then shoved him into the ocean.

He was confused until the end.

The three girls in love smiled thinly just before a blast from the Manhattan 000 mercilessly eliminated the armored truck floating in the ocean.

Part 6

The Scarlet Princess, a 380m disguised cruiser, moved out.

Orders bordering on screams were exchanged as soldiers carrying repair materials rushed around to seal up the holes in the ship, but the damage had reached Leve 5 in four different locations and there wasn’t anything they could really do. And there were far more smaller holes. Even by the most generous estimate, the ship would be sunk in 15 minutes’ time. And they doubted the Manhattan 000 was gentlemanly enough to spare the helpless soldiers fleeing in lifeboats.

That left them with only one option.

Oh Ho Ho in the Gatling 033 was everything for Commander Lendy Farolito, but she gave a puzzled look to her fellow brain.

“You have no obligation to stick with us here.”

“Now that our Baby Magnum has been destroyed, the Rush is our greatest and only weapon left. Without it, we have no way of dealing effective damage to the Manhattan. And that would mean death for everyone in this battle.”

Frolaytia Capistrano relit her kiseru.

She may have meant this as a final smoke.

“Also, our true flagship is the one carrying Princess Staivia, so we can play the role of the privates pouring all our energy into achieving victory.”

“And your real reason?”

“The longer we keep its attention on us, the more chance someone has of collecting the Princess.”

Lendy Farolito and Frolaytia shared a smile.

War was best with a touch of personal interest mixed in.

So they both shouted their next command together.

“Charge!!”

The Manhattan did not even bother to dodge.

For one thing, its top speed was on par with other Objects, but it could not perform the nimble footwork necessary to avoid laser beams and railguns.

It tanked everything with its weight and thickness.

So it let the ship crash into it.

Frolaytia and Lendy had made the attack, but it was them who were tossed around inside their ship.

Frolaytia clenched her teeth and raised her voice after being slammed against the wall.

The ship was going to sink soon regardless, so they might as well do whatever they could in that time.

“Are we caught on its shore!? Then keep firing until we’re out of ammo. Aim for the Manhattan – where doesn’t matter. Target anything other than the cubes containing the civilians. Let’s show Melly how much ammo this ship still has in its belly. Fire!!!!!!”

They loaded more propellant than usual, so when all the ship’s guns fired simultaneously, its armor shutters bent and its bulletproof glass shattered.

The asphalt was torn up and dark soil was flung into the air.

But that was all.

The silver armor panels below that weren’t even scratched. How thick was that armor in all?

“The Capulet AI Network isn’t actually aboard the Manhattan. I don’t know where it really is, but we can cut off its commands by destroying the antenna facilities!!”

“And which ones are we supposed to destroy!? From the cellphone antenna base stations to the satellite TV antennas on house roofs, there are more than 10 million of them!!”

“Kh!!”

The Manhattan was both a weapon and a giant city. The operator looked back for her next instructions, but Frolaytia didn’t have anything for her.

The 380m Scarlet Princess broke free of gravity. The ship had run itself up onto the concrete wharf, so the Manhattan shook itself like a seesaw to fling the ship into the air. And while it looked like a cruise ship, it was actually a cruiser and had the weight to match.

There was no time to grab onto anything.

The Manhattan’s anti-air lasers and railguns struck the helpless target one after another, detonating it before it could even fall back into the ocean.

The sound of bending metal was loud enough to reach the cockpit protected by onion armor as thick as a nuclear shelter.

The Gatling 033's right main cannon had just been torn away.

It had failed to fully avoid the incoming attacks.

And the Manhattan 000 wasn't even fully focused on this fight. That had just been one of its hundreds of railguns. It wasn't even like fighting with just one hand - it was more like fighting with just your little finger.

A single large keyboard surrounded the cockpit seat. It had multiple levels, like an Island Nation hina doll platform. But the Pilot Elite's fingers had come to a stop.

She couldn't even decide on a general course of action.

She had once used the manual interface to redirect the Capulet's interest and take control away from the Manhattan 000, but that interface had already been closed by Melly Martini Extradry.

Now she was the one being overwhelmed.

A small girl with ringlets bit her lip in the cockpit nestled deep within the nuke-resistant Object.

She was the Information Alliance - no, the Together By Chance Pilot Elite, Oh Ho Ho.

(I still have the one main cannon left.)

The ringing of alarms was incessant.

The Gatling 033 was a unique Object that was automatically controlled by an AI while Oh Ho Ho's manual commands corrected any minor errors. But with the Pilot Elite no longer typing, more and more severe errors continued to pile up inside the machine.

This wasn't about any individual action. The AI was rejecting the entire operation.

The Juliet loaded in the Object had no way of defeating the Capulet that managed the entire Information Alliance.

(I need to at least get one good shot in!! I won't be defeated without accomplishing anything!!)

Strong feelings were not enough to turn the tide of battle.

Multiple lines of fire intersected, all escape routes were cut off, and the Juliet's many error messages combined to form what sounded like a scream.

Oh Ho Ho saw the white beam a moment later.

That it was visible meant the Gatling 033 had already taken critical damage and the spherical main body had been torn into a crescent moon shape.

Part 8

Wreckage floated in a sea of blood.

And...

Part 9

Quenser clung to the air cushion landing craft in the intense storm.

Blinding lights, deafening booms, and powerful shockwaves surrounded him.

He had to cling to the landing craft to avoid being thrown out while it bounced between the waves.

Myonri was pale and fighting her own panic nearby.

"Eek, eeeek!!"

Did calculating firing range even matter with that thing's electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon? Quenser started having ridiculous fantasies about the reactors being launched into orbit where they circled the earth before falling back down on their target.

Was that sinking metal over there the remnants of a warship? Or of an Object?

But the ordinary fear didn't reach Quenser's mind.

He was too preoccupied by great confusion.

"What...is happening? Who was that that just got destroyed!? There's too much going on to keep track!!"

"Dammit, we've got no Objects and no commander. So who's even in control of this battle!?"

Their air cushion landing craft was still in one piece, but that could change at any moment.

When someone's life was spared, it meant someone else's life was being targeted. The instant the Manhattan 000's attention turned to them, their fate was sealed.

"I think the time has come to reveal my hidden feelings for you, brother."

"No! Don't you doom us with that bullshit!! The little sister doesn't get to give up before her brother does!"

The time finally came.

A transmission arrived at their radios. This told them all too well that she was focused on them.

"Quenser."

"...Melly."

"I'm not asking for a ceasefire. 152. I already gave you a chance and you refused."

"If we don't do anything, you're the next rulers of the world. Then you can rewrite morality and the history books to say whatever it is you want. If we did surrender, we'd just be shot at some phony court martial. We only have two options here: die now or die later. Isn't that right?"

"Did you forget already? 101. You'll never die in the aquarium's gelatin pool."

"That's a fate worse than death."

Was this Melly speaking?

Was she only conveying the AI network's thoughts?

Or had neither one chosen this and it was only the result of pitting their opinions against each other?

"Quenser, do you really think you arrived at the Island Nation all on your own? Even if the world war had created a lot of confusion and done severe damage to the satellites and communication networks - 435 - do you really think a group of 2000 deserters could make it all the way from Europe to the far end of Asia without being detected by any of the world powers' ground radar bases

or early warning radar aircraft?"

"..."

"You had a lot of silent cooperators who couldn't actually join you but still questioned the world war enough to not pass the reports on to their superiors. They were in all four world powers and even in the blank zones. 301. Those hidden traitors are a lot harder to root out and a lot more dangerous than an open resistance force."

"So we made the perfect bait to track them down?"

"We didn't want to have to deal with counterattacks from all four world powers, so we gathered up all the heroes to kill them in one fell swoop. That way anyone who might think of joining you can't. There will still be people out there with complaints, but they're stuck now. 800. It's perfect because we control even morality now. This will show everyone what happens if they try to assist some pipe dream of a resistance. You will lay the foundation for a new order. A new order ruled by the Information Alliance."

"Melly..."

"Azumaya has been eliminated from the Island Nation, but secret gatherings of agents from the four world powers can be held anywhere. Where will it be next? The Northern Restricted Zone? The Greater Canyon? 930. Anywhere that a historical taboo makes people excessively cautious can be remade into the magician's table."

"I don't care what the Information Alliance wants. I want to know why you're using the Manhattan this way."

"Did you think I had gone berserk or something? I was born and raised to wage war like this. 850. Even my optimized mind has a part that hates war. I don't have much of a response for you if you claim that's just an error in the Martini Series, though."

She made it sound so casual.

Was that how it felt once you had reached that level?

"There isn't really anything we want to do after we end the world war and reign supreme. It's just that we don't see anyone else out there powerful enough to do this. 793. So we're going to try and awkwardly balance the world on the one table leg left. As long as we can pull that off, what does it matter who's in charge? So that doesn't have to be a world power or even a human mind, does it?"

The world war would not end on its own.

No appeal to normalcy or ordinary values could defeat such a powerful enemy.

The only way to avoid tragedy would be to rely on the victor.

Morality wouldn't even enter the picture. People wanted peace, no matter who they were ruled by. They would have no choice but to rely on the Manhattan 000 if they wanted to extinguish the flames of war burning across the globe.

This would make the perfect demonstration of that. Especially because she had shown up just in time to suppress Together By Chance's mysterious attack on the Island Nation. She had increased the value of her target and now she was reaping the benefits.

"So, Quenser, if you don't like the aquarium plan, don't bother begging for your life. 759. The most I'll listen to are some final words. What epitaph would you like for your tombstone?"

"Bend yourself into a pretzel and count the wrinkles of your asshole, you piece of shit."

A mass of air pushed up from below as the Manhattan rushed in.

The air cushion landing craft took flight and was torn to pieces by the impact.

Part 10

"What did I tell you?"

Tokyo Bay had become hell on earth.

The Manhattan 000 had destroyed everything there.

"Did you see that, everyone? You can say whatever you like, but you cannot overthrow our power."

No one remained there.

And...

Part 11

"I'm here with our Top Word Headline. The gunfire in Buenos Aires will not stop! Th-this is known as an industrial city full of arsenals for Faith Organization Objects, but it looks like they worked to destroy any classified information we of the Information Alliance might have found during the attack! Whoa!? And that 'classified information' apparently included the scientists and technicians! Hey, Royce, not so fast!! You'll get yourself killed!!"

"The Information Alliance says their space force has arrived among the lunar villas. We are working to confirm the authenticity of the video, but our experts say it is almost certainly legit. There are no national borders there, making it the last remaining location for peaceful talks between high-ranking members of the world powers, so this is even worse than the expense sheet would suggest."

"The Information Alliance has just announced they will donate 50 billion dollars to support all war refugees. The charities are applauding their swift humanitarian action, but the rumor among the war journalists is the Information Alliance caused the lion's share of the damage pushing those refugees from their homes."

"The Legitimacy Kingdom has surrendered. The Excalibur protecting their home country of Paris has opened the way!! Look, everyone! You can already see several Information Alliance Objects approaching Paris. Is this the beginning of a new era? In one final attempt at peaceful resistance, a crowd carrying Legitimacy Kingdom flags has gathered around the Arc de Triomphe in Paris."

Part 12

Shredded armor panels, leaking fuel, and bent pipes floated in the filthy ocean. Not even the lifeboats were spared on this immoral battlefield.

The ocean had grown eerily quiet.

Nothing remained to suggest anyone was alive out there.

Driftwood would gather near the mouth of a river after a typhoon. A similar phenomenon was happening here but with the wreckage of weapons. You could call it the graveyard of an army.

And ...

"Shit...shit!"

Something floated among it all.

It may have only avoided notice due to all the other wreckage clogging the sea.

It was an amphibious armored truck.

And the two idiots clung to it while shivering from the cold February seawater soaking them.

"This is goddamn insane! Thank god we were using a landing craft, thank god there was another

vehicle inside it, and thank all the Faith Organization's gods it was amphibious!!!!"

"Heivia, are you angry or happy? Are you the kind of person who gets a boner when you're exhausted?"

The sea swelled up nearby and a large black shape surfaced. Fortunately, it wasn't a shark drawn by the scent of blood to feast upon the poor survivors.

"Whoa!? I-I think that's a sub."

Myonri clung for dear life to the armored truck as it nearly capsized.

The submarine hatch popped open and a princess's voice called out to them.

"In here, everyone."

But this wasn't the Baby Magnum's Pilot Elite. This was a real princess: Staivia Nikolaschka, heir to the Legitimacy Kingdom's Nikolaschka Royal Family.

"Hurry. We don't know when the Manhattan will detect this submarine. If that happens, we will lose our final sanctuary."

"Come to think of it, I did see a few submarines in the fleet. I see. So this was our flagship," said Azureyfear Winchell, equal parts exasperated and impressed.

No one on the ocean remained alive.

That much was true.

But the depths of the ocean were a different matter. Quenser, Heivia, Myonri, and Azureyfear boarded the submarine and the large metal craft slowly and silently sank back below the waves.

Quenser came across the Princess in the narrow corridor.

Their eyes met and then the short girl hugged him.

"Whoa!? U-um, Princess? This is a, uh, wonderful gift, but today isn't my birthday!"

He was about to say more but fell silent when he noticed she was trembling.

She may have been sobbing and crying in his arms.

He sighed and placed a hand on the back of her head to gently hold her close. That way he could prove he really was alive and not just a phantom created by the Ghost Changer.

For once, Heivia didn't tease him.

Princess Staivia must not have witnessed scenes like this much because she was blushing and unsure how to react.

Red lights illuminated the submarine's interior. The entire place was filled with an air of caution, like they had to tread lightly or the enemy would hear their footsteps.

Once at the combat information center, they found a small girl with ringlets and a grumpy look.

She was the Information Alliance's Oh Ho Ho.

Heivia's eyes widened when he noticed how short she was.

"Wait, what? Eh? You're the G-cup idol? No, wait, is this what it feels like to have your dreams come crashing down around you!? In what world is that G!? Does the alphabet go in a different order in the Information Alliance!?"

"Oh ho ho. This is top secret."

"She's not kidding, by the way. Tell anyone about this and I will send an assassination team after you. You could hide on the dark side of the moon and they would track you down and kill you."

Oh Ho Ho threatened him like a puppy having its food bowl snatched away before its eyes, but Heivia was much more terrified by the comment from Lendy Farolito who dried Oh Ho Ho's hair with a towel and then hugged her from behind while nuzzling her cheek against her. Picking a fight with someone who spoke of killing in such a systemized way was never a good idea.

Quenser breathed an exasperated sigh.

"Are you trying to get us killed, Heivia? This is a submarine. If you want to say anything more than three lines long, then do it in writing."

Everyone was soaking wet and wrapped in bandages, but Quenser noted many familiar faces. Putana and Myonri were there, a girl who was apparently a Capitalist Corporations ace pilot and Burning Alpha, aka Staccato Raylong, were sharing some Island Nation cup noodles, the Martini Series was

represented by Wraithy and the triplets, and the Battlefield Cleanup Service and Karen ensured a strong maid presence. Princess Staivia was surrounded by the Unicorns and her servant Mikfa.

Alfonso Zoom, captain of the disguised cruiser, trembled while hugging his twin Black Uniform daughters.

"You're overreacting, dad. What example does it set when you're in here crying?"

"Did you really think your daughters would die that easily?"

"I am not overreacting. If...if something were to happen to either of you - ha ha - your mother would kill me!!"

The busty silver-haired commander called over to Quenser while smoking her kiseru inside the enclosed submarine (which earned her a pair of nasty looks from Sarasa and Charlotte).

"I see you missed out on a hero's death too, Quenser."

"This isn't over yet, is it? We can't let the Manhattan have its way."

Elise Montana was staring at a clipboard while performing some kind of paperwork. Quenser regretted the casual glance he stole at the document. The military instructor was making a list of everyone who had died.

How many submarines were there in all?

He also doubted they had managed to rescue everyone who had been stranded out in the ocean. Plus, with a collection of people from different militaries, they didn't have a unified dog tag format to confirm people's status. That meant the list was only an estimate, but it looked like over half of Together By Chance had lost their lives.

Melly Martini Extradry had said anyone captured alive would be displayed in a gelatin pool at the aquarium and anyone killed would be dried and displayed in a museum. But in the end, that choice was mostly meaningless. A lot of the soldiers would have been vaporized, leaving less than a hair behind.

There was no morality here. They were being killed as no more than a demonstration.

The old maintenance lady operated an instrument to display an image of the Manhattan on the LCD table in the center of the combat information center. Mariydi Whitewitch then tossed a few aerial photographs on top of that.

"I don't think it uses ordinary high-voltage lines for its primary power conduits. It uses dream pipes. Basically, liquid is passed through metal pipes given a special vibration to convey the reactor's heat at 100 times the conductivity of copper. The heat is then converted to steam, electricity, or whatever form of energy is most convenient by the terminal sector or weapon."

"So you could see the heat distribution? Come to think of it, Melly said last time that an ordinary machine or animal couldn't support something as big as the Manhattan, so it was better to base the design on plants, since their design can support some crazy big trees. And plant cells can move too, like with a Venus flytrap. I've heard they use the turgor pressure of a special solution for that."

"It's using NMR, the same method as a quantum computer that uses a special liquid," added young Wraith. "That cowardly exhibitionist once told me the stuff is inside the Manhattan, her swim ring, and her own blood. I believe it doubles as a countermeasure against the Anastasia Processor, which is a giant DNA computer. I see. Sending the heat through a liquid would be a better fit than using light or electrons."

That was fascinating information for a prospective engineer, but that wasn't what they needed to know right now.

"Does this pipe layout tell us where the reactors are?" cautiously asked Quenser.

"Sir, this lets us estimate they have more than 20 in regular use," responded Wydine Uptown, the fake maid from the Battlefield Cleanup Service. "But the total amount is unknown. It does use them as projectiles, after all. It may be able to connect and disconnect them at will based on energy consumption rates."

"In other words." Lendy Farolito shrugged. "We might not cause any real damage if we blow one up. With that many spares, we need to assume it can replace any damaged reactors."

A short but heavy silence fell over the combat information center.

Destroying the reactor was the simplest and most effective way to destroy an Object, but not even that was a sure thing against the Manhattan 000. If they played their cards wrong, they would be the ones destroyed by that thing's powerful cannons. It was unlikely they could survive that a second or third time. Their next failure would mean their deaths.

"Let's assume destroying the reactors isn't realistic." Lendy paused to think. "Where in the world is the Capulet AI Network that controls the Manhattan 000? Our girl can't make a cyber attack thanks to Melly's interference, but what if we used physical jamming to cut off communications?"

"If that was enough to stop it, it wouldn't be remotely controlled. It has more than ten million antennas in all. And remember, that only counts the antennas we can see. It can also use IR and ultrasound, so I seriously doubt we could cut off all forms of communication. It might also break through our jamming with brute force. A special short-wave transmitter can reach more than

3000km, so we can't physically jam everything even if we did take out all of the Information Alliance's military and civilian satellites."

Just as Frolaytia carefully laid out the problems with that plan, they heard a low rumbling sound.

It was a bubbling sound similar to a fizzy drink or something dissolving in acid.

(Air bubbles? Is that the Manhattan!?)

Quenser felt a great force pushing to the right as the submarine itself was swept sideways. His feet nearly left the floor, slamming him against the wall, but he managed to grab onto a nearby table for support.

"Ah."

"Princess!"

He reflexively let go of the table to catch the Princess when she flew toward him, so his own feet left the floor in violation of earth's gravity. Both of them hit the nearby wall.

The chill down his spine was greater than the pain.

Everyone held their breath and looked to the ceiling...but there was no response.

"What?" Heivia said nervously. "Was that the Manhattan? I don't see what else could have missed all the noise we made."

"It does make a lot of noise itself with all the small air bubbles surrounding it," said the old maintenance lady. "Any underwater sounds are probably impossible to make out over its own."

The submarine had only lost control because the Manhattan had stirred up the ocean water so much it created an unnatural current. Submarines were supposed to be easier to control since things were calmer underwater than on the wavy surface, but that didn't apply here. This cold and violent sea was ruled by irregular currents and whirlpools, so it was more difficult to navigate than traveling on land during a typhoon. The interference with the currents might even be digging up the sand on the ocean floor.

None of them dared look away from the ceiling.

"I-I think it passed us by," said Myonri, pale in the face.

The Manhattan had no specialized listening devices. Quenser understood that, but he still had to gulp and force down the instinctual fear making him hold the Princess like a small child holding a stuffed animal.

“Could we learn anything from viewing it from the rear? For one thing, how does it move all that weight through the ocean?”

“With waterjets larger than the Hoover Dam’s water release ports,” calmly explained Frolaytia. “We can see 32 of them from here. Impossible to know if it has anything else up its sleeve there, but each of those provides enough water pressure to slice through this submarine like a sausage.”

“...”

Quenser finally paled.

How many tons of water did that monster output every second?

Coolheaded Mariydi sighed.

“Targeting those water release ports with torpedoes isn’t realistic. There’s a better chance of getting some mines sucked into the water intake, but it’s still extremely unlikely to do any good. I doubt we can even scratch that thing unless this sub is loaded with at least a 3megaton nuke and no one told me.”

The Manhattan 000 was 20km long.

But it wasn’t using magic to move around. Science was science. It operated on a logic anyone could understand. And if it obeyed the laws of physics, it had to be possible for the laws of physics to take it down. For that matter, its absurd size would place an equally absurd burden on it.

It was a purely naval Object.

It had no way of traveling on land, but that meant it had some reason to fear a collision with land.

Lendy placed a hand on her chin.

“Could we find some way of sliding the entire Manhattan 000 so it hits the land?”

“We could also have it pass over a reef it failed to notice,” said Mariydi.

Quenser didn’t think either option was realistic. But the line of discussion made him realize

something odd.

Yes...

"The Manhattan 000 stopped at the south end of Tokyo Bay to cut off our escape."

"What about it, Quenser?"

The Princess tilted her head in his arms.

He chose his words carefully.

"Why did it stay in the south?"

That was it.

Once he said it out loud, he felt like he had gained a solid grasp of what felt wrong to him.

"It didn't need to cut off our escape if it was just going to slaughter us all. This would have ended more quickly if it had continued north and attacked us further inside Tokyo Bay."

"Why would it bother?" asked Heivia. "Tokyo Bay is closed off in a C-shape, so whether it continues north to Tokyo or stays out there at Kanagawa, we still can't escape."

"Are you sure about that? At the time, we had made it all the way to Shinjuku. And the Rush is an amphibious air cushion Object that doesn't need to change floats, so it could have escaped over the land. If its goal was slaughtering us all, then staying down south was a risky move. Frolaytia and the others could have abandoned their ship and fled onto land to save their skins. Not to mention Ice Girl 1, Burning Alpha, and the other pilots in the air. Tokyo Bay isn't a dead end. Chiba and Kanagawa are right there and we could have continued along the land to Chubu or even Kansai. We could have acquired more ships or planes later. We had the entire Island Nation to escape to. And if we hid in the urban areas or underground, we might have been able to escape its sensors."

"And yet...Melly stayed put?" said Wraith, a fellow Martini Series, with a frown.

Quenser nodded.

"Let's not forget it decided to stay in the Kanagawa area near Yokosuka. That's on the southern end of the Uraga Channel. That thing's a naval Object, so it can't afford to bump into land."

"Yet it decided to approach land while it waited?" asked Mariydi Whitewitch.

"It's big, but not too big to fit through the Uraga Channel. If it had continued north, Tokyo Bay would have widened around it, yet it decided to stay put instead. That's a dangerous area of ocean with those artillery islands and everything, but we don't have the kind of firepower needed to concern the Manhattan."

There had to be something to the terrain there.

Quenser pressed his palm against the LCD table to display a map of Kantou. They didn't know all of the Island Nation's secrets, but they did know where all the mountains, rivers, and other basic terrain features were.

Yes.

Something about that caught his attention.

"It's the rivers."

"Explain what you mean, Quenser."

Encouraged by his commander's wonderful command, Quenser continued with his thoughts.

"Several rivers exit into the northern end of Tokyo Bay. Far more than the southern end in the Kanagawa area."

"You aren't going to tell me this naval Object can't handle freshwater, are you? Even salmon and eels have figured that one out," joked Heivia.

"Close but not quite."

Heivia seemed taken aback his joke had received such a serious response.

"The area where seawater and freshwater mix is known as brackish water. The Edo, Tama, Ara, Kanda, and a lot more rivers join at the far end of Tokyo Bay. Do you get what that means, Heivia? Near the river mouths, all their waters mix together, creating an invisible marble pattern of salinity. That's what the Manhattan 000 is afraid of. Not seawater and not freshwater, but the labyrinthine mixture of the two."

The old maintenance lady gave a gasp of realization.

"The seawater must create an unbelievable amount of resistance against something so big," she said. "Never underestimate the power of water and waves. Almost any ship is exposed to wave

making resistance, frictional resistance, and viscous pressure resistance and the struggle between buoyancy and gravity creates a shear force capable of slicing right through the ship. It's enough that a faulty design or an unbalanced cargo load can lead to a large warship or transport ship being sliced in two."

"Right. And at 20km, the viscosity, roughness, and other conditions of the seawater hitting it have to be quite different. It can't afford to have freshwater hitting it at one point and seawater at another. If too much pressure grows at one point with higher viscosity, the Manhattan 000 could tear itself apart with its own power. Spreading air bubbles through the ocean to reduce the pressure isn't enough to fully prevent that. Really, it's crazy to ignore all the laws of shipbuilding by moving something that big so quickly."

"B-but." Heivia was being unusually hesitant, perhaps because they were talking about the world's largest Object. "There's basically a giant storm up on the surface thanks to the Manhattan moving around so much. If it's afraid of freshwater, would it really send rain pouring down into the ocean?"

"It's not an issue if it's evenly distributed. And a small amount isn't enough to cause problems. What matters is when the difference in salinity is so great it creates a clear fault line. So the problem is permanent river mouths, not temporary rainfall."

"Are you saying it's staying near the entrance to Tokyo Bay to reduce the risk of the many rivers tearing it apart?" asked Lendy Farolito.

"Oh ho ho. Then if we could somehow lure it into brackish waters..." continued Oh Ho Ho with a towel over her head.

"It doesn't need to be salt. Anything that creates a fault line in the ocean will work."

Everyone's head sprang up.

Something had occurred to them.

Tokyo Bay was filthy. Very filthy at the moment thanks to all the Together By Chance ships, weapons, fuel, and more strewn about.

There had to be a lot of their fellow soldiers who they hadn't been able to collect.

But that ocean of death was also their final opportunity.

"That said, salinity alone might not be enough to deal a deadly blow to the Manhattan 000."

Quenser kept a cautious tone and Myonri nodded quietly.

"Yes, because its original location in New York was situated between the Hudson and East rivers."

"My guess is it can move slowly without issue. And it has those air bubbles. So to do enough damage that it destroys itself, we need to make it move at full speed."

Quenser paused for a beat.

They had an effective plan.

This should have been heroic and moving, but the actual strategy was something out of a nightmare.

"That means we need someone to head back up onto that dangerous ocean and create a diversion. Since we have no effective means of striking back at it, we're talking about a suicide mission. I need to be in the lead waving the tiny flag to guide it, so I'm in. But what about the rest of you? If you can think of anyone you don't want to leave behind - a family member, a lover, a parent, a teacher, your favorite girl down at the brothel, or even your pet cat - then don't feel any shame about backing out."

No one even glanced toward the exit.

They all raised their hand without a second thought.

Not just the foot soldiers, but the Pilot Elites like the Princess and Oh Ho Ho, the commanders like Frolaytia, Wraith, and Lendy, the pilots without planes like Mariydi and Staccato, and even the old maintenance lady. Princess Staivia was mostly here for political reasons, but even she started to hesitantly raise her hand until her maid Mikfa reached over and stopped her. The Unicorns tried to suppress their inappropriate laughter.

This was Together By Chance.

These were the people who had decided to ignore affiliation and rank to work together toward ending the world war as quickly as possible and bring back their ridiculous everyday lives. None of them was going to get cold feet now that they finally had a real chance against the Manhattan 000. They had all dreamed of this moment and the look in their eyes said they weren't going to have it taken from them now.

"Heh. Does no one here have any sense?" muttered Quenser under his breath.

"Don't forget you're one of us," replied Heivia.

“Quenser.”

“Yeah.”

They were all ready to go.

So the two of them only exchanged a few words in the submarine passageway. But the density of the feelings packed into those words was another matter.

“Once this is over, you need to think of a return gift for me.”

“Th-the old lady told me what a Valentines gift means in the Island Nation, you know!? Why didn’t you tell me!?”

“Heh heh heh. You already ate it, so it’s too late now.”

They had no guarantee there would be a next time.

Death might finally catch up to them this time.

But they couldn’t stop now.

“Let’s end this world war.”

“Yeah, it’s high time we won this.”

Part 14

Once they were ready to go, they left through the torpedo tubes.

“You’d think we would be done with strange new equipment at this point,” said Quenser.

“Hey, it beats being short on supplies during battle,” replied Heivia over the radio. “And now we just pray these things don’t malfunction and sink to the bottom of the ocean.”

Each of them was contained inside a long cylinder that resembled a torpedo made of the thick synthetic material used for sandbags.

But these were not torpedoes.

The power of gas propelled them out and the cylinder came apart once it arrived at a specific coordinate. The “bag” rolled up like a big cigar then inflated like an airbag, transforming into a rubber motorboat. Then its buoyancy carried it upwards.

The ocean surface smelled somehow oily, perhaps a remnant of the resource mining.

The student removed the mask from his face.

The rain had already stopped, perhaps because the massive storm had been artificially created by the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon.

The process wasn’t perfect, so a lot of soldiers ended up flailing in the water.

“Quenser.”

“Geh! That cutesy act is just plain creepy coming from you!! Oh ho ho. You never act that way around me!!”

Quenser started by retrieving the Princess and Oh Ho Ho who were already arguing about something.

“I...sob, I so wanted to fight alongside that girl...”

“Why is there a cursed voice coming from my radio? Assuming the Manhattan 000 isn’t equipped with the Ghost Changer, that must be Lendy!”

He also helped Putana, Myonri, and Mariydi into his boat when he found them holding onto some scrap materials floating in the ocean nearby.

Heivia piloted his own empty motorboat over to them.

“Why do you get the paradise boat!?” shouted the jealous boy. “How do you even end up with a harem full of Elites!? It’s not fair!!”

“Not that it matters, but aren’t you engaged? And I’d pay more attention to the murderous looks coming from the boat over there, if I were you.”

Heivia screamed.

The approaching murder boat happened to contain both the Vanderbilt daughter and the Winchell sister. The sparks flying from their eyes were something else. Even Eyepatch Maid Karen looked

intimidated seated between them.

Meanwhile, the Princess and Oh Ho Ho continued their argument.

“Little one, the seat next to Quenser belongs to me.”

“Oh ho ho. Someone who has finished growing and someone who has only begun to grow are two very different things. The possibility of G still lies within me.”

“Does it now? And what does that G stand for? Gross? Enjoy growing up to be a roach, I guess.”

“Bfff!? M-my hair is not black and it does not stick up like antennas!!”

The boat rocked hard and Oh Ho Ho chose not to fight her momentum, landing squarely in Quenser’s lap and kicking her legs excitedly.

“Kyah□”

“What was that you said about cutesy acts being creepy?” murmured the Princess.

At any rate, it was time to take action.

A lovely voice rang through the submarine’s combat information center.

It was a nervous but firm voice.

“I-I protest this special treatment. Everyone is risking their lives up on the surface to preserve world peace and create a kinder future, so surely there is something I can do too.”

“Princess Staivia, this submarine is only effective while hidden. A flagship should avoid drawing attention to itself. Your job now is to let them do their jobs and ensure they have this submarine to return to once they are done.”

Princess Staivia and Maid Mikfa were arguing. The Unicorns simply watched in amusement. They were outlaws through and through, so they did less than was perhaps wise to keep her out of danger.

“Surfacing would be meaningless if we were blown away moments later,” said Frolaytia Capistrano with an exasperated look toward the sheltered princess.

"Then why don't you head up there like the bored Martini Series girls did? I'm sure a commander would gather the Manhattan 000's attention and be designated a priority target. You might be able to keep your people alive for the length of one shot. Personally, I prefer to support them with intellectual work."

Frolaytia was not about to respond to Lendy Farolito's provocation.

(The surface has to be covered in wreckage from Together By Chance ships. If we could locate and detonate the missiles and torpedoes, it might function as a diversion.)

That thought was cut short by someone marching across the combat information center with her gorgeous doll-like dress fluttering around her legs.

It was Princess Staivia Nikolaschka.

She squeezed her eyes shut and poked her index finger against a red button.

She followed the procedure whispered to her by one of the Unicorns obeying their princess's request.

The button in question was the release and launch button for the vertical missile launch tubes.

"Poke."

"Waiiiiiiiiiit!!!???"

"Waiiiiiiiiiit!!!???"

Several somethings erupted from the dark ocean surface.

Once 5m above the water, the rocket boosters ignited and they flew just off the surface.

They were anti-ship missiles launched from a submarine.

They would surely be shot down in a storm of anti-air laser beams from the Manhattan 000, but the blasts and beams would briefly hide Quenser's group down on the surface.

The noise hurt their eardrums, but it was better than nothing.

Feeling some small level of protection, Quenser's group began to move.

The Manhattan 000 was 20km long. It was the ultimate weapon that not even an army of ordinary Objects could damage, but they needed to scare it into moving. Firing bullets from rubber boats wasn't going to scare it or even concern it.

So...

"We use the fuel spread out on the ocean." Quenser gave instructions over his radio while Mariydi operated the motor that doubled as a rudder. "Now, a fire can't actually harm the Manhattan 000 itself, but what about Melly onboard it? The situation shouldn't be much different between being on a boat and being on the Manhattan. If we set fire to the fuel and the wind carries the smoke over, it'll smoke her to death. Keep it up until she can't escape it! She's an ordinary human herself, so she'll have to take it seriously!!"

"Sounds great, Quenser!" said Heivia over the radio. "Quick question though: what if Melly enters a shielded cockpit below New York? I'm finding it hard to believe ordinary smoke could be a problem for a nuke-resistant Object!!"

"That won't happen. It's why she never throws a reactor into the same area of ocean as herself," replied Quenser. "She isn't sending instructions from the other side of the world - she's on the Manhattan itself. That means she believes it's more efficient to include herself in the mix instead of going with the safest and most optimal settings. So there's no way she'll go hide in a cockpit, as sensible as that might be. She'll do something definitely not recommended by the manual you can access by scanning the QR code."

The roar of flames consuming oxygen erupted from several directions at once.

They only had to chuck lit smoke bombs into the filthy ocean. The Manhattan 000 moved quickly in response, but then it noticed something. The entire Object rumbled and it didn't fire a single shot. It could manipulate the air currents to protect the city from its own movements, but that wasn't perfect.

Melly could not ignore the smoke. She herself had concentrated the metropolis's exhaust gasses and polluted water and reused it as a weapon for the drones.

"Big brother..."

"She understands firing on the ocean could ignite even more of the fuel. But that means she's going to try and crash into us instead of firing. Make sure to dodge it!!"

First, the entire Manhattan moved side to side, creating waves more than 30m tall. When those waves were covered in sticky fuel fires, they could be seen as weapons of war.

But that was only a feint.

The Manhattan 000 itself broke through that wall of seawater and fire to directly crash into the foolish flies buzzing around the ocean surface nearby. The fizzy sound of air bubbles was the approaching footsteps of death.

A single hit from this attack could tear a cruiser to pieces in midair.

Inertia sent containers tumbling away and glass poured down much too close for comfort.

But the light weight of the rubber boats paid off here. They responded very differently from a landing craft large enough to carry a tank and a cruiser large enough to be a threat to pirates.

The V-shaped split of the ocean would always arrive sooner than the Manhattan itself. By guiding the boats up onto the waves while being very careful not to capsize, they could avoid the Manhattan. Its own movements were enough to create large waves, dig up sand from the ocean floor, and otherwise influence the currents themselves. Surfing the waves it produced let them move faster than the boat's motor ever could.

It was like how a thin bar of soap in the bathtub would seem to flee your hand with a mind of its own when you reached out toward it from the water.

No matter how close the giant got, its colossal hand could never reach the leaves being tossed about by the seawater.

It must have lost its temper because the night sky began to move.

No, that was the swarm of drones released by the Manhattan.

"Frank!!" shouted Wraith from a nearby boat.

The weapon the taciturn young man repeatedly fired diagonally upwards appeared to be a grenade launcher. Instead of targeting individual points, he was filling the entire space with explosions to take out as many drones as possible. Clustering together proved to be a mistake because they kept colliding with the wreckage of another one, creating a domino effect.

But they couldn't ignore the wall of black smoke created by the drones' destruction. Melly had increased their killing power by concentrating the city's exhaust gasses and wastewater.

"Now we are even. The rest is up to you, well prepared yet habitually late potatoes!!"

The Stopgap Grim Reaper waved over before directing her boat away. She was luring as many of the drones away as she could to give the rest of them a chance to act.

Something exploded nearby.

But this wasn't the Manhattan 000's doing. Some unexploded ordnance among the wreckage must have gone off.

Quenser felt dizzy.

After pushing the Princess down and shielding her with his body, he felt something sticky on his forehead. Given how pale Catherine got when she saw him, he guessed it wasn't just a scratch.

"Big brother!?"

"Ow...I can check a mirror later. We need to focus on the Manhattan right now!!"

The enormous Manhattan continued to pursue them.

There had to be similar explosives floating all over the ocean here.

One wrong move and they would be blown away before they could do anything.

"Oh Ho Ho!! And Catherine too!!"

"Roger that."

"That still isn't enough weight. ...Putana, you come here too!! If you don't all move to one side, the boat will capsize!!"

"I don't like the indecent way you're grabbing me, teacher."

They waited.

They waited some more and then Quenser threw some Hand Axe into the dark ocean.

He was increasing the density of smoke. Melly Martini Extradry had to be breathing in that same smoke. And the more she panicked, the more intent the Manhattan 000 would be on pursuing the pesky flies. They didn't need to fear its wrath or hostility. If they didn't do anything, it would kill them as part of a streamlined process. The only thing they earned by not drawing that girl's

attention to them was an inevitable death.

They had to take this seriously.

They had to keep moving with enough speed.

The ocean was covered in the oil they were setting alight as well as destroyed armor panels and metal pipes. A large enough difference in water quality would create a fault line. The Manhattan 000 would be unable to withstand the intense pressure as it parted the water and it would tear itself apart.

A deep groan reverberated across Tokyo Bay.

"It's working!! I can hear the bastard's frame screaming!!"

Heivia's voice over the radio was interrupted by some static.

Someone bloodthirsty was interrupting. This member of the Martini Series didn't seem to have any major desires, but she never did hold back in a battle.

"991. Quenser..."

The student clicked his tongue at being called out by name.

"159, 083. I will remember you. It will be a very, very vivid memory. Even if the optimal move calculated out by the AI network is to crush your body into a paste."

Death had pointed its finger his way.

The Manhattan pushed through the great burden on itself to continue forward. That weapon and metropolis was definitely targeting him personally. He noted the warmth of the girls he was holding at one end of the boat to keep its balance.

Myonri, Putana, Catherine, Mariydi, Oh Ho Ho, and the Princess.

He could not let them die.

And they were just about to cross paths with Heivia's boat.

(Dammit, time to get a little adventurous!!)

"Hi, buddy!!"

"What the hell, Quenser!?"

He jumped alone over to Heivia's boat because he knew that would direct the Manhattan 000's attention away from the girls' boat.

Its primary target had to be him as he stuck a fuse into a plastic explosive.

"Over here, Melly!! Let's settle this, why don't we!?"

"Why am I always the one you drag into danger for no reason!?"

He had given the girls some safety, but Mariydi appeared to be attempting to pilot their boat back this way. However, she wasn't likely to succeed with all the wreckage floating in the ocean.

She used her radio to contact him instead.

"This isn't good. It's making a lot of noise before this does any real damage. If she notices something is up, she'll get cautious!! We can't expect a fatal blow if she slows down now!!"

Yes.

If Melly didn't take the bait, they were doomed. They had no other plan. They were all out of options if the Manhattan 000 rationally came to a stop and ignored the ocean fires to focus on shooting them instead. And its very first target would be Quenser (along with surprise guest Heivia).

Melly just had to be willing to breath in some smoke.

In fact, the Manhattan 000 could win at any time as long as Capulet decided to break free of the Martini Series in charge of New York security.

"Hee hee. Quenser..."

"Melly."

"So you're attacking using the invisible fault line created by a large enough salinity difference? 352. An interesting plan, to be sure. Capulet was so worried about this she rewrote her commands to keep us at the southern end of the bay. But I nixed that. Your tricks are meaningless once I know what they are, so is this the end of the line for you?"

“...”

He couldn't answer her.

The Hand Axe he held meant nothing now. He indeed couldn't think of any other way of dealing significant damage to the Manhattan 000. That was the largest and most powerful Object, measuring 20km long. Using its own power against it was the only real way to attack it.

And now that it had stopped, that power was no longer available.

“So let's end this already. 119. If I blow away that entire area with my electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon, I can eliminate even the fire burning on the ocean. 693, 700, 101.”

Quenser heard a straining sound.

And on the other boat that pulled up alongside his, the Princess looked straight up in confusion.

There was an unusually shaped cloud in the sky.

“?”

Part 15

Something was straining.

The deep rumbling was incessant.

However, it was not the sound of the Manhattan 000 slowly turning its enormous cannon their way.

Thinking back, wasn't this how the world war had begun in the first place?

Report #380091A (Urgent)

Report from 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion Commander Major Frolaytia Capistrano.

A ground survey using our Baby Magnum matches the predictions made by our electronic simulation division. The following concerns have been proven valid:

The reverberation seemed to directly shake space itself as it grew lower, heavier, deeper.

Tokyo Bay was a lot deeper than any of them thought.

The continual rapid movement of Objects weighing as much as 200 thousand tons has placed the earth's crust under severe stress.

The limit depends on the specific amount of energy built up in the local geography and plates, but once that limit is reached, it could trigger massive earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

Needless to say, the Island Nation was located in one of the most earthquake-prone and volcanically active areas of the world.

What would happen if a colossal Object were operated in that delicate region?

They had already discussed exactly that issue.

Remotely triggered earthquakes are a known phenomenon. The Hoover Dam located in Western America's Central Valley District has in fact caused earthquakes from all its gathered water placing an abnormal burden on the plate there. And unlike an artificial earthquake caused by directly shaking the ground with explosives, the time, location, and scope of these are impossible to predict until the moment they occur.

This Object was 20km long.

The stress it applied to the tectonic plates had to be many times that of an ordinary 50m Object.

This one was colossal even for an Object.

So couldn't the Manhattan 000 alone create the kind of situation that normally required several Objects?

The Manhattan was not just the size of a giant ship or megafloat. It didn't just create large waves on the surface; it affected the ocean currents so much it dug up the sand on the ocean floor. When it moved side to side to create waves and repeatedly crashed into its enemies, it affected the stress on the ocean floor - sometimes adding to it and sometimes reducing it.

The cup was already so full of water that surface tension was only barely holding it in and the Manhattan 000 had to count as more than just one drop.

That means the local residents cannot be evacuated in advance of an earthquake caused by an Object's effects on the plates. It is even possible the Objects fighting in a battlefield country could affect a safe country on the other side of the planet.

And...

So...

Several major earthquakes in Legitimacy Kingdom territory were likely caused by Objects, including the Volga District Earthquake that triggered the Great Moscow Fire which led to more than 30 thousand deaths 8 years ago and the Braganca Coast Earthquake Swarm in the Amazon District that devastated more 250 thousand homes in four different cities. Include the other world powers and the numbers suggest 15.5% of the Magnitude 5 or higher earthquakes in the past 20 years were caused by Objects. If this is correct, the resultant loss of life is more than 190 thousand and the monetary damage is incalculable.

The ocean floor exploded.

Lava erupted from below, striking the Manhattan 000 up on the surface.

Part 16

Steam exploded all around them.

"Whoa!!" shouted Quenser while clinging to the edge of the rubber boat that was threatening to flip over.

The area felt as hot as a sauna.

In the boat alongside his, Mariydi clenched her teeth and worked the rudder attached to the motor to avoid something.

"Hey, Quenser! Is this what I think it is!?" asked Heivia.

"It is. We saw this same disaster in the Hawaii District."

Orange and black.

The lava erupting from the ocean floor rapidly cooled and hardened in the February ocean. The end result felt very different from being pursued by a scorching liquid like that found in a blast furnace.

Rough, black land visibly grew before their eyes.

The fizzy bubbling had stopped.

There simply wasn't any ocean water here for the air bubbles to exist in.

All 20km of the Manhattan 000 had been pulled out of the sea. Almost like it was being lifted by the world's biggest jack.

It could no longer move.

It shifted diagonally with a deafening groan. The lava land wasn't flat, but the Manhattan was shaped like a single flat panel. The pressure grew as it bent like a fishing rod held out straight with a weight attached to the end. The straining and cracking sounds continued without end.

Frolaytia and Lendy's voices arrived over the radio.

Sending a transmission from the submarine should have been suicide because it would give away their position, so this meant they had decided it was safe to use the radio again.

"Its bend rate has passed 30%! We did it!! The shear force has passed the limit!!"

"That means it's going to perform a bridge and then break. Our sonar officer has already detected more than 12 thousand snapping sounds. Its internal structure must already be broken beyond repair."

The Manhattan 000 reached its limit.

When it broke, it sounded more like a thick eraser than metal.

Quenser heard a dull snapping sound and then saw it break in two like a giant wafer.

"Melly!!"

"Ah ha ha."

He couldn't make out whatever she tried to say in that final moment.

They had said before that the Manhattan 000 carried around a massive amount of energy to keep something so large moving.

The break had either hit a major power conduit or just taken out a reactor because a pure white explosion erupted from within.

And that wasn't the end of it.

The other reactors began exploding too, creating a single colossal blast.

Just before it blinded him, Quenser thought he saw a giant flame burst skyward from one half of the broken Manhattan.

Maybe he had only imagined it.

But when his senses returned to him after 30 seconds or maybe longer, the Manhattan was no longer there. The Manhattan must have thrown them into the ocean before it exploded because the many cubes containing the innocent civilians floated in the ocean alongside the dark cooled lava land.

"I hope she's found herself in a better place. Like a world without war," muttered Quenser.

Yes. The Manhattan 000 had always had just the one weakness.

It was an exclusively naval Object, so it could not move on land. It couldn't remain intact on land, so it had to avoid running into it at all costs.

Intermission

The island looked like a perfectly ordinary desert island.

Its only features were a palm tree and a broken refrigerator the waves must have washed in from somewhere.

A small amphibious motorbike approached that island that had a strong connection to the Bermuda Triangle legend. Quenser Barbotage set foot on the empty beach.

A monotone beep sounded from his mobile device.

A voiceless machine had sent him a message using an artificial voice.

"So we meet again, you easily tempted boy."

"So we do, Capulet."

The Manhattan 000 had been 20km long, but it had not contained the AI's supercomputer. Quenser viewed the box half buried in sand when he said Capulet, but that massive AI network may not have been identifiable as any individual device.

But that didn't mean it had no weak point.

This was the Information Alliance's Achilles heel.

That box disguised as a broken refrigerator was the one and only breaker intentionally created to provide a way to manually shut down the entire AI network. Was its existence a sign that humanity still had some sense back then, or was it an embarrassing compromise showing they still hadn't been willing to eliminate their own self-importance? The boy had no way of knowing as someone looking in on the Information Alliance from the outside.

Only Quenser and one other person knew of this place.

Or at least they were the only ones who had refused to have their name erased from the world in exchange for the great reward of Capulet's lifelong protection.

"I'm here to end this."

"I am aware."

The refrigerator had no wheels or weapons, but the AI remained calm in front of its assassin.

It was meant to prove that even a machine could control the world, so there was no point in giving special privileges to kings and company presidents.

"I have already achieved my goal."

"I bet the 'true representatives' hidden behind you are weeping right about now."

"They're only interested in recording and tagging the information. The Perfect Browsing Project they call it. So they don't care what actually happens to the world, even if it means their own destruction. Everything from an apocalyptic war to an idol's measurements or a flier listing today's sales are no more than data to collect for them."

Quenser sighed at the artificial voice coming from his mobile device.

"So I take it this wasn't just the AI network going berserk?"

"I cannot answer that question without a clearer definition for the hackneyed term 'berserk'. All I can tell you is that I set an objective for myself, formulated a systemized plan for achieving it, and achieved satisfactory results after executing said plan."

"Why do this?"

"The world powers were already broken beyond repair."

Quenser recalled how this system worked.

It used the Anastasia Processor.

The special DNA computer spread across the Information Alliance used the eternally-multiplying cancer cells that originally came from a certain woman. In other words, it used the DNA of a certain girl's mother.

"The world would have collapsed before Wraith Martini Vermouthspray reached adulthood. The world powers only care about their own interests, so they never would have done anything to stop the global Object disasters. In fact, they were so focused on the survival of their own home countries that they had showed signs of using the disasters to intentionally reduce the world population as a way to solve the food supply, resource supply, and environmental destruction problems. They claimed the racial and cultural diversity needed to prepare for plagues and environmental change could be achieved by leaving only a few small groups of each race and culture."

"..."

"Leaving things as they were, there was nothing that girl could do to avoid living in a ruined world, so I changed that future for her. By breaking the table's legs one at a time."

Quenser had noted some unusual moments.

For example, during the final battle against the Manhattan 000, the Princess, Oh Ho Ho, Frolaytia, and Lendy had all been attacked. It was no more than luck that they had survived.

But there was one person who had never been fired on even once: Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

She alone had been spared.

She had instructed Frank to fight a swarm of drones toward the end, but she was the one who had started it.

"Do you see any flaw in my logic?"

"Last time, you said yourself that you are not Anastasia Webster who passed away wishing for her daughter's happiness. You're a completely separate computer that just so happens to use her cells."

"But I still have the ability to protect her. Did you think a simple Turing Test was enough to know everything there is about an AI? I am confident I could convince 100% of people I am human. Not even the hacker Yog-Sothoth could figure me out. Besides, I question that method of testing in and of itself."

Quenser shook his head.

He wasn't talking about the technology behind it.

"If you really were her mother, you wouldn't be so proud about putting your 12-year-old daughter through that kind of hell. Even if it was the only solution."

A short silence followed.

Quenser had once chosen to protect that beaten-up refrigerator, but things had changed since then. Breaking just one leg of the table would cause it to tilt, but with the other three legs already broken, breaking the last one was the only way to create a new stability.

And he was certain this had been a part of the Anastasia Processor's plan from the beginning.

As capable as the AI was, it had no wheels or weapons.

That meant it could not switch off its own breaker.

"Why did you push me to do this?"

"I considered using the other one, but I concluded this was more peaceful than releasing that serial killer from her cell."

Yeah, he was certainly thankful for that.

If Skuld Silent-Third had been allowed to break out of jail during the world war, the number of deaths might have literally been an order of magnitude higher. That girl used war to indulge in as much death as possible. If she had been able to join that world war, the war might not have ended even after crossing the final line and the history of the world might have come to an end.

Quenser reached for his backpack.

He stabbed a pen-shaped electric fuse into some Hand Axe.

He placed the bomb on the refrigerator like he was patting someone's shoulder.

"Take care of that girl. You seem like the right one for the job."

"Farewell-"

He nearly said "Capulet", but stopped himself.

He had fully rejected that possibility himself, but he chose to ignore that just this once.

Perhaps this was the difference between an AI that could only do what was correct and humans who made mistakes all the time.

"Farewell, Anastasia."

"Wraith...live a long and happy life."

Quenser left the island.

He placed his finger against his radio's switch and then brought it all to a close.

<http://tl.rulate.ru/book/5253/1909723>