

Chapter 2: Parasite Kill >> Battle for Liberation Within Manhattan

Part 1

Bloodrics Capistrano chose the “beaten up” option.

“Pant, pant, pant!!”

“...G-gbweh. Wait, it would really help your Onii-chan if you ended this attack...”

Frolaytia Capistrano gasped for breath while holding her brother’s bowtie in her left hand. Her dominant hand was of course clenched in a fist.

They were in a military port of the Amazon District where the Legitimacy Kingdom held a lot of sway.

They were a few hours away from the Central American ocean. They had taken a submarine which clearly had too much speed and stealth for civilian ownership. Its distress signal had been picked up and the few survivors, including Frolaytia, had set foot on dry land once more.

After arguing with her blood relative in a guest room for noble visitors, the busty silver-haired 18-year-old clicked her tongue and let go of the trash. She then spoke to the laptop sitting on the heavy work desk.

“Princess. Things have calmed down here for the time being. You’ve gathered enough information, so return to base before you go too far and get burned.”

“But...”

“...I know what you’re trying to say, but if we waste our trump card here, we really will lose all means of rescuing our people from the Bermuda Triangle.”

Needless to say, Frolaytia and the others had not been sitting around doing nothing.

The Princess’s Baby Magnum was a multi-role First Generation that could race along the ocean at more than 500km/h and swap between multiple different main cannon types: low-stability plasma cannons, railguns, coilguns, laser beams, rapid-fire beam cannons, etc. Even if it could not immediately supply a decisive blow, it was the perfect Object for directly engaging the enemy force to get a sense for what it could do.

And what had they learned after firing various types of cannons from a distance with no expectation of a hit?

“Electronic simulation division.”

“We only have rough estimates, but we have finished analyzing the footage.”

Frolaytia spoke to a different channel and received an immediate response from one of the experts who continued working with what equipment had survived. She was clearly exhausted, but there was no dissatisfaction in her voice. Everyone knew it was only coincidence that they had been protected. If the luck of the draw had placed them in the other category, they would have been devoured by the Information Alliance.

“To start with, the Manhattan really does have extraordinary firepower. That electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon is essentially detonating a JPlevelMHD reactor with each shot. By firing that main cannon in every direction like the face of a clock, it could entirely surround itself with a wall of plasma like some kind of fortress city.”

“That’s a lot like an old-fashioned ABM system...or a defensive theory using nuclear mines.”

Frolaytia stuffed unique-smelling shredded tobacco into her long and narrow kiseru as she spoke.

Laser beams were light, so they could be bent if high temperatures altered the refractive index. Plasma and rapid-fire beams were weak to electromagnetism. Railguns and coilguns used metal shells, so their trajectory could be bent using expanding air or explosive blasts.

Simply put, an absolute defense was possible if you forced it through with enough firepower.

However, it was a strategy only possible for the Manhattan and its hundreds or possibly thousands of reactors.

“But it didn’t do that, did it? It only used the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon the very first time.”

“Yes. And the theory of bending a laser was also used by the Nitrogen Mirage. It still used ultra-high temperatures – albeit not as high – but it achieved that by firing low-stability plasma fireballs around the battlefield and then firing the laser beam or railgun. It was a lot like a rollercoaster. It ignores all existing artillery theories.”

But when the Manhattan had responded to the Princess’s “test firing”, it had not filled the area with firepower; it had returned fire with pinpoint sharpshooting. It had shot down each of the Baby Magnums various shells and lasers like a venomous snake targeting mice or frogs.

The metal shells had been fried with electron beams or laser beams.

The optical weapons had been reflected and neutralized by metal shells.

“So far, it has only intercepted our attacks, but if it goes on the attack itself, the Baby Magnum will not last five minutes,” said the electronic simulation division.

“Ah, you idiot!!”

Frolaytia tried to stop her, but it was too late.

The Princess was already childishly pouting her lips on the screen.

“I don’t mind. Because it’s true. Hehh, hohh, hmm.”

“Listen, everyone can get along when things are going well. The true value of teamwork is when things are going badly. Everyone needs to keep that in mind!!”

“Also,” continued the electronic simulation division. “Including Manhattan’s visitors, there should be more than 10 million civilians onboard. If they are used as hostages, any direct attack will be a target of international criticism.”

“Have you not even noticed the trouble you’ve caused us, you geek!?”

Frolaytia shouted, but the Princess still looked suspicious. She brushed back the short blonde hair plastered to her forehead with sweat, unzipped her special suit, and sprayed a coolant directly on her flushed soft skin. Everyone, including the analyst, was female, so she did not need to restrain herself.

The fact that arrogant Frolaytia had to act as a cushion for her showed just how chaotic the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion’s situation was.

(Heivia can wait until later, but we really need Quenser back immediately!!)

Frolaytia placed a hand on her forehead while having that very rude thought.

And as stated, they could not use an Object’s firepower to fry 10 million civilians, even if they belonged to an enemy nation. Thus, the Baby Magnum had made sure its main cannons would not hit during its reconnaissance mission.

...Of course, that was also because moving too close before understanding their enemy’s specs was likely to result in the Baby Magnum being turned to ashes by a variety of super weapons, including the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon.

The Manhattan had easily fired a deadly blast from New York to New Caribbean Island – from North America to Central America.

The Princess used her small hand to fan air into her opened special suit and made a suggestion while sounding dazed from the heat.

“Since it intercepts attacks that are not actually going to hit, could we fire randomly but rapidly so it uses up all its ammo?”

“It’s not a bad idea, but remember how large the Manhattan is. Even if it’s forced into back-to-back battles without resupplying, we’ll dry up first.”

What could they do?

How could they supply an effective blow to that monster?

(If a direct attack won’t work, I guess we’ll have to try some kind of trick. Like sending a small group right up to that giant thing...)

Frolaytia narrowed her eyes with a quiet look on her face, but then slowly shook her head.

Had she been infected by those idiots’ way of thinking?

The Princess breathed a heated sigh and spoke with a blank look in her eyes.

“I want to see Quenser and the others soon.”

(Agreed. This is hard work without anyone to shove the most annoying parts onto.)

Frolaytia kept that part to herself and then spoke up.

“Analyst, the Martini Series holds the AI network’s reins, so why do you think they authorized this?”

“That is unknown, including just how many of them have malfunctioned. We simply have too little information to say. But assuming they are not wishing for their own destruction, I can’t imagine why they would send the Manhattan to the front line on its own...”

“...”

“Capulet is an AI network. If it sees no special meaning in the loss of individual physical devices,

then it might view even the Manhattan as a disposable game piece.”

“If the algorithm was that digitally destructive, I doubt the Information Alliance would have prospered as much as it has. At the very least, it would not be so accepting of the highly-wasteful lifestyles of humans.”

If not all that many Martinis had actually lost control, it would explain why Manhattan itself had taken action all of a sudden. But they had no real evidence and the situation was fluid. And if the other Martinis were affected in a rapid chain reaction, it would hardly matter.

“Any sign of our people who disappeared at sea?”

“None at all. Our embassies and consulates have received no notification that they were taken prisoner. ...We cannot even say whether they are still alive or not.”

“It’s too late to go check the Information Alliance maintenance fleet that was nearly obliterated by their own side. I wish we had at least sent out a spy plane to keep an eye on it, but it’s simply too late. Thanks to a certain moron!!”

Bloodrics responded to Frolaytia’s shout by raising both hands without getting up off the floor.

“Tia-chan, you know that would not have been realistic either way, don’t you?” said the pummeled brother. “Even if you had accomplished something then, they would have gotten serious and vaporized New Caribbean Island.”

An alarmed cry came from the screen.

Bloodrics could not see the laptop screen from his position, but the Princess must not have known that. As soon as she heard a male voice, she blushed and quickly held the front of her special suit closed with her small hands.

Frolaytia ignored that and spoke coldly to her blood-related brother.

“So what?”

“If no one reports on it, no one would know any of your people were left with the Information Alliance maintenance fleet. Then there would be zero hope of rescue for them.”

“...”

The brother’s point made the sister grimace so hard she nearly bit off the end of the long, narrow

kiseru in her mouth. He was right, but she did not want to accept it. Anyone could tell just by looking at her.

There was nothing they could do.

But that did not mean they had no thoughts on the matter.

They knew their comrades were clinging to life on a deadly battlefield across the ocean where they could not even ask for help, but they could not reach out a hand. They wished they could trade places. That was not just a nice thing to say after seeing some tragedy on TV. They all meant it. Otherwise, they would not have forced their exhausted bodies to keep moving and continued gathering information without any sleep or complaint. The Pilot Elite, the base commander, the maintenance soldiers, and the analysts were all in agreement on that.

Bloodrics Capistrano understood that.

And that was why he had done more than just flee.

"I provided a starting point for you. How is he doing?"

"Rigas Blackpassion was one of the people on that Capitalist Corporations submarine."

"But you saw that report that he said something interesting, didn't you?" Bloodrics got up from the floor. "The Ragnarok Script. It seems to be a toy capable of interfering with the Martini Series that forms the core of the Information Alliance. Although we don't know if they inject something of pure data into their heads or stimulate their senses using pheromones, ultrasound, flashing lights, or whatever else. That means solving this might require more than simply attacking the Information Alliance. This might sound somewhat dirty, but this Ragnarok Script might be an opportunity for us. ...If an external attack looks hopeless, causing them to crumble from within might create enough of a 'crack' to rescue your people stranded in that deadly ocean."

"..."

Frolaytia clicked her tongue again and sent a fist into the center of Bloodrics face for getting carried away.

Without even a glance toward her collapsed brother, the sister left the guest room with her laptop full of classified information. She walked to the interrogation room with some large men from base security. There, she found an upper middle-aged man bound by leather belts to something like a dentist's chair.

The long-haired, gloomy, and timid interrogator girl whispered to Frolaytia. Her face was hidden by her bangs, an eyepatch, a mask, and some headphones, so her nickname when she was younger may

have been Kuchisake Onna.

"H-he seems to have lost a lot of blood when Sir Bloodrics severed his hand with a katana, so I need to stabilize his blood pressure first. We should be able to administer the drug after that, so, um..."

"Rigas Blackpassion," cut in Frolaytia. "The Ragnarok Script. I want to know what that means. Did you really procure it yourself? I doubt a small fry like you is pulling all the strings. What is hidden behind the scenes?"

The Capitalist Corporations man raised his limply-hanging head.

"I don't expect the war treaties to apply in this sealed room...but my life still has value. Look at my arm. Ha ha. Push me too hard and I'll die before you can get any information out of me. Treat me with care or you will be wasting your time."

"Is that so?"

There was nothing more than that.

Frolaytia must not have been expecting anything from the beginning because she casually glanced over at the interrogator who had desperately hidden her face.

"The plan was to loosen his lips by ridding him of his mental willpower with a drug, right?"

"Y-yes, um, we will be using an animal anesthetic. It's the same idea as someone talking more readily when they're sleep-deprived or intoxicated. But before any of that, we have to give him a blood transfusion to stabilize his blood pressure..."

"No, that gives us another option. Hold this a moment."

"?"

Frolaytia pushed her laptop into the interrogator's arms, shocking the flat-chested girl into silence.

And with a dry gunshot, a dark red hole opened in Rigas's neck.

"Ah...bah?"

There was a blank in his memories.

As Rigas looked over his sweaty body, he tasted a rusty flavor spreading through the back of his throat, saw dark, dried blood on his uniform, and felt the pain receding. He must have been given some kind of anesthetic.

The Capitalist Corporations officer blinked in confusion at the unnatural passage of time and Frolaytia spat some disinterested words his way.

"Your heart stopped for about 1 minute 45 seconds. From the shock of blood loss. You should be thankful Luce was skillful enough to revive you."

His breathing was not functioning properly.

He heard a whistling sound with each breath.

"Y-you're kidd-..."

Another bang.

"35 seconds."

"Wait, are you saying you-..."

"1 minute 2 seconds."

"Abbeh. Gurgle gurgle..."

"Oh, that was a close one. You were out for 2 minutes and 30 seconds."

A yes or no answer changed nothing. To transform him into a human device that would spit out whatever they wanted to know, his mind had to be thoroughly torn down first. The violence would continue until Rigas Blackpassion no longer said anything unnecessary.

Each time his consciousness cut out and returned, the amount of boxy medical equipment surrounding the dentist-like chair had increased. At this point, the electronics probably weighed more than Rigas himself.

For some reason, the interrogator girl (who was now soaked with blood) was gagging and crying behind her eyepatch and mask more than the Capitalist Corporations officer himself.

The look in Frolaytia's eyes had not changed. The handgun drawn from her hip was still aimed directly at him.

"Not even an expert can completely control the revival. So it might not work next time."

"...You...what about the war treaties...the fundamental articles on treatment of prisoners...?"

He was killed twice more.

Rigas was now covered in tubes. He had essentially been turned into a living mummy and was nearly encased in the blocks of medical equipment. And Frolaytia's eyes were even colder than the machinery.

"Blood loss intoxication. That's the excuse used by perverts with an abnormal fetish for drinking blood or having their own blood drunk. It's also theorized to explain why a police officer can dramatically stand back up after being shot in the gut. If all we need to do is adjust your body's internal state to loosen your lips, we don't need to inject a drug. We only need to cause enough blood loss to leave you woozy. Of course, take too much and you'll die before telling us anything, so it isn't exactly favored by experts. And sure enough, you're approaching death pretty quickly now."

They were neither killing him nor not killing him.

Her casual tone led the Capitalist Corporations officer to move his tense vocal cords and force out the words.

"Y-you're insane..."

"Don't even try it, you fool. I'm the piece of shit that retreated to this safe base while ignoring so many of my people who needed help. And yet you think your life should be guaranteed when you're the one that messed with the Information Alliance and set up some kind of conspiracy? Just how convenient a world do you think you live in!?"

He could no longer speak.

While Rigas gasped as he struggled to breath, Frolaytia Capistrano pressed her handgun muzzle to the center of his forehead and roared at him while the heat sizzled on his skin.

"I will do whatever it takes to get the information I need to rescue those idiots. The Ragnarok Script. Either tell me everything you know or you can continue playing ding dong dash at the pearly gates!! Now, what will you do, you piece of shit!!!!!!?"

Part 2

"Simply put, it was practice."

The tall Asian beauty named Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks spoke on the cruiser's bridge.

Unlike the past, modern ship's bridges were not all that important. Ship and weapons control were generally done in the windowless combat command center on a lower level, so this bridge was mostly just for show. In an intense battle, the captain on down would have to withdraw from this central point. That seemed like a case of mismatched priorities, but it had gained a new value.

Yes.

It was the perfect place for the privileged class to clear everyone else away for a private conversation.

Although it did require some caution for female officers in skirts because the reinforced glass window extended all the way to the floor just like a broadcast tower's viewing deck.

"To be honest, the Olympia Dome's broadcast facility was not all that high a priority. It was better off destroyed, but we could have dealt with the issue even if it was not. Same with forcing the Legitimacy Kingdom to pay reparations. That must have left quite a few bodies behind, but it seems the Faith Organization was up to no good as well. What really mattered was proving the method as effective. ...That is, a method of directly accessing the moving Manhattan 000, gathering information, and sabotaging it if necessary."

"..."

Wraith, another Martini Series, maintained a troubled expression.

Taratua remained seated in her fancy chair and casually clapped her hands twice at her fellow Martini who had safely returned from the Olympia Dome.

"As a giant artificial floating island, the Olympia Dome has many similarities to the world's largest Object. To be honest, the Olympia Dome is the more difficult of the two when looking only at the infiltration phase. After all, our maintenance fleet and the Manhattan 000 are both from the Information Alliance. If we set a damaged ship adrift and send out a distress signal, the Martini holding the Manhattan 000's reins will follow the rulebook and approve a rescue even as she argues with the AI network. Simply put, we can get onboard using the exact same method."

"But how many Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers are left? Thanks to your meaningless harassment, they were driven nearly to disaster and most of them were slaughtered by that flying Object."

"Oh, is that why you're so irritable?" Taratua did not seem to care. "Disposable personnel are only valuable when you dispose of them. Can you win a war if you're too afraid to fire a single bullet? We just have to gather spare personnel from elsewhere. Any new soldiers can be provided the necessary information through training. They work and we profit. Simple, right?"

"Is what you're doing even war?"

"Oh, it's war. A war by me and for me. In that sense, I may have wronged you, Wraith. They're only disposable, but they do have experience packed in their heads. So I promised them your head as a reward for a successful mission."

"..."

"Given how much the blood had rushed to their heads, I imagine they'll kill you before they can even think up a cleverer but more perverted plan. Well, just accept it as your fate. I will increase the value of the Martini Series, so you can be part of the foundation."

Wraith sighed.

"Let's discuss a hypothetical."

"Hold on, do you think this is a chat between friends or something? Romantic advice is simply outside my area of expertise."

"...Let's say there is a method of completely destroying the Martini Series from without, using the same kind of active self-denial as throwing out everything you own to get a new start on life. Would someone as universally capable and foolish as you be able to forgive your fellow Martinis who went insane?"

"Is that what this is about?" Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks gave a snort of laughter while elegantly crossing her legs. "It would be one thing if you were born with it, but when it's something done to you afterwards, then you should have been able to prevent it or stop it. No attack or defense is perfect if it is made by human hands. That is why the Martini Series was created to make up for the AI network's flaws. We're supposed to play house with Capulet which may not even have a center anymore."

"Your point?"

"Active self-denial? If someone takes advantage of a vulnerability, the responsibility lies with the person who knew of it but didn't put together a countermeasure."

"I see," muttered Wraith while squirming a bit.

Now, did Taratua notice that the medals on her chest reflected the sunlight to inconspicuously send a signal somewhere?

A moment later, a spider web of cracks ran through the thick bulletproof glass on the floor of the

bridge.

“Oh...?”

There was a surprised expression there.

The leather chair's stuffing scattered everywhere. Taratua's butt slid forward in that luxurious chair. She tried to hold onto the armrests, but her entire body had gone limp. Her hips fell from the chair and she collapsed to the floor.

Had the wet sensation finally caught up to her by then?

Fresh blood was splattered around like someone had rubbed red paint around with a mop. Needless to say, it drew out the path Taratua had taken as she rolled along the floor.

And lastly...

There was a dark red hole in the tall Asian beauty's stomach.

“Ah...bh.”

“If someone takes advantage of a vulnerability, the responsibility lies with the person who knew of it but didn't put together a countermeasure? You are awful through and through, but it doesn't really matter if you were broken or if you were always that way.”

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray's expression had not changed.

“Who do you think did this?”

She slowly leaned forward to bring her face in close, but she showed no sign of stopping the hemorrhaging blood or providing any other first aid to her fellow Martini.

“You're the kind of asshole who hides information on the Hammer Throw 001 for no other reason than to be cruel. You probably can't even keep track of how many people hold a grudge against you. If you were mediocre enough to be convinced, I would not have had to rely on this.”

“...———”

“Yes, yes. No need to worry. None of our people will be blamed. They made sure to bring back some Faith Organization guns and ammunition as souvenirs. Shoot you with those and, well, all the documents will say you were shot by an enemy soldier in the normal course of the war. War is not

treated as a crime. Although this might change some rules so we can't hold private conversations on the bridge any longer. The adults will be sad to lose another valuable smoking area. Personally, I'm not too fond of the combat command center and its thick walls. It feels too oppressive."

Nothing dramatic happened.

Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks could not close her wide-open eyelids and she simply stopped moving like her battery had run dry.

Humans were selfish creatures. She did not inspire the kind of emotion that Piranirie had.

Wraith held a hand to her ear and spoke into her earpiece.

"She is dead. I will send her body to the military doctor and have it proven that the wound came from a shot fired from 400 meters. And that it was done by the Faith Organization bullet embedded in the wall."

"Oh, is that so? Thanks for actually choosing to kill her. I don't think I could have handled it if you had tried to bring Taratua into this. But what else would I expect from one of the great Martinis? No one's better at sending people to their death."

"..."

"Honestly, this is the last time I do anything as annoying as a sniper job from a one-man submersible rocking in the waves. Now you need to take command. You can do that as a Martini, right?"

"Hold on. That's much easier said than done. It's not just an issue of rank. You need to consider affiliation and the command structure as well. You are aware how many hurdles I have to clear here, aren't you?"

"I don't care, Madam Lieutenant Colonel. The only reason I didn't shoot you first is because you're easier to control and thus more valuable than Taratua. Well, there was also all the people who died because she hid the information about the Hammer Throw 001. After we settle this Manhattan issue, you need to modify the records so they don't list us as dead. That's the only way we can return to our normal lives."

"Understood."

"Are you sure?"

This was not an icy voice.

Heivia's voice was somehow mechanical. That was proof that he had passed the temporary surge of emotion and his drive for revenge had settled in as a normal thing. With the exception of a certain individual, no pain or death he witnessed would shake his heart now.

Wraith had seen plenty of people like that on the battlefield.

As a Martini, she had maintained order within the Information Alliance military by managing losing armies and occasionally eliminating berserk units or indirectly executing war criminals by sending them to certain death.

"Your life is a limited-time-only deal that lasts as long as you're useful to us. Once you're useless, you will meet the same fate as Taratua. You can give me an upturned look with tears in your eyes and you can place your hands on the wall and stick your ass out toward me, but it won't change a thing. I'm having a hard time finding reasons not shoot you right in your insane head. So work hard for the Legitimacy Kingdom."

The cold and mechanical transmission ended.

Wraith was all alone for the moment.

No, it was possible no one had ever filled the gap left by that one boy. Not even the young man who was always by her side. Especially when she knew how angry it would make her if someone casually offered to fill that gap.

Part 3

"Captain Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks was killed in a cowardly and calculated surprise attack by a Faith Organization remnant. I will take command for the remainder of the operation. I am sure some of you will not like having me go over your heads, but I would like you to leave this to me as I am an expert at recovering from failure in combat."

Inside the tilted supply ship, Wraith explained that with her aide by her side.

The operation was already underway.

"I am having a retaliation list put together based on who could have made that sniper shot given the conditions, but that is being handled by a different team. Because we have our own timetable. We will show all standard condolences and respect to Taratua by continuing with her suggestion. We will disguise one of 'our' maintenance fleet's ships as a wreck and place it along the Manhattan 000's predicted path. We will have it pick up the crew and bring them directly onboard."

"...So it's essentially the same as with the Olympia Dome. The problem is it's still hard to say whether that was a success or a failure."

Heivia sounded fed up with the whole idea.

The fox saw that look on the tanuki's face and nodded.

"The Manhattan 000 has extraordinary size and power and it is currently the world's largest Object, but it cannot attack us if we are right up on it. Because it can't fire on itself. Boarding it will be the first obstacle."

After all, a normal(?) Object was about 50 meters, while just the portion of the Manhattan visible above water was more than 20,000 meters. It also had more than one reactor and the total number was unknown. The fact that its electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon had obliterated Heivia's unit in the blink of an eye from North America to Central America made it clear that its range and power were both far beyond the norm. Any standard Object that challenged it would be vaporized before it even arrived within firing range.

Any explanation would just sound like someone bragging about its abilities.

Did it not have even the slightest weakness or flaw?

"Is our objective to destroy it?"

"If necessary." Wraith readily agreed even though she too was from the Information Alliance. "But while the Manhattan 000's specs are on another level entirely, it still has more than 10 million normal residents on its surface. We cannot make a general attack from the outside."

"What has even happened to them?"

That alone was an honest question. Taratua had said Manhattan itself was traveling south at 388 knots, which was around 700km/h. If that was true, it would be like clinging to the wing of a passenger plane.

But Wraith only shook her head.

"I don't know, but it doesn't seem there has been any major damage."

"??? Were they all evacuated to the subway stations or something?"

"No, not that." The blonde girl answered Myonri's question while her hand wandered through empty air as if in search of a pen to twirl. "It seems they're artificially manipulating the air currents to protect the Manhattan surface from the violent winds."

“Wait, what? Manipulating the air currents???”

“It makes sense in theory. Even your average factory uses air curtains. By blowing an artificial wind vertically, you can keep out the dust and dirt that would otherwise get in horizontally. By scaling that up by a lot, they’re using the wind blown up from below to divert the fierce headwind hitting them from the front. It forms a dome.”

“That’s simple enough to say, but we’re talking about the same winds a passenger plane would experience!”

“So what? Just how much does your ordinary, everyday common sense do you think applies to the Manhattan 000? Not even I know how many JLevelMHD reactors it has.”

Just how forceful could it be?

But that was exactly how Objects had ended the age of stealth bombers and nuclear weapons.

“As long as they can solve the air current problem, the rest is easy. 700km/h might sound scary, but it’s really the same as riding a linear motor train or a passenger plane. It should be a comfortable ride as long as it doesn’t make any of the sharp footwork seen in Object combat.”

But once you were onboard, you could not get off.

And no one could predict what the Martinis or Manhattan would do. There was no guarantee the 20,000m mass wouldn’t suddenly perform footwork that exceeded a fighter craft’s movements.

“...What’s going on there?”

“Who knows. We are intercepting some of the EM signals as a part of analyzing the Object, but it seems the people’s usual smartphone-dependent lifestyle is continuing. They’re still posting on social media and video sites without a care in the world.”

Myonri blinked at that.

“Um, they’re not connected to the outside internet, are they?”

“You can analyze someone’s conversational patterns if you can see their social media friends list and message log. They’re probably receiving automated responses disguised as their online friends’ accounts. The Martini in charge of New York may be doing her best to deny reality as a part of her active self-denial. Thanks to that, the logical and thoughtless Capulet AI Network is in top form today. Everyone in New York probably thinks they’re internet heroes. Their desire for approval is probably being satisfied more than ever before.”

Heivia found it hard to decide whether or not that just meant their senses had been dulled by peace.

Legitimacy Kingdom military textbooks told the story of a man who cooked instant ramen even as his house burned down around him. When humans were faced with a situation too difficult to accept, a defense instinct would apparently kick in and they would continue their normal daily routine to preserve their mental balance. That way they could tell themselves they were still living their normal life and had yet to stray beyond it.

Wraith brought a hand to her slender chin.

“Our objective is to discover the reason why the Manhattan 000 is on its way here. From the look of things, I doubt we can hope for the Pilot Elite to go on strike. As I said before, the ultimate decision is up to the Capulet AI Network that supports the Manhattan 000 and the Martini who holds its reins. The idea that it is here to settle the mess around New Caribbean Island concerning the Nitrogen Mirage and Katarina Martini is no more than speculation, so we don’t know the actual reason. If that girl is acting in the overall interest of the Information Alliance, I will protect her. If she is ignoring an error in Capulet and has steered in the direction of annihilating the human race, then I must destroy and stop the Manhattan 000 that acts as her eyes and ears and her arms and legs.”

“Is that the Information Alliance’s overall opinion?” asked Heivia. “If not, this will count as treason and you’ll be reduced to a slave.”

“It’s an issue of the human heart. I was ‘created’ in the hopes that I would have the humanity to stop a rampaging machine when the adults alone could not make the appropriate decision. So that is what I will do.” The Martini Series girl did not bat an eye. “Also, I will share the details on Melly Martini Extradry who was in charge of New York security. All contact with her has been lost and there has been no report of her death. The very fact that she has intentionally failed to report to the military is an irregularity. It is possible she has been broken by abuse of active self-denial just like Piranirie. As you experienced with Piranirie, a broken Martini is more dangerous than a machine. The Elite may have been affected as well.”

Wraith closed her mouth for a moment there.

Before death, Piranirie had mentioned some external factor that could drive the Martini Series mad. She had assumed the culprit was Katarina, the engineer asking for asylum, but she had been wrong. And she had said an enemy force was the most likely suspect as they would gain the most from doing that to the Martini Series who preserved order in the Information Alliance.

Was the true enemy in the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Capitalist Corporations, or the Faith Organization?

Myonri must have been quick to adapt to new environments because she raised her hand before speaking to an enemy commander.

"U-umm, then, uh, how do we from the Legitimacy Kingdom benefit from looking into the secrets of the Martini Series and Manhattan?"

"To be blunt, you don't."

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray sounded indifferent.

But she may have been better than Taratua since she did not hide the truth and deceive them.

"But if you fake your deaths during the intense fighting with the Manhattan 000, you will have a chance to escape the control of Capulet which manages the entire Information Alliance."

"You have to be joking. You're the commanding officer here. Aren't we free once you sign the right document?"

"I am not Piranirie or Taratua. Without their rule of fear, the many people below me will grow suspicious and might shoot you in the back if you attempt to leave with a smile." Wraith quietly sighed. "With how big the Manhattan 000 is, a single shot will reduce you to ashes, preventing anyone from identifying your corpse. And a naval facility should have plenty of ways to escape in an emergency. More than just small boats and submersibles, I wouldn't be surprised to learn it has an entire giant submarine. ...All I want are the results. When you see a chance, then run off on your own."

"What about the documents the Information Alliance rewrote!? I was a noble heir back home, but they'll treat me like a ghost now!! I don't want to get home only to be turned away as a lookalike and forced to live in a cardboard box!!"

"Your military will have your DNA data on file. Run to a base or embassy with a hair or tissue full of squid-smelling filth and have them check the genetic information. You can tell them the report of your death was just more of the Information Alliance's usual harassment."

"...You have got to be kidding. We're not talking about a loan shark's 5-second smartphone eligibility check. That's not exactly a guarantee."

"Then this knowledgeable beauty will write up some memoirs on a website anyone can access. If I mention the harassment operation, you won't have anything to worry about."

It was a very Information Alliance kind of thing to write up fake memoirs as a way of getting out the truth.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray lightly clapped her hands to gather attention.

"We all have our own goals here, but right now we need to clear the first hurdle. Then we can use the situation to our advantage. The strategy itself is simple. Taratua said the Olympia Dome incident was practice, so we just have to do that again."

"That sounds great. Very reassuring."

Heivia breathed a heavy sigh.

And then he said it.

"The problem is that the damn Manhattan saw right through our trick, fired a giant blast our way, and tore a huge chunk out of our ship, so now we can see the ocean right there. Goddammit!!"

A rapid-fire beam had punched through the side of the ship, so the entire thing looked like a half-circle arch. Even if its height was restricted to keep the center of gravity low, it was still more than 9 meters. The steel supply ship just ended all of a sudden and there was the ocean directly below. The exposed cabins and corridors were visible in the other end of the cross section a few dozen meters away.

The artificial storm had passed, so it was sunny.

They were afraid to remain on the flimsy deck. The sea shining in the light of the blue sky and sun had never looked so sinister before.

A single attack from Manhattan had transformed a nearly 80m steel ship into an arch, but it must have been more of a game for it. It was like an exterminator poking at the beehive with the insecticide nozzle to see if it was still full of pests or if it was empty.

It had been a cannon, but only the smallest of the small.

If it had used its electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon, all metal would have been melted over an area of several dozen kilometers.

"I-I'm actually surprised," said Myonri. "Information Alliance ships can take this much damage without sinking!?"

"Well, the ballast tanks are functioning as floats and the bulkheads and watertight doors were shut. Plus, a supply ship will have more tanks than usual. It's basically filled with small balloons like the packaging material used to protect online store shipments."

"She meant that as a rhetorical question, you overly serious idiot!! More importantly, what do we do? The Manhattan knows we're here. Lightning is about to strike on the level of your parents

finding out you were browsing porn on the tablet you borrowed from them!!”

According to Taratua Martini On-the-Rocks, the Manhattan was supposed to arrive near New Caribbean Island 4 or 5 hours after leaving New York. They could not tell from the edge of the arch, but they were already sharing the ocean with it.

There was a bright beam of light.

But it was not the Manhattan.

“What idiot did that!? What bastard just poked the hornet’s nest without even asking permission!?”

“Those are...probably Faith Organization Second Generations. Challenging that thing with only 5 Objects is suicidal, but maybe they were ordered to gather information no matter what.”

Wraith’s judgment was proof enough that this had surpassed the assumptions of the clean wars.

They did not have time to figure out the individual traits of the Objects. Cannons were fired one after another. Any one of those Faith Organization elites would have been able to easily defeat Heivia’s group in a proper fight, but they were almost immediately blown away like a sugar sculpture placed too close to a heater.

“It...The Manhattan took some damage from that, didn’t it!?”

“Probably not,” said Wraith. “With that much firepower, it can divert anything from plasma to lasers. And have you not noticed what the weather is like?”

“It’s bright and sunny, but what does that have to do with-...ah.”

“So even a fool like you has finally caught on. A single shot from its prized electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon will stir up the atmosphere to the point of causing rapid pressure changes that produce a major storm, but there’s no sign of that. That means it was holding back. The Manhattan 000 is intentionally keeping its electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon in reserve.”

Needless to say, it was not holding back for the Faith Organization’s sake.

Wraith’s opinion was rational.

“A storm would expose the people of Manhattan to lightning strikes. That’s the only concern it has. If any of the Faith Organization cannons could have scored a direct hit and done serious damage to the people, it probably would have ended the battle even sooner using its electromagnetically-launched

reactor cannon. It showed no hint of that.”

It had been too easy.

The last of the five Objects was unemotionally blown away.

“That’s awful. The battle is already over. That wasn’t even enough time to cook some instant noodles.”

Heivia had gone pale as he fiddled with his assault rifle and shoulder-fired missile launcher at the edge of the arch, so Wraith continued in exasperation.

“Since you might actually be that stupid, I guess I’ll ask: You don’t think you can sink the Manhattan 000 with those, do you?”

“It’s already learned of our plan!! I’ve never heard of a would-be surprise attacker being treated with much care. We’ll definitely be executed for their amusement. There will be no kindness for us after we used this method. If we raise our hands in surrender, we’ll just be vaporized! I’m not about to excite people’s living rooms as a shocking year-end news story!!”

“You won’t have to worry about that. In the Information Alliance’s internet culture, television is dead.” The black-uniformed girl smiled coldly. “And you seem to be mistaken about some things, so allow me to correct you. One: The Manhattan 000’s Elite is probably just a figurehead. Its actions are determined by the constant conversations and mutual error corrections between the Capulet AI Network contained in unknown physical devices and the Martini in charge of New York security. Two: I’m honestly skeptical that Capulet has even detected our presence.”

“Um, what do you mean?” asked Myonri.

“They are simply being cautious after what happened to the Olympia Dome. If it could accurately detect our numbers and locations from our heat and magnetic signatures, it would have vaporized us with pinpoint accuracy. It would not blast a huge hole in the ship like this. Why did it carefully ‘remove the fat’ with a smaller secondary cannon instead of vaporizing the entire ship with a powerful main cannon it can fire as many times as it wants? ...The Martini, who we suspect has fallen victim to active self-denial, is not certain. So she is removing everything she is not certain of so we will panic and reveal ourselves.”

“That’s all speculation.”

“Yes. But if you climb up on the deck and fire a shot, then she will be certain. Once the Manhattan 000 detects hostile intent – even from a peashooter – it can rest easy and transform us into sea debris. And this time, it will use one of its many main cannons.”

Wraith slowly moved her lips to repeat the phrase “rest easy”.

In other words...

“The correct choice here is to wait. The Martini holding Capulet’s reins made a mistake due to her active self-denial. Silence will be more helpful than a million bullets here. No matter how suspicious this ship might be, it is officially registered as an Information Alliance supply ship, you are powerless prisoners, and I am a commander who can manage that kind of noncombatant. We have made no mistake and yet the Manhattan 000 fired on us without advance warning. And it fired right into the side of the ship instead of just a warning shot. Their Martini must really be in a crisis right now. AI can’t be charged with human crimes, after all. If this really is a harmless ship, it was all for naught. She’ll have no choice but to admit to the mistake and quickly rescue us.”

“You have no guarantee that we’ll all be saved!!”

“It’s true your odds of survival are pretty low with my plan. But if you challenge the Manhattan 000 to a hopeless final battle, those odds are precisely 0%. Now, which will it be? I know I shouldn’t say this at my age, but even a child could do that math.”

A dull metallic sound followed.

Heivia had aimed his assault rifle at Wraith.

But even more noises surrounded the delinquent soldier.

The other Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes aimed identical guns at Heivia’s back. They seemed to be saying sorry in their hearts. Even Myonri was among them with an apologetic look on her face.

“Wait...you’re kidding, right? Whose ass do you think you’re aiming those tiny dicks at?”

“It would appear that everyone except for you is a rock-hard adult.” Wraith teased him by lightly raising her hands, slowly lifting her butt from the floor, and standing up. “It is highly likely that the Manhattan 000 will fire a few more test shots. And even if it doesn’t, the deck will break soon. That could throw us out into the ocean, so grab some oxygen tanks and anything that will work as float. This is a military ship, so it will be well supplied. Frank! Gather a few emergency kits for me.”

The aide young man grabbed a bag hanging on the wall. Whether it was a joke or not, Heivia bit his lip when he saw it said AED on the side.

“...I refuse to accept your methods here.”

“You don’t have to, but the clock is ticking all the same.” The black-uniformed girl winked and stuck

out her tongue a bit. "By my estimate, the next attack will arrive in less than 3 seconds, so...sorry, the time passed while I was talking."

With a deafening blast, their battlefield was transformed.

All of them were shaken by the intense impact and thrown from the edge of the arch-carved supply ship and into the glittering ocean.

"Bwah!! Bwoh!?"

Heivia misjudged the timing of his landing, so he swallowed a bunch of seawater as soon as his face hit the water's surface. He somehow managed to get his head above water while his vision spun, but he could not stop coughing. He did not feel like he was getting any air at all.

"...Dammit."

And he did not have time to choke.

The supply ship's flimsy deck had broken and the entire ship sank into the ocean as it fell apart. To make sure he was not dragged down with it, Heivia grabbed onto some broken wood that must have originally belonged to a table. The sight before his eyes felt like something from another world altogether.

It was there.

A 20,000 meter length of ordinary skyscrapers was approaching.

Its 700km/h speed was nowhere to be seen, presumably because it had already arrived at its destination. It was motionless. That only made its presence all the more imposing.

If he was looking down from a helicopter while it was lit up at night, it would have been a million-dollar view. But that impossible location rose up from the clear blue ocean. It was like a dragon. A giant dragon with a thick forest growing from its back.

It had completely left the category of modern weaponry.

That was why Heivia's mind erroneously saw it as something from another world.

He was less than 200 meters away from it.

That was barely within range for infantry to target a moving human without the assistance of a

scope, but what about for that extraordinary Object? You might understand how he felt if you kissed a crocodile that was larger than you were.

He no longer felt anger at the unreasonable situation he found himself in.

Definite fear now squeezed at his heart.

"It's there. It's really there. And it's way closer than I expected! This is like a sudden close-up of the actor's you-know-what in a 3D movie, goddammit!!"

"Do not fire!!" shouted Wraith while clinging to the same waterproof bag as the aide young man. "Restrain your fear. Silence is the correct answer here. If you don't fire, it will rescue us. This is all over if you touch your guns, you hasty and simple-minded animals. The difference in firepower and armor does not matter. You saw what happened to those 5 Faith Organization Objects, didn't you? Step outside this 'blind spot' and you will be reduced to ashes in an instant!!"

"~ ~ ~!!"

What would that boy have done in this situation?

Would he have found a weakness and challenged this great a monster with just the equipment he had on hand?

Heivia thought and thought but could not find an answer. Heivia Winchell was not Quenser Barbotage.

Something shot by in the sky overhead.

The boomerang-like craft was likely an unmanned spy plane. Relaying information was their entire purpose, but just like a submarine, they only emitted signals when absolutely necessary and used simple circuits for their power system. At any rate, you would never end up with that trimmed-down silhouette with the thick armor and fire-extinguishing equipment needed to increase a pilot's survival.

"Tch. They're spying on our little swim, dammit!!"

It did not matter if it had missiles hanging from its wings or not. Once they were located, the Manhattan could send any number of shells their way.

Wraith said something like a prayer.

Was it meant as advice for the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers, or as a means of calming her own pounding heart?

“Slowly, slowly. Just let the current take you. That will bring us closer to the Manhattan 000... Listen, it can fry an area of several dozen kilometers with a single main cannon blast if it wants to. The one safe zone is right up next to the Manhattan 000 itself. Arrive at point-blank range and it can no longer use its main cannons. We haven’t lost and it hasn’t escaped. This is the best result. Understand!?”

They did not actually do anything.

The Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes were carried over to the Manhattan. No, that extraordinary monster had probably taken up that position to begin with. The 200 meters were gone in no time. Their sense of time may have been malfunctioning.

“...?”

Heivia felt an odd bubbly feeling around him.

It was like soaking in a bubble bath or in the jets of a jacuzzi. He looked down at his uniform below the water and saw small bubbles covering it like he was soaking in a carbonated beverage.

Hadn’t Taratua, the girl he had shot himself, theorized that it used supercavitation to reduce the resistance of moving through the water?

Heivia’s group was carried over to a location that jutted out sharply.

Wraith groaned while she rocked in the waves.

“The downtown district. Lower Manhattan. This is probably where you would normally board the ferry to the Statue of Liberty.”

The distance was now zero. They had arrived at Manhattan.

Heivia managed to grab onto the concrete bank.

He sensed the presence of quite a few people.

“!?”

With no hesitation whatsoever, he obeyed his survival instincts and aimed his assault rifle straight

up.

And a moment later...

"Wow. Hey, can I take a picture of that?"

He heard a silly voice.

It was a small child of less than 10.

The boy had an innocent smile that looked out of place in a city that had just been targeted by 5 Faith Organization Second Generations. Was he even aware that there was a war going on?

"That's a Legitimacy Kingdom uniform, right? I've seen videos of those. The southern sea is really dirty. There are all sorts of things floating here."

In the Central American heat, Heivia froze in place with his soaked weapon still aimed up at the unarmed children who crouched down, aimed the lenses of their phones and game systems his way, and produced electronic shutter sounds.

The children were carrying backpacks and water bottles, so they were probably on a field trip or something.

"Who is this?"

"Teacher, it's like the person we saw juggling over there!"

"Yes, a street performer. You give them money to tell them they did a good job."

They threw some change his way like anyone would at the water's edge in a tourist area.

A soft female voice came from somewhere. It was probably a recorded announcement.

"Welcome to Battery Park at the southern tip of Manhattan! Why not take a break and enjoy the greenery to recover from sightseeing at the famous Wall Street? At our park..."

Another look around showed a park below the blue sky.

A few speakers stood up from the gently rising hills covered in a carefully-maintained lawn. And beyond that were true skyscrapers. Those were the buildings of Wall Street, the world's largest

financial street.

The field trip children were not the only ones there.

A young wife was stretching on a yoga mat laid out on the lawn. An old man was jogging slowly down the winding path and a large pet dog was running out ahead of its master. There were plenty of people practicing martial arts or playing guitars on the grass.

There was a giant divide between sea and land.

The difference was so great that Heivia could not shake the feeling that he had just traveled through time.

It was peaceful.

He had come across a true safe country.

It was enough to make Heivia and his assault rifle look absurd.

“What the hell...is going on?”

“The eye of the storm may be surprisingly calm. It is always the onlookers and not those directly involved who make the biggest fuss. Which is why you professionals should be more responsible about what you say.”

Wraith must not have been able to get up on the concrete by herself. Drenched, she climbed up into Battery Park with some help from the aide young man pushing up on her small butt.

She then extended her small hand to pull the young man up.

“See? We were right not to fire. Provoking them would have been dealt with like a major crime in a safe country. You would have been shot as a violent criminal instead of dealt with like a prisoner of war.”

Then they heard the sound of thick rubber scraping on the ground.

Something had approached them at some point. It was probably made of the same substance as a special operations rubber boat. A girl moved across the grass with her butt inside a giant swim ring. There were no apparent tires or treads on the bottom...but as far as they could tell, it was moving as smoothly as a curling stone.

"Oh, Wraith. 419. Long time no see."

"Hi, Melly. You've changed your look again, I see."

Wraith smiled, but she gave off some slight tension. If this girl was using active self-denial, any past relationship with her was no guarantee of safety.

She was a girl of about 14 with brown skin and a blonde bob cut. The gentle curves of secondary sexual characteristics were contained by what looked like a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson oil paper. It was reminiscent of what one would wear for a massage or medical exam. She held a tablet in both hands...except it may have actually been a notebook-sized game system.

She wore what looked like a backwards baseball cap, but it was not.

Were those special VR goggles?

"Yes. The wheelchair and medical bed were not very promising. I got bedsores on my back. Ever since I partially retired after breaking my spine, the earth's gravity is pure torture. From there, it was a battle with the literature. In the end, I decided to revert to the basics. 881. I don't know if you should call it a waterbed or an oil damper, but it's something like that. I fill this swim ring with a special liquid and then have it vibrate with a set pattern."

This was Melly Martini Extradry.

If the information they had been given was accurate, she would be the Martini in charge of New York's security.

She controlled Manhattan over the head of the Pilot Elite. She must not have been used to the male gaze despite her risqué outfit because, when she was exposed to concentrated fire from the eyes of Heivia and the other potatoes floating in the ocean, she pulled her hands back toward her chest like a praying mantis. She somewhat nervously continued as if trying to distract them from something.

"The undercarriage uses a flagellum structure. 791. Okay? Do you remember the insane team that researched the structure of euglenas based on the theory that you could overturn the food chain if you gave plants the ability to move as quickly as humans?"

"Oh, the one where they settled on the conclusion that euglenas aren't actually plants?"

Wraith looked up at a flower-like security camera looking down at her.

"Is that for more than just decoration?"

Security cameras were all about mutual surveillance. With a square room, you could place a camera in opposing corners to cover both their blind spots. But that distribution grew much more complex outdoors.

The swim ring girl nodded proudly.

"It's cross-pollination. Whether they use the wind, insects, or birds, flowers can prosper as far as their pollen reaches. That made them incredibly useful as an example of how to set those up to cover for each other."

"If you were that thorough... Oh, so that's the basic theory behind the excessively-large Manhattan 000."

"Turgor pressure is incredible. The Bullmites were the extent of what animal research could handle. At this size, existing examples of muscular and skeletal structure are no use whatsoever. 660. It might be easier to think of it as crossing the divide between plant and animal. A 1000-year-old cedar supports more mass than a whale or mammoth."

Wraith already looked exasperated, but Melly did not stop. It was not clear if this was her area of interest or if she wanted to keep her mind off of the male gazes focused on her, but she felt the need to say it all. Just like a child showing off their treasure in a local park, the brown girl smiled and raised the game system she held in both hands.

"Tah dah! It's Stick VR. 721. With smartphones and computers, we reign supreme here in North America, but we just can't seem to compete with the Island Nation when it comes to video game systems."

"Hold on. You aren't making any sense. Weren't Stick VR and Paste VR rivals?"

"That's why I forcibly built some compatible software to bypass that. Man, it was quite a job concentrating all of Manhattan's functions down to this one device. 993. But that improved things immensely."

It was like she was showing off her level of influence.

The next thing they knew, the gathered children had been casually led away by their teacher. Was Melly monitoring all of Manhattan on that one flat-screen monitor and could she spy on the 10 million people's personal lives whenever she wanted? What was the actual Elite doing?

Next, they heard the sound of metal fitting together.

Two or three 2-meter quadrupedal animals made of steel and composite armor walked up alongside the girl whose butt was inside the giant swim ring. They were combat support robots modeled after

bulls. They could carry weapons, act as shields, search out the enemy, drive the target out from behind cover, or even crash into the target with more force than a large motorcycle. They blatantly rubbed their bodies together. They could communicate without accessing a server by recreating the actions and society of animals.

They did not even need a controller.

Just give them a general target and their programs would have them work as a group to surround and neutralize that target as quickly as possible. The sheep dog did not even need to give any instructions. Those serverless unmanned weapons would work together and achieve victory all on their own as long as they had an objective set. The cowgirl watching over them only had to provide the herd with corrections when absolutely necessary.

Wraith glanced upwards at the 6-petalled flower shape of the devices distributed using the theory of cross-pollination.

“...Everything you do is always so involved.”

“789. Manhattan is only one of New York’s 5 boroughs, but it contains more than 700,000 security cameras. Of course we’re going to make sure they look nice.”

Needless to say, those were not the only eyes and ears in Manhattan. Even during the intense fighting with the Faith Organization, Melly must have accurately predicted where on Manhattan Wraith and the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers would wash up. She had clearly sent out that unmanned spy plane to check on the situation.

And with that in mind, the brown girl wearing nothing but a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper asked a question.

“So who are they? 002.”

“Oh, them.”

Wraith kept her cool.

And Heivia’s group still had not climbed up onto land. That proved a devastating mistake.

“They’re something of a souvenir. They’re the ones who killed Taratua.”

They did even have time to shout.

Wraith took a device the size of a large lunchbox from the young man and tossed it toward the ocean. It was an AED, a medical device that used an electric current equivalent to a stun gun in order to shock the heart.

“Bwah...!?”

The power light flashed and the two electrodes attached by the same curly cables as a home phone flew through the air. The flat electrodes contacted the ocean’s surface. Heivia was already soaked and there was nothing he could do even when he saw it coming.

With a dull bursting noise, the potatoes were neutralized in an instant.

The bright blue ocean disappeared. Everything fell into darkness.

“It seems you didn’t trust me, but did you think I would still have any fondness for you left after you kept threatening to kill me? The Information Alliance maintenance fleet corrupted by Taratua was the worst, but the Legitimacy Kingdom is just as bad for helping. To be honest, I’m sick of it all. You can’t expect someone as honest and straightforward as me to not want to switch sides.”

As Heivia’s consciousness faded, he thought he heard the girl laughing scornfully down at him.

“When you get down to it, I belong to the Information Alliance. The gears shifted out of place after I shot Quenser, but I shouldn’t have had any reason to be trapped between enemy and ally. ...Melly, I will sell them to you as a sign of trust. Will that cover the Manhattan 000’s boarding fee?”

Part 4

Only ten minutes had passed.

“Oh? Is this what their new maple caramel parfait is? It’s just soaked in maple syrup! What does that have to do with the Island Nation!?”

“I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you...”

After leaving the park of betrayal and passing through Wall Street which was often seen in movies and dramas, they found a strange scene filled with Asian writing. It was the area known as Chinatown.

For some reason, Wraith the traitor and Heivia the betrayed were seated at the same table in front of an Asian chain café there. The scene was just as awkward as having a café maid kick you out and later running into her at a nearby convenience store.

The group of drenched potatoes in Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms must have seemed like better content than a kitten climbing into a bag because phone cameras were aimed their way from every direction.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray was equally soaked, but she had a towel draped over her head.

"I didn't expect this outcome either, so what can I say?" She sounded annoyed. "I never expected the enemy soldiers I sold out to be released into the city with only their weapons confiscated."

"Speaky! Tell me how to silence this piece of shit!!"

Heivia's shout was only meant to comfort himself, but the bottle-shaped speaker in the middle of the table provided the clever reply of "Start by taking a deep breath. Some days are like this."

The Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes had all gathered in one place, but they had not been handcuffed or given GPS ankle bracelets.

The enemy must not have deemed it necessary.

The flower-like stationary security cameras were not the only eyes watching them. They were apparently a rare sight wherever they went because Asian strangers were aiming their phone cameras at the soldiers purely out of curiosity. Having lenses aimed their way from every direction made them feel a certain way.

"It's like we're animals in the zoo. I'm going to kill every last one of them..."

"Well, this is probably a cage made of data. Manhattan doesn't have a prison, so they have several layers of human management at each coordinate."

Water erupted upwards like a fountain from the fire hydrant at the end of the road.

New York's proper latitude was similar to Hokkaido in the Island Nation. No one was used to the Central American climate, so they all looked overheated. They could always stay indoors and receive the benefit of air conditioning, but they were so obsessed with finding content for social media that they braved the discomfort and let the fire hydrant's water cool them off.

"Maintaining a calm facade but going nuts on social media. That's just how New Yorkers are."

After giving an exasperated look to those wealthy people who were intent on showing off how unfazed they were that Manhattan had started to move, Wraith grabbed a junk food mini spring roll from a rectangular cardboard container and tossed it into her small mouth.

She winked and pointed at the floral security camera overhead.

“People who put a lot of wasted effort into appearances are willing to die for their pride. Closing yourself up in your room is the ultimate form of self-indulgence, but being closed up by someone else is solitary confinement in prison. You can live in the exact same coordinate in New York, but the label slapped onto you can make that feel like heaven or like hell. That’s probably how the people are controlled.”

“What the hell!? Does it only take you five seconds to forget who you threw under the bus, crazy girl!? Do you have any idea what you did!?”

Heivia shouted angrily and started to stand up, but then a heavy metallic noise rang out.

A 2m composite armor bull that was heavier than a large motorcycle had slowly stood up from where it had been seated on the ground.

Wraith gently raised both hands, winked, and devilishly stuck out her tongue.

“This city has the world’s highest camera density. You heard what she said about the flowers, right? If you don’t learn from the New Yorkers and increase your tech literacy, the government will be spying on you out in reality and on the internet. So until you learn the rules, how about you avoid any actions that might be misinterpreted? Those Bullmites do not use a server and only need their simple circuits to coordinate, but if one tackles you, you’ll be bedridden for the remainder of your life. I’m sure they have you surrounded in an inescapable layout calculated out using big data simulations and baseball data theory. Nonlethal weapons can be a type of sadism. Since they can beat you up without killing you, no one has to hesitate before using them.”

“Curse those weird Bullshits or whatever they’re called...”

“You probably lost another life just now. The question is how many lives you have left before it’s game over.”

Heivia, Wraith, and the others had successfully landed on the extraordinary Object, but they saw no sign of soldiers walking around. The only people they saw were the New Yorkers of that safe country known as the racial salad bowl. Instead of people, the city was being patrolled and protected by unmanned weapons, primarily the Bullmites that kept gently rubbing their bodies together.

And the passersby showed no concern when they saw several dozen soldiers from an enemy nation.

A digital surveillance society was a creepy thing, but at the same time, everyone assumed it was targeted at the anti-government guerillas, enemy soldiers, and other minorities that had been rejected from the larger framework of society. They assumed they would not be affected themselves if they did the clever thing and obeyed.

But in truth, they had no guarantee whatsoever who the unseen observers would decide to cast out on a whim.

“...This really is the Information Alliance, isn't it?”

“Oh, is that so?” complained Heivia. “I see where we stand here now, but more importantly, the instant I get my gun back, I'm firing some bullets right up your ass, goddammit...”

A large donut-shaped swim ring slid over like a curling stone and it carried Melly Martini Extradry who only had a game system and a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper. The ring looked like it would flip over on even the smallest slope, but the smiling brown girl maintained perfect balance. This was different from the unmanned weapons that used simple circuits and no server. Just like the game system, the ring may have been directly linked to the Manhattan 000.

The blonde bob cut girl held the family game system that was probably monitoring all of Manhattan, moved freely around in the liquid-filled swim ring, wore VR goggles like a backwards baseball cap, and pulled her limbs in close as if afraid of the potatoes' gazes.

“Sorry about the wait, Wraith. 650. Oh, would you look at that unusual pairing.”

“Running across them was not exactly reassuring, just so you know.”

“029. They're on a different layer, so it's fine. They couldn't touch you even if you are at the same coordinates. Okay? Now, let's go!”

Heivia spat on the ground and raised his middle finger, so a composite armor bull knocked over the table and crashed into him. Counting each individual wrong move he had made would be too much work, but it seemed he had just used up his last life. The serverless Bullmites' simple circuits could apparently comprehend manners.

After leaving the sweaty men, the brown girl with her butt in the swim ring looked more able to spread her wings. And that was more than a figure of speech. Her brown arms and legs had been freed, just like a butterfly spreading its wings after leaving the hard, dry chrysalis.

...Of course, Wraith did not want to let the brown girl notice her own tension.

“Hmm. What is it, Wraith? 202.”

“Well... I was just noticing that you still haven't lost that habit.”

“I'm only tagging my memories. 751. It doesn't really mean anything, so just ignore it.”

Wraith had heard before that she added 3-digit numbers within her words to provide arbitrary landmarks to help her accurately recall her memories later on. The numbers could be entirely meaningless. As long as they were not too close together, repeats were fine and even gave the memory an antique feel, so there would be no unintended overwriting of the sort worried about during the Y2K problem.

As New York's defense commander, Melly held a very important position, but her eccentricities stood out even compared to the other Martinis like Wraith, Dorothea, Alisa, Rica, Orsia, Piranirie, and Taratua.

"New York's defense commander, huh?"

"Yes, what about it?"

(How much is she involved in all this? Did Capulet simply lend her the Manhattan 000 and its Elite for the benefit of the Information Alliance as a whole? Or has she succumbed to Capulet thanks to an abuse of active self-denial?)

Wraith was definitely suspicious, but she would gain nothing by letting her suspicions be known.

She turned a skeptical eye toward Melly whose butt was inside the swim ring and who only wore a red paper surgical gown.

"...That is quite the outfit you're wearing. You always dress so oddly."

"This was driven by necessity, so it's nothing to be ashamed of. Plus, fashions and common sense can be easily manipulated by continuous statements on social media. After establishing the basic supporting legs of beauty and health, you can add in some charitable and economic effects as the finishing touches. 515. I could make wrapping your naked body in a ribbon this year's biggest trend and I could create a high society where you're shunned if you don't finish it off with strawberries and whipped cream."

That sounded like a joke, but no one in the Chinatown aimed their smartphones toward Melly despite how much soft skin she was showing. In fact, their attention was drawn to Wraith in her black military uniform that stood out among all the colorful casual clothes.

...But Melly herself began blushing and trembling a bit with her butt still inside the swim ring. An ominous atmosphere had set in while Wraith was not paying attention.

"...Wait."

"Oh, excuse me. Heh...heh heh. Everyone just walks by this unusual sight without even noticing. Even though I'm showing an unthinkable amount of skin in an unthinkable location. Heh heh heh

heh heh. No, I can't record this to memory. 081, 099. Yes, yes, I really shouldn't be. When will they notice? When will someone realize this isn't right? Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh..."

The black-uniformed girl could only form a small triangle with her mouth and fall silent.

Finding special meaning in no one noticing that something was out of the ordinary was subtly different from a perverted old man who wandered around the late night streets with only a trench coat on. It may have been more like someone who enjoyed the borderline thrill of walking through the crowds of a packed tourist beach in nothing but bikini body paint.

...This would explain the odd tension when Heivia and the others had looked at her. Unlike the residents of Manhattan, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes had not been on the receiving end of any data manipulation, so they would have seen the brown girl's paper two-piece surgical gown without any cognitive filters in place.

"You must have a...stressful job..."

"Oh, what ever are you talking about? 121. Nnn."

Melly stretched out her arms and legs to take a strange pose atop the swim ring, so her game system may have had bad reception in that exact location. Wraith was very worried that the crimson oil paper covering her soft skin was going to tear at any moment. Was she invincible as long as she had those cognitive filters? It may have felt something like taking a selfie, but the brown swim ring girl was constantly checking on herself with the countless floral security cameras. In accordance with the concept of cross-pollination, they were positioned so their pollen range just barely overlapped.

"435. Anyway, I never expected you to visit Manhattan like this."

"How can you say that after you stopped reporting back as your duty requires?"

Wraith and her aide did not even glance over in the direction of the chaos caused by the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes and the two of them walked down the street with the other Martini Series girl. Three of the serverless Bullmites that rubbed their bodies together followed the giant swim ring that was presumably linked to the Manhattan 000.

As far as Wraith could tell, her aide did not "count" in Melly's eyes. She did not shrink down when his cold, mechanical eyes fell on her.

Or perhaps she viewed him as belonging to someone else.

Swim Ring Girl Melly glanced over at the composite armor bulls and spoke.

"They might seem intimidating, but this is necessary. Also, the Bullmites have air purifiers attached. 223. Try to feel at home around them."

"That sounds smart, but it's actually pretty foolish. There's no point in using those outdoors..."

"You're underestimating New York, Wraith. 090. This is a shockingly gluttonous polluted region that has the world's greatest medical development yet can't brag about its average lifespan."

They left the Chinatown and continued north into SoHo. As the swim ring passed right behind a uniformed police officer writing a ticket for a car parked on the curb, the brown girl started trembling again. Wraith spoke up while glancing over at the giant window of a luxury shop selling shoes and bags.

"What do you know about Piranirie Martini Smoky? I am speculating that she was using active self-denial."

"Ahem. Do you mean the method of breaking the Martini Series using an external source? We're near New Caribbean Island right now and I wouldn't have brought the Manhattan 000 all the way here if I wasn't aware of the Ragnarok Script. 381. As New York's defense commander, I put a stop to it across the entirety of Manhattan."

"Ragnarok?"

"Oh? You hadn't discovered that over-the-top name? It seems some Faith Organization rats snuck into the Information Alliance to investigate our vulnerabilities. 115. I left them alone and intercepted every last one of their transmissions to ensure I had the whole picture, but that may have been a mistake. They managed to slip away and I was too slow to react."

"...I want to ask this directly: Are you still a functioning Martini?"

"If you ask me, Piranirie was so easily corrupted because her stopper had so little influence. 991. Unlike the other Martinis, she always found some excuse to act independently."

The brown girl smiled and let her bare legs dangle from the donut-shaped ring like she was relaxing at home, but she also looked to a spot next to Wraith.

Melly was looking at the young man who worked as Wraith's aide.

"I'm jealous. 544. Mine died in the operation that broke my spine."

"You were the one that refused to accept a replacement."

"088. Imagine it happened to you. Would you be happy if they said they could supply a replacement so easily?"

After that blunt statement, Melly realized the contradiction of her words and gently shook her head.

Just as the large swim ring she controlled with her notebook-sized game system moved out onto the crosswalk, the crosswalk light switched from red to green. She had grabbed the game system with both hands, held the two detachable controllers with her toes, and stretched out her legs in a mystery pose, so had she done something?

A large truck waiting at the light was loaded full of crouching Bullmites. They looked like illegally parked bicycles or a wireless industrial power station at a security company that could charge devices by the dozen. It was a mobile power supply truck.

The surgical gown girl trembled a bit while exposed to the crowd's view in all directions at the middle of the large crosswalk.

"Well, I might be much the same since I distract myself from the loneliness by messing with machines. 777. That's essentially the same as being given a replacement."

"..."

This was no time for sentimentality.

The Manhattan 000 had left the Information Alliance home country and come here. And neither the actual Pilot Elite nor Melly Martini Extradry had a partner to act as a stopper. She had a high risk of going berserk just like Piranirie. She had just about reached the peak, but things were looking ominous. Even if she started descending the mountain out of active self-denial, no one would encourage her and tell her to continue toward the peak.

If its owner was to be believed, the swim ring moved so smoothly thanks to an artificial flagellum structure. Once it finished crossing the crosswalk, the brown girl spoke with her eyes lowered toward her game system's screen.

"Do you suspect me of going berserk? 895."

"If you want to clear away the suspicions of another world power using that Ragnarok Script thing to influence the Martini Series, then you at least need to remove the Manhattan 000's Pilot Elite from their cockpit. Showing that you can do that would prove your authority and sanity."

"290. Sorry, but I can't do that."

“Why not?”

As soon as great tension filled Wraith Martini Vermouthspray’s small body, the young man by her side inconspicuously altered his position. He was preparing for a response from the Bullmites that coordinated their actions by rubbing their bodies together instead of using EM signals.

But the reality far exceeded his expectations.

The entire area of land shook.

The scale was so great that understanding slipped from their minds. Wraith and the others were in Manhattan, which meant they were on top of a giant Object.

It had moved ever so slightly.

Black-uniformed and blonde Wraith shrieked and clung to the nearby young man like a small child in a safe country, but the brown girl used her notebook-sized game system to hide the smile on her lips.

She could do more than monitor.

Once Melly had composed her expression once more, she lightly waved the game system.

“Didn’t I tell you it was quite a job concentrating all of Manhattan’s functions down to this one device? Okay? I am the Martini in control of New York’s defense. That means I control everything related to Manhattan at the center. 808. Yes, and that includes everything related to the Manhattan 000 as the world’s largest Object.”

“Are you saying...it’s you?”

Wraith stared in shock as Melly placed the game system itself on her belly, grabbed the two remote-like wireless controllers in her hands, and made some light punches without her hips behind them.

Did the controllers contain gyros, or were the movements being monitored by the floral security cameras set up everywhere based on the theory of cross-pollination that allowed multiple plants to cover each other’s pollen distribution range? The exact method was unknown, but the sound of Melly’s voice clearly changed

Wraith had not noticed at all.

Until now, the ring had been using a surround sound device to place a different sound amplitude over Melly’s voice to alter it in real time.

This was what it sounded like without that support. She oddly pronounced each syllable very distinctly for a voice that sounded more machinelike than a machine.

“Yes, I have mastered the basics of every single strengthening program. I am #29 in the Martini Series and also the Manhattan 000’s Pilot Elite.”

That should not have been possible.

If the Martini Series could directly manage the Information Alliance’s Objects, Wraith would not be needed to clean up after their troops lost or went berserk.

“Of course, it’s just like the Gatling 033 in that it’s assumed I’ll be working with the AI. Capulet and I eliminate each other’s errors in a symbiotic relationship. I don’t know about the Information Alliance as a whole, but within my territory of New York and inside the Manhattan 000 as an Object, I have greater authority than Capulet.”

In - other - words.

The brown girl once more passed her voice through the machine to stabilize it.

“This Object is mine and mine alone. 217. The Capulet AI Network is only borrowing it over the high-speed lines. Just like remote surgery.”

“That’s ridiculous... Aren’t you afraid of a conflict?”

Wraith was dumbfounded by this product that sounded like suicide to her.

The blonde bob cut swim ring girl responded while waving her thin game system.

“Stick VR. ...I said I had built some compatible software to bypass it, right? 567. Including everything I might need is my style.”

She literally controlled everything in Manhattan.

She had become one with this pricey area of New York.

That explained why Melly could not escape her loneliness.

“But I also use Manhattan to control this assistance device I’m sitting in. Like I said, walking in earth’s gravity is pure torture because of my broken spine. 765. I really am sorry, but I must ask you not to remove my helmet.”

“...”

There was nothing to be done if she was rejecting it. Either way, Wraith could not force anything. One method of neutralizing a sturdy Object was to focus your attacks on the Pilot Elite...but she likely could not use her infighting or assassination trump cards here.

Choosing to oppose Melly Martini Extradry was the same as making a head-on attack on the Manhattan 000. Needless to say, choosing that would end with her being vaporized.

For now, she would have to solidify her position here as much as she could.

“Why did you bring the Manhattan 000 here?”

“Did you think it was all my decision? 915. Even if I wield the dual swords of Martini and Elite, I am still just an individual. There is only so much I can do. In general, everything is the result of my conversations with the Capulet AI Network. I thought it was necessary, so I lent it the Manhattan 000 as the quickest tool available. So, Wraith, the problem is the exact opposite of the one you think it is.”

Of course, if Melly had fallen into active self-denial, she would simply go along with the AI's erroneous decisions. If the mistakes were not pointed out as mistakes, even Capulet would gradually shift off course. But something felt off, so Wraith frowned and asked about it.

“What do you mean by that...?”

“111. The Manhattan 000 has not gone berserk because of a major problem. Nor have I, the checker, been broken.”

Because it was linked with the Manhattan 000, the giant swim ring hopped up with smooth movements to carry Melly up the stone steps as she got to the crux of the issue.

“Capulet detected a large enough external problem to require bringing the Manhattan 000 onto the stage, so it made a swift request to resolve that problem. That is why I lent it this Object. 901. That seems like the most natural way of looking at this.”

“Wait a second. Are you saying...?”

“I had predicted this was about swiftly purging Piranirie after the Ragnarok Script corrupted her, but it looks like that wasn't all it was. 501.”

This was a completely different idea.

Many things shifted around inside Wraith's mind and the brown Martini girl asked a question while peering into her eyes.

"So I have a question. Okay? 331. What happened out here near New Caribbean Island? What kind of monster slumbers in the ocean here?"

Part 5

"Heivia, Heivia."

Myonri had a good reason for sounding so nervous as she called his name.

Sit. Lie down.

The 2m composite armor bull was politely standing directly above Heivia who was collapsed face down on the ground. Even without a server, they were apparently obedient enough to attack delinquent soldiers. They really were well made.

Heivia had been entirely incapacitated and could only squeeze out the voice of a squished frog.

"...Myonri, drag me out of here before this piece of junk starts moving its hips. I wouldn't say I've lived a life that lets me hold my head high in front of the Virgin Mary, but don't you think it's a bit much to let this machine force some bestiality onto me?"

"Um, what are we going to do now?"

Myonri may have gained the ability to automatically filter out anything that would dirty her ears too much. The other potatoes also showed no sign of providing a helping hand.

Myonri was fed up of being spied on by the trumpet or flower-like security cameras that were arranged based on the ability of cross-pollinizing flowers to cover each other's pollen distribution range.

"Manhattan has come all the way to New Caribbean Island, but at the moment, all it has done is come here. Nor does it seem to be preparing to attack anywhere else. In that case...what are we supposed to fight against once we get our guns back?"

"What are you smiling about? Are you interested in what their ass tastes like? This is the enemy's greatest Object! There's no sign of the actual Elite, Capulet is putting in overtime under that crazy Martini's control, and they've already used their electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon for a preemptive strike with no advance warning!!"

"So we're just supposed to shoot the innocent people walking around here? Doesn't that seem like the wrong target?" Myonri placed a hand on her slender chin. "It's still unclear whether that...Miss Martini? was using Manhattan to target us in the Legitimacy Kingdom or the Information Alliance maintenance fleet corrupted by Piranirie. We were the ones that infiltrated that fleet, so if they say they didn't know about it, it would mean we were simply caught in the middle of an internal purge..."

An odd groan escaped Heivia's mouth.

That would mean there had been no act of war in the first place and they would have no reason for a counterattack. That would make Heivia and the Legitimacy Kingdom the aggressors in attacking Manhattan and the Information Alliance.

They had done a lot to hype up how frightening the Manhattan was, but now that they were onboard, they found it was peaceful. It was true it had arrived in the ocean near New Caribbean Island, but it was not moments away from vaporizing the Legitimacy Kingdom military with its extreme firepower. It was a mystery who the Manhattan's opponent was and where it had been targeting with that initial attack. Heivia and the others had not been handcuffed or thrown in a cell. They had been released into the city.

There was nothing they could do now.

The potatoes felt silly for getting so worked up about war.

With nothing here, that macho army had lost their reason to fight. It would have been much simpler if they had discovered a plot to wipe out the human race. Like this, it looked more like they were trying to stir up trouble in the perfectly peaceful city to start a war.

This was a fully controlled society.

People were bound by data.

Heivia had glimpsed the fear of a digital city that did not even need to separate out the criminals. Something deep in the delinquent soldier's heart told him it was all over if he let this break him. So he desperately searched for a reason.

"I'm not going to just go along with this and have my bones buried in the Information Alliance. I have noble blood, so I have to inherit the Winchell family."

"That's a nice idea...but what if they say they're contacting our embassy in preparation to hand us over safely?"

They would break.

Even if nothing of the sort was actually happening, Heivia and the others would break if that Melly girl told them that. While she dodged the issue and stalled for time, they would get used to this, lose interest, and decide this was good enough.

Anyone would be afraid.

If you were thrown out in front of such a colossal weapon and told you had to fight it if you had any complaints, anyone would be scared out of their mind. That was why Myonri and the others were clinging to this temporary peace. If they could not find a reason to continue fighting, then why fight? They wanted support for that conclusion.

But that was not good enough.

For one thing, the words of the Information Alliance could not be trusted. They had to assume those words were like disposable bullets meant to manipulate their target and devour everything of value they had.

They should have learned that lesson already.

Back on that ship's deck when their friend had been helplessly shot to death.

"We..."

Heivia opened his mouth to resume arguing with Myonri and the others who were about to fall for it.

But he was cut off.

It was a dull and unpleasant metallic noise a lot like a poorly-crafted bell being struck. It came from directly above Heivia who still lay pinned to the ground. It came from the side of that Bullmite. A thumb-sized hole had appeared there and sparks flew from it like a handheld firework or smoke bomb.

Except circuit boards would not spew sparks like that no matter how you damaged them.

This was clearly the work of a chemical meant to fry the circuits.

"A sniper...using armor-piercing incendiary rounds!?"

After an especially large burst of sparks from within the electronics, the entire Bullmite went limp. If it had not collapsed to the side, it might have crushed Heivia under its weight.

But Heivia did not look exactly delighted after gaining the freedom he had so desperately desired.

“Who did that...?”

He asked without thinking, but no one knew the answer. All of the few dozen Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were gathered in this same location, so none of them could have left and prepared a sniper rifle on a building roof.

But that meant nothing to the people around them.

The Asian passersby widened their eyes, held out their many phones, and produced countless electronic shutter sounds.

Heivia’s group could tell they were surrounded by killer intent.

Patrolling Bullmites appeared from around seemingly every corner, as if the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers had triggered the cage of data. And the machines were clearly in a different mode than before. Even if they did not use a server, their simple circuits were apparently enough to pick up on their fellow Bullmite’s demise and work together to resolve the situation.

But they were fundamentally wrong. They mistakenly thought the soldiers had broken the rules.

This time, Heivia’s group really would be killed.

“What dumbass did that!?”

There were 700,000 public security cameras and who-knows-how-many phones and drive recorders on top of that. And yet no one could answer that fundamental question.

Who had thrown the stone?

Round 2 had begun.

Part 6

That free and peaceful city looked entirely different now.

The countless security cameras, which were set up according to some big theory about cross-pollination or whatever, were no help at all. They would not clear the soldiers’ names of this false accusation.

“What the hell, what the hell, what the hell hell hell!?”

Even if someone else had thrown the rock, they had to deal with the pests that erupted out of the hornet’s nest. But Heivia and the others had no weapons, so they only had one option. If they did not run away, they would die. All of them would be killed together. The Bullmite on Heivia’s back had collapsed, so he had to get up and run through the Chinatown.

“Wh-where are we supposed to run to!?” asked Myonri. “All 20,000 meters of this place is on top of an Information Alliance Object!!”

“If you really want an answer, then put your hands on your knees, stick your ass out toward them, and take the time to think! Me? I’m running!!”

After turning a corner in the Chinatown, Heivia found an ordinary gun barrel aimed his way.

“!?”

He grabbed and twisted the attacker’s wrist and slammed them back-first into the ground only to find it was a college student.

“Why does a civilian have such a big submachine gun!? Are these easier to get than the Island Nation’s Stick or Pokemamo!?”

When Heivia fired a few warning shots into the air, the passersby all crouched down and hid below tables and benches. In what seemed to be a sign of surrender, they tossed guns and cartridges out like money offerings. The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers did not have time to take them all while they fled, but in something like marathon runners at a water station, they all ended up with guns from a variety of makers.

“There is something seriously wrong with the North American market,” said Heivia. “Isn’t this more guns than on the battlefield?”

“Revolvers, shotguns, submachineguns...are these really all for self-defense?” asked Myonri. “Uwehh, there’s even some LMGs and sniper rifles...!?”

Guns was more reassuring than no guns, but the serverless and highly-coordinated Bullmites were designed to be used as shields. A machine would not die even if you shot it in the head or chest.

“Normal bullets” was not going to do the trick, so they selected lightweight weapons rather than powerful ones.

Increasing their firepower was not going to stop the Bullmites.

“Oh, honestly!!”

Heivia raised the submachinegun almost on reflex, but it was no use. He was up against machines. Threats would be useless and a stream of 9mm bullets would only be deflected by the thick armor. Given how many civilians were cowering around them, ricocheting bullets would be too great a threat.

They were not alive.

They did not fear destruction.

Did the rules really change this much when unmanned weapons were sent to the battlefield?

That was when a “silver bullet” arrived in advance of its gunshot.

The armor-piercing incendiary round could punch through the thick armor and fry the circuit boards within using great heat. After being fired down from some roof or another, the sniper bullet punched through the transformer controlling a traffic light, so a large truck drove through and targeted Heivia’s group.

Yes.

The problem was that the “silver bullets” were not just targeting the monsters.

“Watch out, dammit!! God, this is a terrible orgy!! You never know when you’re going to get a face full of squid stink!!”

The truck drove right over a concrete barrier that doubled as a flowerbed and came to a half-crushed stop just short of hitting the delinquent soldier. But he did not have time to catch his breath. The mystery sniper fired a few more shots into a nearby park, calling that area’s Bullmites toward the soldiers. Just like gathering the attention of an isolated enemy in an online game.

“That sniper is following us,” said Myonri.

“Are they jumping from building to building? Hey, if you’re not using that plastic sniper rifle, toss it here! Silencing that gloomy Peeping Tom takes top priority!!”

That said, real snipers were not like in movies. You could not just look up and see them leaning out from the building. They seemed to be running along the roofs of the buildings alongside the sidewalk Heivia’s group was running down, but it was not clear where exactly they were.

There were countless floral security cameras set up, but they were arranged with the flow of people in mind. Simply put, monitoring the populated streets came first and the sky overhead was less closely watched.

Meanwhile, another Bullmite pushed in to cut off their path.

“That isn’t going to work even if you fire at it head on!”

“That’s not what I’m doing, you idiot!! Bukkake-ing on a mech’s face isn’t my idea of fun!!”

Without even using the scope, Heivia fired a high-speed rifle bullet at the fire hydrant at the end of the road. Those animal types had little surface area in contact with the ground for their weight, so they were in trouble when they lost friction. That was obvious when nothing but four small hooves were used to control the same weight as a large motorcycle.

Myonri and the others fired more bullets as the Bullmite slipped and toppled over, but that only sent sparks flying from the armor. Not even concentrated fire on a defenseless enemy had any effect.

“What do you think about that sniper!?” asked Heivia.

“Well, I definitely don’t want to be their friend!!” replied Myonri.

“Not that. I’m just talking about their skill.”

The torrent from the fire hydrant had knocked over a window washer’s bucket of industrial detergent, so the Bullmite slipped even more than expected and could not seem to get up. When it could not move, it seemed to have difficulty using its motions to communicate with the others. Thus, the other units did not move to help it. And the potatoes were not about to stay in one place. Heivia had to click his tongue and jump right over the mass of composite armor that could not return to the fight and kept spinning around and around like a giant pinwheel firework.

“They destroyed a traffic light to send in a truck and they provoked the Bullmites into attacking. Why are they being as indirect as a literary girl with a crush? All they need to do is fire bullets straight into our heads!!”

“Um, maybe they hope to make it look like an accident?” suggested Myonri.

“They’re using armor-piercing incendiary rounds. That’s more than just repacking a used cartridge bought from a gun shop. These bullets will stand out a lot more than the used gum all over the sidewalks, so there’s no room for a conspiracy there.”

They fired occasional warning shots into the air to deter the sniper who they still had not located.

Normal bullet would not work on the Bullmites who pursued them in a coordinated fashion without using a server. After making sure the sporadic gunfire had rid the area of civilians, Heivia fired his sniper rifle straight into the air.

A crane's wire snapped and several steel beams fell from a building under construction.

"Those things can still move after a direct hit!?"

"You need at least as much firepower as a powered suit!" said Myonri. "More importantly, what were you trying to say about that sniper?"

"There's more to sniping than just distance and wind direction. Machine assistance can make up for the scientific side of things, but the more social side of it is harder. You have to predict what your target will do and place the ballistic trajectory where they will be next. This sniper was always targeting things that are easy to predict: Bullmites that have no fear of death and a stationary transformer. For those, all you need to do is line up the crosshairs in the scope."

Realistically, Heivia's group was as cornered as could be.

But he proposed a bold theory all the same.

"This sniper is only an amateur virgin. They're not confident then can satisfy us, so they're firing on the easier mechanical targets instead."

In that case, what was the attacker's field of expertise?

The sniper attacks with armor-piercing incendiary rounds were a lot like extremely small-scale explosions. They were also good at figuring out how gadgets like the Bullmites worked. They ignored the preparations on both sides of the fight to throw the scene into chaos and achieve more than their skill would normally allow for.

...Come to think of it, hadn't someone well known to Heivia nervously attempted some machine-assisted sniping to rescue the Princess in the Alaska District?

(You're kidding, right...? I'd love it if he's alive, but he wouldn't make his appearance like this, would he!?)

He heard what sounded like a thick metal clasp fitting into place.

He looked back while running and his eyes bulged. At some point, the composite armor bulls had received attachments resembling backpacks or saddles. And attached to those were a light machinegun, grenades, and a small container magazine that resembled a cooler.

It was as unfair as finding the relentless zombies had started cleverly aiming guns your way.

“What the hell is this...!?”

That was when the sign for a subway station entered the corner of his vision.

It was all over if those guns opened fire across the surface street. The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers and the innocent civilians who had evacuated indoors would be caught by it. Heavy machineguns used bullets thicker than a thumb, so they could tear through glass and concrete like it was styrofoam. Heivia gestured to the other potatoes and they all ran down the stairs.

“Do you really think this will save us!?” asked Myonri.

“How should I know!? Go call tech support!! But this will at least distance us from the sniper on the roofs. And underground, the 2D map alone won’t be enough. Plus, Manhattan has turned all around with no concern for the cardinal directions, so we can only hope those things will lose track of where they are...”

War was generally a contest over who could take more lives.

Thus, they would have to change how they fought when up against lifeless unmanned weapons.

Hearing the commotion, some benevolent station workers started to come out with stun guns, but Heivia’s group aimed their real guns over to force them back while running through the chaotic ticket selling area and jumping over the ticket gate.

They heard further angry shouts and screams from behind.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“Damn, did it not work!? Are they using microwaves or submillimeter waves or something!?”

“Could you please explain what this means!?” asked Myonri. “I thought the Information Alliance’s unmanned weapons were autonomous and didn’t need to access a server!”

He did not have time for that. They were dead if those things caught up.

The floral security cameras were installed here too, so the Martini would know where they were. That limited what the potatoes could do. They would be trapped if they kept running and returned to the surface through a different exit. And even if they ran to the platform, Heivia doubted they would find a train conveniently about to depart like in a drama.

"It would only be the same standard wireless LAN that can misdirect the selfie a bored housewife meant to send to the guy she's cheating on her husband with. Could we jam it!?"

"We don't have any equipment, you moron!! Stop asking for the impossible! And why are you so fixated on signal interference? They'll keep coming for us even if we cut off the cameras monitoring us, right!?"

They did not even have 10 seconds to think. Even a human could run across the 100-meter structure in that time.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

"Anyone with a hand to spare, gather as many fire extinguishers as you can!!"

"Heivia?"

"Head down to the platform!! Hurry! It's meaningless if they catch up!!"

The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers more jumped down the stairs than ran as they rushed to the subway platform. As expected, no train conveniently slid up to the platform. The platform was empty on both sides and the college students and housewives waiting for a train all ducked down in shock when they saw the many guns.

"What are we going to do!?" asked Myonri. "Run into the tunnel!?"

"What good is playing tag with machines in a long, straight tunnel? More importantly, give me the fire extinguishers! All of them!!"

Heivia snatched away the red metal containers and aimed the hoses at a surprising location: the track below the platform.

"Subways send the power through the bottom instead of the top."

"What does that matter?"

"How do those bull bastards track their location and their destination while the Manhattan turns? I'm guessing they use EM waves."

"But weren't we told that unmanned weapons can move around while offline?"

"It doesn't have to be on a military bandwidth. It could be signals for TV, radio, cellphones, or

whatever else. EM waves are waves, so the Doppler Effect comes into play. By reading the signals flying around, they can tell how Manhattan is moving. The unmanned weapons use that as a virtual compass to track their own location. Wraith said submarines are the ideal form of an unmanned weapon, right? If they're only passively receiving the signals, they don't have to worry about the enemy locating them!"

Which meant...

"The Bullmites didn't get lost while underground because the microwave and submillimeter wave broadcast signals can penetrate the thick concrete. But if we use jamming to mess with the EM Doppler, they should lose track of their location and stop moving! So let's go with a corona discharge. The third rail is normally kept at a distance so it won't cause any interference, but if we place an impurity nearby, that will change!"

The spraying sound was like an amplified version of a carbonated beverage.

The bubble-type fire extinguishers launched their liquid chemical beyond the platform.

A moment later, they heard a lot of noise from the stairs. The quadrupedal Bullmites with a firearm attachment came crashing down toward the platform.

Myonri and the others immediately aimed their shotguns and submachineguns that way.

Their trigger fingers remained motionless.

The Bullmites had suddenly gone limp, lost their balance on the stairs, and started rolling.

The collapsed unmanned weapons did not move again.

Myonri and the others kept their guns aimed at them for a while afterwards.

"Have they...stopped?"

"A corona discharge doesn't make a bunch of noise like a stun gun, so it can be heard to tell anything is happening. Locating a power line was not easy since New York likes to bury everything from national secrets to broken messengers, but I figured a train's power rail would be enough to jam the EM Doppler."

With this electromagnetic interference, any photos sent from an amateur's phone would not reach their recipient. That meant they did not have to worry about any "unintentional spies". Heivia used his sniper rifles to shoot out each of the security cameras installed directly around the platform.

He was a capable boy as long as he was not up against an Object.

“Okay. We’ve finally built a blind spot, so let’s change clothes and get the hell out of here. Just like swapping cars in a parking garage or below an overpass.”

Just then, there was a deep noise and the windowless subway platform was wrapped in deep darkness.

“We truly apologize for the inconvenience. The power to this station has been cut to troubleshoot a problem. Lights, air-conditioning, communications, and other services will be brought back one at a time, so to avoid tripping, please remain in place unless a station staff member provides evacuation guidance...”

The sudden darkness was like having a video game unexpectedly switched off.

Heivia worked his imagination while listening to the unnecessary announcement and then he gave a shout

“Crap!! Cutting the power stops the corona discharge!!”

He could not see his hand in front of his face in this darkness, but he could hear several metallic sounds. Needless to say, machine eyes had a greater visual range than human ones. The power outage meant nothing to them. With no power to the subway’s third rail, the EM Doppler would recover and the Bullmites would be unstoppable.

Myonri gave a short shriek right next to him.

“Eek!?”

“Don’t fire at random!! You don’t know where the civilians are in this darkness!!”

“Then what do we do!? They effectively have night-vision goggles, so they can fire accurately!”

Their firearms were commercial products taken from random people, so they were not up to military standards and were not equipped with the various cameras and sensors those soldiers were accustomed to.

In the end, Heivia Winchell could not become Quenser Barbotage.

And a moment later, the massive machines rushed in like charging bulls.

Part 7

Heivia had no idea what happened in the darkness then.

To start with the result, the Bullmites did not turn them to Swiss cheese. Someone's hands reached in from behind, covered or grabbed his mouth and dominant hand, and then pulled him away. He heard no gunshots in the meantime. This third party was not suppressing the noise and light with silencers and flash hiders. Even those would have left some sign of gunfire.

Nevertheless, the Bullmites did not pursue.

After passing through two thick metal doors, brilliant light stabbed into eyes adjusted to the dark.

His vision did not return for a while.

"When in combat mode instead of marching mode, the Bullmites choose their targets based on microwave anti-personnel radar and walking-pattern analysis instead of simple image analysis using a camera."

Heivia heard a smooth female voice.

It belonged to the mystery person using their hands to keep him from speaking or using his dominant hand.

"Your pseudo-jamming using a corona discharge affected not just the EM Doppler but also the EM scan used for their autonomous decisions. It was a decent idea, but it seems it could not knock out the proper radar equipment."

"Bwah!"

Heivia was finally released.

As his vision gradually returned, he and the other potatoes quickly glanced around to grasp their situation. First of all, they were in a narrow stone tunnel with orange mining lights hanging down at even intervals. His mouth had been covered by someone in an Information Alliance officer's uniform who had long silver hair and brown skin. The soldiers serving her were also from the Information Alliance.

Once his eyes adjusted, it did not seem like enough.

Below those dim lights, the beautiful brown woman with silver hair introduced herself. She had an adult face and voice that were used to smiling.

"I am Lendy Farolito. My rank is lieutenant colonel."

"I'm not going to shake that hand which could have been holding anyone's you-know-what. I'm sick of you Information Alliance people using us as your pawns. Besides, those Bullmites are your unmanned weapons, aren't they?"

"If we were working with the Martini, do you really think we would be hiding in this 'gap'? If we had control over those things, we could have removed ourselves from the list of targets in advance."

The brown beauty named Lendy sounded exasperated, but Heivia and Myonri did not understand what this dark underground path even was.

However, there were no floral security cameras or bull-like Bullmites here. Melly Martini Extradry's ubiquitous eyes did not exist here. That was enough for this dark subterranean path to feel far more liberating than the open city streets. ...Although that may have been Heivia admitting that he was Manhattan's enemy.

"Is this city nothing but secrets on top of more secrets...?"

"This is the Underground Railroad. ...And I do not mean it is a literal railroad located underground. This is a free space modeled after the organization that secretly rescued many slaves and helped them escape to safety during the civil war of an older age. The privileged class who were sick of this surveillance society altered the construction blueprints to create this 'gap'. It is primarily used by students of Manhattan's Columbia University and by Wall Street brokers and lawyers who graduated from there. ...Since they could dig something like this without causing any real harm, the Manhattan 000 must be built thick down into the ocean."

"N-no matter what anyone is trying to say, it always sounds like they're bragging about the Manhattan's specs. I have no idea if you've saved us or not..."

The problem was the scale of it all.

And Lendy nodded toward dumbfounded Myonri.

"In the Information Alliance, the powerful rule the weak through information management. There is always a risk that the higher ups are well aware that we believe we have fooled them. You should assume there is no such thing as a perfect safe zone."

They had no words in response to that.

They still could not tell what was going on, but it seemed the Information Alliance was not a monolith. There were two groups: the standard one that had sent the Bullmites to finish off Heivia's group, and the special group that had gathered the potatoes and taken them to a surveillance blind

spot.

Lendy brought a hand to her slender chin.

"We too are focused on the Manhattan 000's actions. In this case, that means the actions of the Capulet AI Network, which even the military has stopped worrying about the hardware side of, and the Martini, who is constantly conversing with that network. We have decided someone has to apply the brakes on the entire affair. Even if the AI is correct, its decisions will eventually stray from the truth if the inspector Martini continues giving it inaccurate responses. We have an idea of how to apply the brakes, but you need more than a trump card to play a game. We needed to gather enough 'normal cards' to reach the point where we can play that trump card."

"Thank you very much for ignoring everything we've said. You will be pleased to know that being ignored by silver-haired brown-skinned young women has a way of making me nice and hard. Also, what about that sniper? Based on what you said, the natural assumption is that you stirred up that trouble to drive us down into the subway station."

"...That would certainly be nice."

However, Lendy's response was a surprise.

Heivia had expected either a yes or no answer that might be an attempt to deceive them.

"We are at as much of a loss as you are about that, so I don't know what to tell you."

The brown beauty shrugged.

And she said it.

"It seems some other problem has arisen even as the Information Alliance is split in two over the Manhattan 000. This appears to be a different force altogether."

Part 8

The person on a high-rise building roof had also come to a stop.

They were only 70cm away from one of the floral security cameras set up based on the theory of multiple plants providing mutual pollen range coverage, but that did not matter since they were outside the visual range supplied by the trumpet or megaphone shape.

Manhattan's limited land meant it was densely packed even for New York. The building density was even greater than Shinjuku or Hong Kong. Jumping from building to building might sound like a

superhuman action, but as long as you had the guts, it was perfectly possible with average muscle strength. You just needed the mentality to treat a tightrope walk the same whether it was 1 meter off the ground or 1000 meters off the ground.

The subway station that Heivia and the other Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes had run inside had 4 entrances. The slender person had taken up a position where they could see all of them, but they finally released a quiet sigh. They left their firing stance and leaned out over the concrete edge using the semiauto sniper rifle as support. Viewing the situation on the surface was more important than that device covered in cameras and sensors.

They set their emotions aside and rationally analyzed the situation.

...The targets had apparently escaped. There may have been a "hole" somewhere.

That was when the person heard an unpleasant buzzing as if from a mosquito or fly.

The device looked like a three-sided square frame holding a giant top instead of a globe. It was similar to a gyro, but somehow different. It was a serverless unmanned drone that used coaxial rotors to fly and used its simple circuits to guide its power system.

It did not matter whether or not it was aiming any weapons the person's way. As long as it transmitted their location, a precision-guided missile or special unit could be sent in.

But there was no concern on the person's face.

They reached for their skinny waist, pulled some things from a too-large waist pouch, and attached them to their face: a nose, eyebrows, lips, and – just to be on the safe side this time – left and right cheeks. It looked like the Island Nation's fukuwarai or like a joke nose and glasses.

Or it would have if they had not been acquired by stripping the raw flesh from unknown youths.

It was an utterly grotesque montage, but they could not hide their eyes that way. They dealt with that by covering their eyes with their golden bangs.

"Yay. Peace, peace."

That must have been enough for the facial recognition to fail. The person formed peace signs with both hands and the drone landed on the roof like it had lost sight of its target. It used top-like motions to move around the slender figure a few times, but ultimately flew off into the air again.

The person's face was covered by a cold and damp sensation similar to putting a used shirt back on, but they did not seem to mind.

They caused the existing preparations to crumble away so they could achieve results greater than should have been possible.

And to that end, they would not hesitate to do things that would have been unthinkable under the standards of clean wars.

...The facial feature they had the least of was upper lips at just 3. They had a full 8 sets of 10 fingers for fingerprints. They knew they would have to replace them frequently, but at this point, just the harbor security group did not feel like enough. They might have to head down and “resupply”.

The person had infiltrated Manhattan using essentially the same method.

Innumerable uncollected corpses from both the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance had been floating in the ocean around New Caribbean Island. And Faith Organization ones had joined those after the Olympia Dome incident. The person had made their preparations by collecting a random person, removing their skin, and wrapping that around their body like a costume. Then they had floated on their back as if doing the backstroke to let the ocean current carry them to Manhattan’s harbor area while disguised as a corpse.

Of course, if an actual human had seen that, they would have immediately realized something was off about the suspicious figure wearing a bloated skin, but once the person was close enough, that hardly mattered. Defeating the harbor security had been easier than slaying a dragon in a hunting video game and then it had been time for the skinning.

...The person had not expected Heivia and the other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers to be so concerned for their surroundings. Such a wonderfully extraordinary Object was right in front of them. And what was more important than teamwork?

If they were to crush the Information Alliance, the person really wished those soldiers had gone on an indiscriminate rampage and gathered lots of unnecessary attention.

But a failure was a failure and they would never get anywhere if they did not accept the truth. They set aside the sniper rifle covered in cameras and sensors and quickly switched to a different weapon.

This was the weapon they really wanted to use.

“Yes. Hand Axe.”

The person put back on the backpack filled with the clay-like plastic explosive and spun one of the pen-like electric fuses in their hand.

Acquiring the genuine product had not been easy given the circumstances, so they had to make sure they made it count.

Part 9

The Underground Railroad was a very narrow place.

Even so, Heivia and the other Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

“As we explained earlier, we consider the Manhattan 000’s current state to be ‘berserk’. Capulet itself might be pure, but if the Martini meant to inspect it has given incorrect responses, it will not know whether it is right or not.”

Silver-haired, brown-skinned Lendy Farolito began speaking while leading the way through the oppressive-feeling underground pathway. Turning her back on enemy soldiers and walking so that her butt wiggled below her short skirt may have been a way of showing her trust.

“Active self-denial, was it? Regardless, we cannot trust this Martini Series, so I doubt attempting to contact Melly would be of any value. It would only reveal our location to her. Meanwhile, the Pilot Elite has almost zero presence, so the Martini must control the Manhattan 000 through the process of rejecting errors as she and Capulet pit each other’s ideas against each other. If we silence Capulet ourselves, the Martini should have trouble controlling the Manhattan 000 on her own.”

“You aren’t telling us to break this giant island in half like a cookie, are you? Or are we supposed to sneak deep inside the Object and kill the Elite? We’re not a toy hidden in some old lady’s dresser drawer.”

“Our plan is not that reckless.”

After the pathway took countless right-angle turns, they finally entered an open space.

It seemed about the size of a city pool. A few dozen people in black uniforms different from Heivia and Myonri’s military uniforms were seated on the floor with their backs against the wall. It was unclear how they had gotten them in here, but a few bulletproof off-road vehicles were parked inside.

Lendy took some paper bags from her black-uniformed subordinates(?) and passed them around to Heivia’s group.

“What are these?”

“Some New York specialties.”

“...They aren’t more guns, are they?”

"I don't even want to think about what kind of misconceptions you have about New York."

The brown beauty sounded exasperated as she pulled out things like banana smoothies and salmon bagels that were practically salads. They were colored a toxic blue. There were even some pink cupcakes to fill the dessert category. It was all very Information Alliance-like. The lineup was clearly designed to look good on social media.

When she saw the skeptical looks on the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes' faces, Lendy took a bite of a bagel herself. Convinced they were not poisoned, Heivia, Myonri, and the others finally accepted the food they had been distributed.

"Dammit, why does food from the enemy have to be so tasty and healthy?"

"If they didn't grow so reliant on doctors and end up marinated in different drugs, they might be unbeatable."

Everyone's focus gathered on Lendy who led the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes toward one of the off-road vehicles. She knocked lightly on the rear door's smoked glass and spoke.

"We have gathered some usable personnel. Although it seems one of them is missing."

"...Is that so? Oh ho ho."

"Wait..." said Heivia with a frown.

He could not see her and he only had the voice through the intercom to go on. It was possible the vehicle itself was empty and the voice was being sent over the internet from somewhere else entirely.

Still, the delinquent soldier spoke up after removing the banana smoothie straw from his mouth.

"Is that the Rush's Elite...?"

"The Gatling 033, you mean." Lendy must have been particular about information because she corrected him. "This girl's Object contains the Juliet System for testing. The truth is, the Information Alliance's Capulet AI Network is an expanded version of Juliet which is closely related to the Gatling 033, or the Rush as you know it. Of course, Capulet has also been connected to the Montague General Database developed from the Romeo collection of big data."

"Capulet and Montague. Shakespeare's two major families?"

"Yes, but they are no more than project names. Whether there is really a one-to-one relationship between the machines is still a major question. Everyone claims to be an expert, but it's possible no one actually knows what Capulet truly looks like," noted silver-haired and brown-skinned Lendy. "By the way, the research team forced to develop them thought that only tragedy would result from connecting the two to form a single giant system. Regardless, Juliet and Capulet belong to the same family, so they are compatible. Thus, this girl can intervene if she gives it her all. The Martini Series seems to use its thousands of members to divide up the work so each one only converses with a section of the Information Alliance, but this girl can converse with the entirety of the AI network on her own. It feels exactly the same as the control system she is familiar with, so she should be able to work with the entire giant Capulet AI Network."

Lendy breathed a gentle sigh.

"For now, we will sever the connection between Capulet and the Manhattan 000. It is unclear how involved the Martini in charge of New York's defense is, but I doubt she can fully control such a large piece of hardware without Capulet's support."

"So it's like a young wife who is a good cook but is helpless when the power goes out and she can't use all her electronic kitchen gadgets?"

"It may be closer to having the recipe site she relies on shut down. If we can safely stop the Manhattan 000, it should bring a stop to the chaos starting to spread around the world."

"If that was true, you wouldn't be curled up like a hair in this dark underground blind spot. What are you plotting, you damn Information Alliance schemers?"

"There have been issues..."

This time, Lendy Farolito sighed with a truly troubled look on her face.

"The Manhattan 000 revealed itself to be the world's largest Object, but it began as a section of New York that anyone could enter. Thus, it is hardly surprising to find safe country civilians here."

"And?"

"...Around the time the Manhattan 000 revealed itself, this girl's father disappeared."

Lendy turned back toward Heivia's group who were wholly focused on stuffing their mouths with bagels and she leaned back against the side of the bulletproof off-road vehicle.

The voices outside could not pass through the thick door without using the intercom.

"We have searched the best we could, but there is only so much we can do. We have yet to locate him, so her condition could hardly be worse. And our military doctor and battlefield counselor have agreed with that assessment. She could not produce her normal results if she made the attack now."

"..."

That might sound silly for the military where everything was fully controlled by rules and regulations, but psychological condition was one of the factors used when selecting soldiers for special operations like snipers or the bomb squad. And that was all the more true for a Pilot Elite where a single individual was in charge of so much more.

"That girl is so fond of her father Royce that, no matter how hard her schedule must be as both an idol and an Elite, all it ever takes is a single morning call from him for her to get out of bed."

Lendy narrowed her eyes a bit and shook her head.

"Anyway, forcing her will not give us the result we want. We have to start by collecting her father somehow or another. And he of course must be collected safely."

"That's a nice tear-jerking story, but it's not making my you-know-what any harder. You want us to search for a single person in the densely-packed skyscrapers of Manhattan? Including the visitors, aren't there 10 million people in Manhattan?"

"We have a general idea. I said we had searched as much as we could, didn't I?" Lendy breathed a heavy sigh. "When all this began, contact with her father was lost at northern Central Park. There was some chaos when the Manhattan 000 activated. Not enough to cause injuries, but the people at work or sightseeing for the day were stranded with nowhere to spend the night, so the hotels and other lodging facilities have been overwhelmed. It seems some large public facilities have been opened for people to temporarily stay, free of charge."

Lendy raised a hand and one black uniform tossed her a notebook-sized tablet. All unnecessary transmissions had of course been switched off.

"This is a photo of Mr. Royce. The very first thing we tried was his cellphone. We could not reach it or its location information. I seriously doubt a journalist like him would shut off his phone in a situation like this, so a third party has probably confiscated it."

"And I guess that could be more than just a Martini Series plot. A thug would probably see a middle-aged man's smartphone as a source of quick cash. You can find people taking advantage of chaos anywhere."

"That does not change the top suspect, though."

This female commander spoke in a polite but cold way that was different from Frolaytia.

"Since it is not possible to directly contact Mr. Royce, we must follow the manual and predict the flow of people. Past Central Park is Uptown. One landmark of Morningside Heights to the northwest is Columbia University, an Ivy League school. All of the stranded people in that area would have been brought there."

"So we have to drag the Elite's father from there for an emotional reunion?"

"Yes. The northern end of Central Park borders Harlem, but the public order is not exactly perfect in some areas. It is highly unlikely that a large group of outsiders unfamiliar with the local rules would have gone there. If that girl's father is safe, he would probably have gone to the university in Morningside Heights along with the others."

"Unlikely and probably, huh? ...You're telling us to risk our lives on something vaguer than a young boy's image of a woman's crotch?"

"We searched as much as we could. ...This Underground Railroad is not enough to build a route directly there. The only option is to step out onto the dangerous surface and forcibly fight our way through Manhattan's streets while the Capulet AI Network and Martini Series know where we are."

Heivia's group had already fought and fled from those unmanned weapons, so they understood the gravity of that statement.

Plus...

"As I said, there is also an unpredictable third party on the Manhattan 000. You should know that after they used a sniper rifle and armor-piercing incendiary rounds to send the Bullmites after you. We have no way of managing the risks en route."

Part 10

It was a strange feeling.

"Nn..."

Oh Ho Ho tilted her head and its gorgeous ringlet curls while removing her clothes within the black vehicle. She was changing out of her casual clothing for walking around the city and into her skintight special suit for Object piloting, but there were a large number of eyes directed her way with only a single pane of glass between them.

That said, it was smoked glass, so even though she could see them, they would be unable to see her. She knew that, but she still felt their nonexistent gazes prickling her soft skin as she bared it.

They couldn't actually see her, could they?

They weren't just pretending not to see even though they could, were they?

"It's the same dynamic in miniature."

The information traveled only one way. The powerful had the weak's information, but the weak did not even imagine the powerful were spying on them. That was the essence of the Information Alliance. In this case, was Oh Ho Ho watching the group through the smoked glass, or was the group pretending that was the case while they watched her? Only a higher authority who could view this from a higher perspective could make that judgment. And that authority would be monitored by someone higher still. It continued on and on like that.

It was all so absurd.

Normally, knowing it was smoked glass would settle the issue. The slender girl sighed, removed her surprisingly childish underwear (which might surprise her fans if they saw it) and then put on the special suit designed just for her. Some Pilot Elites wore underwear and others did not, but Oh Ho Ho wore her special suit over an otherwise nude body. The decision often came down to the role the suit played and how the Elite viewed it. Oh Ho Ho saw it as a swimsuit rather than outerwear or underwear, so it felt odd to her to wear underwear below it.

"There we go."

After pulling it up to her neck, the girl finished putting on the special suit. However, every one of Oh Ho Ho's bodylines showed through, down to each and every rib.

Juliet and Capulet.

The two control systems were compatible thanks to their development history.

(It's annoying that the Gatling 033 itself isn't getting any focus, but I can live with that. No one is more suited to this task than me.)

If the Legitimacy Kingdom was involved in this, would that boy make an appearance?

There were not many of them, but it was still a few dozen. She was not sure of exactly who was there.

And she could not deny that she did hope that he was one of them.

"Oh ho ho. I am the star today. I am the heroine in the spotlight!"

Part 11

"Tell me if you get tired. I'm freed from the earth's gravity, so I can't tell when we've been walking too much. 636. It was for times like this that I expanded the number of unmanned taxis and had New York's subway cleaned up a fair bit."

"...Are you planning to bring that ring on a taxi or train?"

"That...might be a good idea. 984. The driver or station attendant helping me in would be watching as my toes wiggled. Would that break the spell over them? They might realize it isn't normal. Heh heh heh heh heh."

That had been a mistake. One careless statement had brought out the perversion that was usually masked by the girl's calm mood. It was scary that she was also an Elite.

While the Martini monsters named Wraith and Melly discussed matters, they entered Central Park.

Manhattan was normally lined with towering skyscrapers, but a rectangular area had been cut out of the city for a giant green park nearly 4 kilometers long.

Except there was no sign of that anymore.

A slit had opened in the center of the ground and then the park opened upwards like double doors. And a giant diagonal tower stuck out from that massive rectangular hole. Two barrels of different sizes were stacked on top of each other like an assault rifle with a grenade launcher attached below.

The black-uniformed girl grimly narrowed her eyes.

"The electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon."

"Really conspicuous, isn't it? 439. The Manhattan 000 actually has 44 different main cannon systems, but everyone focused on this one. It's like they don't even try to imagine what's hidden behind that bright backlight."

The desire for this Object to be a one-trick pony may have narrowed people's vision.

With her game system directly linked to the Manhattan 000, Melly moved the large ring her butt sank inside of to carry her alongside Central Park and the giant opening within. Uptown, Upper East Side, Madison Avenue. This area had a high density of floral security cameras and every bag or piece of children's clothing sold there was as expensive as a piece of art. The brown girl must have been

somehow stimulated by this luxurious atmosphere because she desperately pursed her lips and trembled within her two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper. With Central Park rising up with rows of buildings on either side, there was no sunlight. There was a pond and a museum clinging to the side of that “wall”, so it had to look like a surreal outdoor art exhibit.

Either she wanted to fiddle with something or she just liked how it felt in her hands because Melly rubbed her thumbs against the analog sticks on either side of the game system.

“Right, right. That’s right, Wraith. I wanted to ask you something since you’ve been all over the world. 948. Do you know a journalist named Royce?”

“What about them?”

“095. I’ve collected them.”

“...You’re attacking the press now? That is the lowest form of information warfare.”

“The press...! Yes, yes, that has such a wonderful ring to it. 707. It has such a formally dangerous sound so different from having your secrets revealed on the internet. Eh heh heh heh heh.”

She must have been leaving the calculations to the extraordinary Object because the ring hopped up lightly along with the paper surgical gown girl inside. Wraith watched with cold eyes.

It did not matter that the AI network, that’s hardware could be located anywhere, was functioning properly if its observer was broken.

Wraith recalled the method of breaking the Martini Series that Piranirie had mentioned. Melly was an old acquaintance, but she felt an eerie pressure from the very existence of the Ragnarok Script that had driven Piranirie mad with active self-denial. If Wraith was asked if she could place her full trust in this girl, she would have difficulty nodding.

After all, she could not even trust herself.

“Anyway, I didn’t mean to do this. He had the misfortune of being on the seam when Central Park opened. 779. To be blunt, he fell down into the classified zone...the main cannon’s storage space. He landed on a catwalk, so it wasn’t a long drop, though.”

“...”

Seeing Wraith’s indescribably uncertain expression, Melly gently sighed in just her two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper. As if to say she had felt the exact same way. After breathing a heated breath on her game screen, she lightly rubbed the screen on the oil paper covering her chest

and showed Wraith the screen of that game system that was like the evolved form of a tablet.

"This is the bearded man in question. 153. To be honest, he's not my type. Although having your secrets revealed by someone who isn't your type might be a decent situation..."

"Keep this up and I really will hate you."

The screen seemed to display a video file.

An ordinary middle-aged man was looking around anxiously. He looked like the kind of person who cared for his family so much he forgot to look after his own life. He probably worked hard, paid his taxes, used up his bonus and paid leave over the holidays prepared by the higher ups, and got caught in traffic.

"Please let me contact my family. I beg you. I am a journalist, so I understand how your rules work to an extent. I will keep your secrets. I will not tell anyone about this. You can monitor my every move if you wish. Just let me tell that girl that I am safe. This isn't like those online journalists who pursued the legends banned by the Faith Organization. None of this is necessary here. Please, meeting in Central Park was that girl's idea. If I remain missing, she might blame herself. Since I am perfectly safe, there is no reason for her to harm herself like that, is there? Just let me fulfill my duty as her father."

Of course, those Information Alliance geniuses were not emotional enough fools to judge someone based on their appearance alone. Detailed data on his breathing, pulse, perspiration, eye movement, and facial muscle movement was provided with the footage.

After reading the data, Wraith could only respond with a quiet look.

"...Well, this is troubling. He's nothing more than a good person. Even if this is a stressful situation, 220 is high for the top blood pressure number. I'm worried about his bad cholesterol."

They also looked through his past educational and employment history, his bank account data, his search history, his online purchase history, and his statements on social media and message boards, but it all came up clean. In fact, it was so clean that they wondered if this was an alternate account for living a double life.

"This was bad luck for everyone involved. If he was a wolf in sheep's clothing and I had even one reason to abandon him, I was planning to detain him or shoot him, but I have to save such an honest person. 600. I'm going to release him and send him to one of the shelters. The military exists to protect the people, after all."

The brown girl breathed a heavy sigh as she explained that.

...At first glance, she seemed to be a normal and sensible person (if you ignored certain unusual proclivities), but she was the Martini in charge of New York's defense as well as the Pilot Elite. That meant she was the culprit who had fired the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon on an Information Alliance maintenance fleet. There was also the Ragnarok Script. Active self-denial could be steering her full speed away from the safe choice. Making a hasty decision would be dangerous.

During the fight against Piranirie, it was revealed that Capulet could not "see" New York because its residents hated the surveillance cameras and email spying. The AI itself was pure, but if the Martini Series meant to check on it had gone insane, there was a fear that Capulet would lose its accuracy.

Wraith rationally observed the girl and hid her rational mindset with an indifferent smile.

"Is there some kind of problem with postponing a decision on this mere evacuee?"

"It looks like he's going to die of an ulcer or helicobacter pylori before I got around to it. But if you don't know him, I guess we'll have to rely on the family member Mr. Royce keeps talking about. 657."

"His daughter, huh? Is she in Manhattan?"

"100. Yes, fortunately for his stress levels. And this might surprise you. Okay? To use an Island Nation idiom, it's like a kite giving birth to a hawk."

"?"

"She's the Pilot Elite of the Second Generation Gatling 033. 710."

"...The Juliet's?"

Wraith's voice dropped in tone.

Melly nodded and narrowed her eyes with her butt inside the large ring.

"The one that shared Capulet's development history. They were working on an AI network from a different angle than our Martini Series. This man is an indisputably good person and he's connected to a VIP. I have no excuse to continue holding him in protective custody. 890. Even if this was an unfortunate accident, it will cause a lot of trouble."

Part 12

"...Ohh?"

Part 13

The Underground Railroad seemed to weave through the gaps in Manhattan's structure, but it only went so far.

Heivia Winchell groaned next to a metal shutter thick enough to be a submarine door.

"This is the worst, dammit. Couldn't I go jerk off, take a nap, and wake up to find peace has come to the world?"

Silver-haired, brown-skinned Lendy Farolito responded with no movement of her emotions.

"If one of the four major powers is completely broken, the entire planet will plummet into an uncontrollable war. You need to give up on the idea of being able to escape."

A mixture of several deep metallic noises approached. While pressed up against the wall next to the door, Heivia and Myonri looked puzzled and turned toward the source of the noise just in time to see the approach of a nice body with G-cups and long hair worn in gorgeous ringlet curls.

It was the Information Alliance Pilot Elite and top idol. However...

"She's huge. Isn't she just way, way too big!? Sh-she's gotta be like four meters or something! She could probably make a slam dunk while just standing there!!"

"Oh ho ho. This is technically classified as a powered suit."

"Powered..."

Myonri was shocked into silence, so silver-haired, brown-skinned Lendy explained.

"It is an impractical concept machine that was displayed at an Information Alliance robot show. There is almost no good use for it, but we receive maintenance and inspection funding just by having it sleeping in storage, so it is a profitable treasure for our unit."

Its history involved some unbelievable grownup issues.

"Wh-what are those huge things it's holding like double handguns?" asked Myonri. "They look more like exposed lab equipment than weapons."

"Those are rapid-fire beam cannons meant to be carried by truck and fixed to a turret. They were originally meant for assassinations on the surface or in the air. I believe they were developed to

vaporize VIP planes and armored cars that are using routes that avoid the Object and all its laser beams. Although they are apparently quite underpowered as they have no reactor to power them.”

“Hyehh. Is it supposed to be mimicking the Rush?”

“What do the weapons matter?” complained Heivia. “That huge thing could break through a tank’s hatch with nothing more than its fists...”

The sense of scale was way off, but the proportions were exactly those of the human G-cup idol. Whatever the actual bust size was, when you looked at it proportionally, the G-cups were still G-cups! And perhaps due to how it was maintained, it gave off a floral scent similar to shampoo or conditioner. It seemed idols really did smell of soap rather than perfume.

And when the 4m G-cups stood next to Heivia’s less than 2 meters, he could not help but have a low angle. He slapped his hand against the fake butt.

“Oh, ohh. Now this is a weird feeling. The fact that it’s soft is actually creepy. I feel a pressure coming from this ass. I’m afraid I’ll be buried alive...”

“The first time I can write off as an accident, but the second time will be considered intentional and I will kick. Oh ho ho. Just like a thoroughbred.”

This was no time to be focused on an enemy idol. He could not stop his balls from shriveling up in fear. After all, this would be more than an impact from dual-wielded steel construction beams. Those cutting-edge weapons were meant to be carried by truck and fixed to the ground with stakes, yet she was holding one in each hand. If that solid grip grabbed his balls, it would be the end of the world.

Myonri was also overwhelmed by rapid-fire beam cannons that looked like reinforced glass lab equipment forcibly covered with composite armor.

“Th-those aren’t exactly disguised. I thought you had to hide your actions from the main Information Alliance group here.”

“The best place to hide a tree is a forest. Melly’s side is skilled at gathering information, so we just have to use that against them. Look at this. Glance.”

“Made in...Nau Yoke?”

“That’s not even close to spelled right. And it has a price tag for \$199.99! There’s no way truck-loaded weapons would be that cheap! What, are they like a used car that’s cursed to kill each of its owners in an accident!?”

No one would think those were real now. Heivia had trouble believing the way the Information Alliance did things.

"I-I guess it's all about making them realistic, huh? Well, I don't care. Just give me some Information Alliance VR goggles. I'll shut myself in my own world and stroke my you-know-what, so go save the world without me."

Whatever the case, if he hopped in a rowboat and left Manhattan, he would be vaporized by one of countless cannons the instant he was far enough away. Heivia, Myonri, and the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes had to solve the Manhattan problem if they were to return alive.

"I don't know or care what hand signs and footwork the Information Alliance uses. We'll do things our own way, so try not to trip us up."

"As long as you act as a shield or a diversion, I do not particularly care."

"Okay, I get it. You can shut up now, plump commander. C'mon, let's get onboard, Myonri."

They could not seem to work together in the slightest.

Without even a basic three-count, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance began moving independently.

The 30m, 12ton yellow school bus loaded with the potatoes broke through the thick metal shutter like it was wet paper.

The bright sunlight briefly blinded Heivia and the others as it stabbed into their darkness-adjusted eyes.

They were in Midtown West, Midtown.

"Oh, geez. Here we are on Broadway!!"

"I wish we could've seen it at night."

Electronic signs and giant monitors surrounded a road as large as a runway. World-class theatres lined either side of the street. Needless to say, this was the pinnacle of the theatrical and film world. The flower or trumpet-like security cameras had detected their presence. Many eyes gathered on them. Heivia felt a definite pressure, like the air had solidified. Tires screeched as the giant vehicles were forced around. The three school busses knocked the poor civilian cars out of the way lightly enough to not kill anyone and finally arrived on Manhattan's largest main street.

Lendy whispered quietly aboard the same large vehicle.

“We’ve been spotted.”

“Those Bullmites are looking pretty adorable now. We’re the big-ass mama who protects the kids on the way home from school!!”

Several boulder-like masses sat in the middle of the intersection. They were the composite armor bulls sitting with their four legs folded up below them. Those serverless unmanned weapons would use flexible actions with just their simple circuits. They would probably function as an immovable barrier in a head-on collision from a normal off-road vehicle, but the yellow school busses rode over them and crushed them instead of knocking them out of the way. Heivia’s group briefly left gravity’s grasp and passed through the intersection with a dreadful impact.

“Passing the Bullmites will increase the alert level. Keep an eye on the sky.”

“Then it’s about time we brought out the trick hidden up our sleeve. Let’s go, Myonri!”

Just then, a giant shadow appeared overhead. What was it? The silhouette resembled a broad, double-edged sword and it seemed to be loaded with a rocket engine. It even opened something like a square umbrella to make sure it did not overshoot them.

It did not feel remotely real to the potatoes, so Lendy shouted in their place.

“That’s a Smart Meteor. It’s an unmanned urban aerial bombing aircraft! Watch out!!”

Did it too coordinate using on-site decisions like a bee or ant? Including visitors, Manhattan had 10 million people walking around, but it did not matter that they were at Times Square, the most densely populated area there. The belly of the broad double-edge sword body opened and a precision-guided bomb was released high in the sky. That bomb used GPS and the movements of its tail fins to achieve a margin of error of only 30cm.

A moment later, an explosive was used to slice open the yellow school bus’s rear end from within. And like a sword being drawn from its scabbard, a smaller (but still large) truck slid out of the speeding school bus and onto the road.

The school bus was forcefully blown away and the flaming mass collapsed on its side and rolled away, but the large truck carrying the potatoes easily avoided the wreckage it had shed like a snake’s skin.

“Self-driving scares the hell out of me! You can just do it all with a smartphone, can’t you!?”

“It’s a good thing Dorothea’s plan using tanks was ended sooner rather than later.”

By this time, were the people of Manhattan panicking?

Or did they think a movie was being filmed?

Heivia and the others followed Broadway to leave Midtown West and entered the Upper West Side directly alongside Central Park.

They wanted to say something about the colossal cannon, but they did not have the time with their life being targeted from above in real time.

“The next one is coming.”

“Myonri! The next layer! These New Yorkers are connoisseurs, so a garter belt won’t be enough to turn them on!!”

The large truck had no one in the driver’s seat and the door on the back burst open to allow several bulletproof black off-road vehicles out. With each decoy, they were using up their extra lives and their armor was growing thinner, but it also made them lighter and nimbler.

They were in the nest. Even without a server, these unmanned weapons could coordinate using the social structure of ants or bees, so trying to eliminate the threat by destroying every single one would be a never-ending task.

They had to think up a way to continue forward without defeating them.

“The next is the last one!”

“The fun really begins once we’re buck naked.”

The luggage-loading door sprang up on the back of their bulletproof off-road vehicle and Heivia and Myonri burst out onto the road riding light off-road motorcycles.

This time, they had no armor whatsoever.

The wind seemed to slice into their flesh.

But it was also true that development of self-driving motorcycles was taking longer than with cars. That eliminated the worry of having them hijacked by a surprise cyber-attack.

"What?" asked Heivia. "There's something other than the Bullmites. What's that collapsible umbrella monster thing!?"

"That interpretation is not entirely wrong," said Lendy over the radio. "It is a Gunner Bat. When folded up, it is no larger than a relay baton and it is an offshoot of portable grenade launcher design. When you throw it, the wings automatically open, it flies autonomously, and an external terminal is used to guide it over the enemy's head where it can fire up to three explosives when instructed. Its accuracy is below average, but it can scatter more generalized damage when loaded with white phosphorous grenades or the like. It is a support weapon that uses a quantity over quality philosophy to force enemy soldiers out from behind cover with explosions and smoke."

Heivia remembered the self-rolling grenades that Wraith had used on the Olympia Dome. Even without a server, their simple circuits could take the optimal action by mimicking the movements of insects. These were Information Alliance unmanned weapons. That electronic equipment filled Heivia with self-pity for using those pineapple-shaped explosives that required him to pull the pin and throw it like a rock. ...On the other hand, these weapons would probably be vulnerable to an EMP or microwave attack.

"White phosphorous in a densely-populated area? What is wrong with them? Nothing about that makes me happy. ...And what is that giant top!?"

"That is a Multi-Gyro. It is a reconnaissance drone that can travel through the air or on the ground. It has no obvious weapons, but it is loaded with a stun bomb. Get within 3 meters of it and it will scatter an 800,000-volt current. Since it does not need to access a server, it can do so without any adverse effects on itself. Not only is it harmful to human bodies, but it could easily cause a vehicle's electronics to malfunction."

Heivia felt his balls shriveling up as he had it calmly explained to him. And before any of those issues, if he passed out while straddling a motorcycle, he would be killed instantly.

The unmanned weapon had no tires or treads, but it still attempted to tackle the off-road motorcycle with nothing more than top-like spinning. Heivia focused on that while also desperately trying to think.

Even if Manhattan was an extraordinarily large Object, it was still only one borough of the giant city of New York. The distance from Times Square, where they exited the Underground Railroad, to Columbia University was about 10 kilometers at most. While ignoring all traffic laws and flooring it, they could travel that distance in less than 5 minutes.

"Columbia University is being used to house civilians, so it has been designated a noncombat area," said Lendy over the radio. "Reaching our destination ASAP should be the safest plan."

"More importantly, what happened with that Oh Ho Ho!? Did you develop a bike big enough for that fat suit and its huge ass!?"

"It is not fat, nor does it have a huge ass! Ho...ho ho...oh ho ho ho ho ho!! You need to look at the overall proportions. It has the perfect golden ratio, does it not!?"

"Besides, you are not authorized for that information," added Lendy. "It can be easy to forget, but that girl's very presence is a secret our unit must protect."

By the time they heard Oh Ho Ho's shouting and Lendy Farolito's calm voice over their earpieces, Heivia, Myonri, and the others on the off-road motorcycles had entered the university campus.

Heivia clenched his teeth when a bomb fell just barely outside the campus. Those serverless simple circuits had done it.

"Ochre, Nex...!!"

"Keep your balance! Do you want to fall over and end up as mincemeat!?"

Myonri shouted directly at him while driving right alongside him. She had to have noticed the allies behind them had been blown away, but they could not use recovery magic that brought back the dead.

The Smart Meteor had been opening its square umbrella to adjust its speed and keep its broad double-edged sword shape overhead at all times, but it veered away so as not to enter the university campus. Heivia saw that as he rode his off-road motorcycle full-speed along the well-maintained lawn, but...

"!?"

He felt a sudden impact.

His off-road motorcycle's front wheel was crushed like a cake dropped on the ground.

(A Bullmite...!?)

He did not have time to gasp.

He was thrown into the air, so he curled up and rolled across the lawn to reduce the impact. Meanwhile, the mass of composite armor planted its four legs on the lawn to accurately target him once more. The serverless bull used just its simple circuits to teach itself, so it began running in order to smash that soft human body.

Unmanned weapons did not fear death.

He could fire hundreds of 9mm bullets straight at it, but he would not stop it.

“!?”

Without bothering to get up, Heivia aimed his submachinegun (that he had swiped from a Manhattan resident). It was mostly just a reflex, like covering your face when a ball was thrown at it. His rational mind was screaming that firing would be useless.

He had to rethink this.

With all the unmanned weapons, this battle's rules were different.

(Throw out the fundamentals. Work your mind to survive. Preserving your gun and ammo is useless if you're turned to mincemeat. What would that bastard do at times like this?)

“Nwohhhhhhhhh!!”

He shook that from his mind with a bizarre yell.

As the mass of composite armor approached, he removed the submachine gun, grabbed the shoulder strap, and swung it like a caveman. He restrained his fear, stared straight ahead, and threw his precious gun toward the Bullmite's forelegs like a cowboy's lasso. This was only an option if he threw out the fundamental idea that a soldier's gun was their lifeline on the battlefield.

The bulls used in bullfighting had outstanding speed and weight, but unlike an elegant horse, they lacked the strength to clear hurdles and other obstacles. The Bullmite could not avoid the submachinegun that spun at higher than knee height. It was over quickly once the firearm struck the forelegs.

The sling belt tangled around the mechanical legs and the heavy mass sank forward like a table with one of its four legs broken.

Its own speed and weight worked against it and it was incapacitated in no time at all. It plowed toward Heivia with the force of a rolling boulder.

“Watch out!!”

The delinquent soldier still could not get up, but he somehow managed to dodge by rolling to the side. If the Bullmite had had all four legs on the ground, it would have made an adjustment even a millimeter before contact to pursue him.

(This is awful. I feel like I'm being forced to kiss the contents of my own balled-up tissue...)

Had he done it?

It was just like a traffic accident. Humans were not strong enough to destroy a gigantic truck, but if they caused an accident, the truck would reduce itself to a mangled mess. He had lost his precious submachinegun, so he hoped for that level of results. However...

"...Damn," he groaned.

A straight line had been gouged into the lawn, but the mass of composite armor stood back up at the end of it. The four mechanical legs stood firm on the ground in order to crush that inefficient mass of muscle.

There was really nothing he could do this time.

(What do I do!? Do I use my boot laces next!? Or remove my belt and swing my prized you-know-what around!?)

But just then, something changed.

With a sizzling sound like water on a hot grill, a giant, half-melted top flew in from elsewhere. It seemed to be a Multi-Gyro falling apart in midair. The stun bomb inside it must have malfunctioned because it scattered an 800,000-volt current that fried the Bullmite's electronics. It no longer mattered that it was a serverless machine that ran on the insect colony theory.

"Owaaaaah!?"

It was more like a rapid series of narrow lights than a single stream of water from a fire truck. The destroyed target had fist-sized chunks torn from its armor, the number of holes grew, and the entire thing melted and was blown away in no time. It was an even worse version of Swiss cheese. Heivia wanted to avoid dying like that at all costs.

The attacks were rapid-fire beams.

Unlike the lasers which had become synonymous with anti-air weaponry, these were visible, but that actually helped them stimulate fear. Heivia doubted this was simply meant as assistance. When the orange spray of melted armor passed right by his face, he frantically got down.

The 4-meter nice body that was "made in Nau Yoke" had arrived later than the off-road motorcycles. The boobs jiggled perfectly in sync with its pace, so it was clearly a crystallization of the designer's blood and tears.

“Oh ho ho. Make sure to thank your lucky stars and the goddess of victory.”

Heivia sounded annoyed as he looked at those weapons that looked like reinforced glass lab equipment forcibly covered with armor.

“A powered suit with prototype assassination beam weapons? It always comes down to tech, doesn’t it?”

“Of course it does. What do you think war is?”

He had only survived by working up a sweat and rolling through the mud, but she had cleaned it all up by wielding those giant rapid-fire beam cannons like an action star with dual pistols. And with her extra-large boobs jiggling all the while. It was clear she lived in a different world since she could take her time and arrive late while the unmanned weapons targeted her from the air in the Manhattan streets.

Myonri made a shocked comment after making a U-turn and returning on her off-road motorcycle despite the danger. ...Except she may not have been motivated by the power of friendship. She may have simply been afraid of being hit by a stray shot of that futuristic beam weapon that was scattering its shots chaotically around.

“I thought Columbia University’s campus was a noncombat area!”

The ubiquitous floral security cameras remained silent. They would not disprove false charges and they ignored their own side’s rule violations, so their quality could not have been worse. Were they only good for peeping on highly-educated college girls?

“No, wait. I recognize these scratches,” groaned Heivia as he looked at the Bullmite that had flipped over like a dead bug. “This is one of the ones that rushed at us in Chinatown. This is definitely the same scratches. You can’t fool my clever eyes.”

The 4-meter ringlet curls girl tilted her head while firing her rapid-fire beam cannons at the Bullmites and Multi-Gyros that attempted to approach. Those dual cannons were devastating in an open area with no hills.

“I am not sure what you mean.”

“That can happen, can it? ...Getting the Information Alliance to admit that feels like victory to me.”

The Chinatown in Downtown was the opposite direction from Columbia University in Uptown. Since Manhattan was full of these unmanned weapons, it was not logical for the same one to have come all this way.

That meant it was possible someone had brought it here.

That meant the Martini who was suspected of falling into active self-denial just like Piranirie. That brown girl with her butt inside a large swim ring.

And...

"Myonri. And the idol too. Keep your fingers on the trigger."

"Eh?"

In place of his ruined submachinegun, Heivia reached for his hip and drew a handgun capable of firing the same bullets. Wealthy Manhattan was overrun with such things.

He would not have trouble killing someone.

"She's coming. Wraith Martini Vermouthspray is coming!!"

Part 14

"Frank. Prepare for battle."

In a second floor hallway of Columbia University's main building, a black-uniformed blonde girl gave that command. Wraith Martini Vermouthspray's eyes were fixed on the yard visible out the window.

"Heh heh. Eh heh heh. Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh. I'm inside a world-renowned Ivy League school in clothing that could be torn with the slightest tug. How thrilling!! 008, 774, 868, 229! Tag it, tag it, tag it some more!! The cold, rejecting atmosphere of the school hallway is so good. Ah ha, ah ha ha. I'm going crazy. Completely crazy. The world is such an amazing place...!!"

"Melly, can I just shoot you?"

"Uwebh, cough, cough!! 808. Sorry, I'll take this seriously."

She must have been focused on the footage from the ubiquitous floral security cameras because the brown girl with her butt inside a large swim ring made from the same material as a special operations rubber boat stared at her game system and began folding up her arms and legs that she had spread out. The approach of outsiders may have brought out her shy side.

"438. To get back on topic, Wraith, I've detected the attack, but I have a few questions. You should be cautious."

“Not what I expected to hear from New York’s defense commander.”

Did Wraith sound so threatening because she suspected she herself was being affected by the Ragnarok Script? Looking at oneself was not easy. Melly, meanwhile, had folded up her limbs like a chrysalis or fetus to enter her serious mode (even if that was only skin deep).

She must have been worried about it overheating because she waved the thin game system like a fan.

“Even with everything I’ve seen here, it still doesn’t add up. I doubt the isolated Legitimacy Kingdom remnant could do all this on their own. 319. We should assume some of our own people are supporting them.”

“So they have equipment and our internal information, huh?”

“050. Also, I can’t figure out why they would target Columbia University. There have to have been better candidates if they wanted to damage the Manhattan 000 as the world’s largest Object. This place is being used as a shelter for civilians because there was nothing of value here. Are they directly targeting me? Or do you have another idea, Wraith?”

“Nope.” Wraith waved her hand dismissively and breathed an exasperated sigh. “But I am aware they would want to kill me if they had a chance. A dangerous and earnest enemy has given up on safely remaining hidden and has made it this far while so many unmanned weapons pursue them. Since they’re actively putting their lives at risk, this has to be more than a whim or just to show off. I doubt a peaceful conversation would get through to them.”

“I see. 591.”

With her limbs folded up and the game system held between her soft-looking brown thighs, Melly lightly swung one of the remote-style controllers. A Bullmite responded to the magic wand by walking up alongside Wraith. Removing the composite armor around its belly revealed a full supply of weapons and ammunition for human use.

Wraith frowned.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Wraith, you will put together whatever you need all on your own. This is a school with plenty of workshops, so it should be much better suited to research projects than a home garage. 171. I’ll supply the weapons, so it would be great if you could settle this with a sensible amount of equipment. And I mean that from a risk simulation standpoint as well. Okay?”

“That would help a lot, but if something happens, say I stole the weapons.”

"Sorry, but I'm not that shameless, Wraith. 903."

The black-uniformed girl snapped her fingers and the young man stepped forward and began checking through the mountain of weapons and ammo like a guard dog given permission to eat.

"Melly, what will you do?"

"Are you asking me to deal with a gun's recoil after what happened to my spine? 749. As usual, I will leave the annoying fighting to the unmanned weapons."

"I doubt that will work," declared Wraith while grabbing a small self-defense handgun. "Not against this enemy."

Part 15

There were more and more sizzling sounds like water on a hot grill.

They were of course coming from the 4m idol piloted by the Information Alliance's Oh Ho Ho. Those bizarre cannons looked like reinforced glass lab equipment with composite armor forcibly added on top. Those giant rapid-fire beam cannons were meant to be carried by truck and fixed to the ground with metal stakes, but she was holding and swinging them around with machine arms. The Bullmites were built to deflect a normal(?) assault rifle bullet, but they could not "hunt" as intended when their opponent was a bipedal powered suit. The Multi-Gyros, those giant tops filled with 800,000 volts of electricity, were also having little luck.

More and more fist-sized holes were torn into the unmanned weapons' armor and they were soon melted like sugar sculptures and blown away.

The university had a lot of straight hallways and the Bullmites could only just barely fit their large armored forms around the corners. It was not conducive to nimble movements that used excellent footwork to approach while moving from cover to cover. They could not avoid the rapid-fire light coming from the two cannons.

"As usual, the star of the battle is the Elite. Oh ho ho!"

"More importantly, watch your head. Seeing a fancy Nau Yoke idol's head smashing through the ceiling and fluorescent lights is one hell of a visual!"

This seemed to be the logic of a Pilot Elite born in the age of Objects.

The powered suit was unstoppable while tilting its head at a diagonal angle but still scraping its ringlet curl head against the low ceiling. Instead of individual ingenuity, it was direct firepower backed by technology and resources that eliminated the threat. Without even using cover, she ruled

the battlefield with the simple idea that a strong offense was the greatest defense.

"I can't believe they would gather all the civilians in one place and then send their unmanned weapons there..."

"Give them enough time and those monsters will decide to use them as hostages. Let's end this before any bored wives are tied to one of those rodeo machines made of composite armor."

"? You are being awfully malicious this time. Oh ho ho. Has the Legitimacy Kingdom been teaching you to feel more hostile?"

That said, Heivia's group had to think about more than just the fight against the Martinis. Their top priority was getting Oh Ho Ho's father, Royce, out of Columbia University.

Unlike a middle or high school, universities gave the students a lot more freedom, but that increased the risk to them. Some of the faded posters on the bulletin boards were asking for information on missing people. That included a journalism club that had gone missing after leaving for a battlefield country (in the name of gathering materials, but who knows what they were thinking).

"Once we're done with this, you really will work your fingers to stop the Manhattan and Capulet, won't you!?"

"Oh ho ho. ...I would really rather do that right away, but the doctors and counselors are all stopping me."

"Only a sage living deep in the mountains can control their own heart."

"I really wish all of you would stop treating this perfect international idol like she has a father complex."

"Wait, did you just add another trait in there? Idol, Elite, busty, father complex...how many scoops of ice cream are on this cone?"

It seemed idols needed to be multi-talented in this age.

They checked inside a nearby classroom and saw a few frightened students with their hands in the air. The shelters for the gathered civilians were apparently in the larger facilities like lecture halls and gyms.

"...We really should have gone there right away. Oh ho ho."

“And where exactly is ‘there’? Will we have to check each one in turn?”

That was easy enough to say, but Columbia University had several dozen schools from both the liberal arts and the sciences, so it was an enormous educational organization with more than 20,000 teachers and students. Even a low estimate for the number of school buildings and related facilities on campus could not be counted on your fingers. Oh Ho Ho’s rapid-fire beam cannons were quite effective, but they could not get overly optimistic. For one thing, she was wielding prototype assassination weapons and those large-caliber, high-power cannons were poorly suited for close ranges. And just like the Bullmites, the powered suit could not move freely inside the complex indoor environment.

If the Bullmites used the coordination of their simple circuits to all jump out at once, the entire situation could be turned on its head. It would be very bad if the unmanned weapons used their lack of a life to carry an anti-tank chemical warhead with them. Whatever the case, they wanted to avoid wandering around if it could be avoided.

Heivia thought for a bit.

“First, let’s head to the cafeteria. With this many civilians here, they’ll have to do something about the food. If there’s a memo in the kitchen listing where they’re sending all the food, we won’t have to wander this educational labyrinth without any kind of hint.”

“Heivia, you do tend to handle everything perfectly as long as an Object doesn’t show up,” said Myonri.

“Oh ho ho. In other words, he is useless in this age of Objects.”

“Just so you know, I’m going to remember what you say here!” shouted Heivia, but they easily ignored him.

Now that they had a plan, they walked across a pathway and ran into some masses of composite armor as soon as they entered a different school building. It was those Bullmites, but while scraping her tilted head against the ceiling panels and wielding her rapid-fire beam cannons like dual pistols, the 4m ringlet curls came to a stop.

They formed two perfect rows.

It was not that they had been stopped by congestion. This formation was clearly intentional. And then they made a coordinated charge like a train.

“Why you-...!!”

Oh Ho Ho quickly fired her two rapid-fire beam cannons while her extra-large boobs jiggled, but the

brilliant beams of light only hit the leading pair. The amount of fist-sized melted holes grew and those shields crumbled like a melted sugar sculpture, but the next pair of identical Bullmites now took the lead. Then the process repeated. If just one of the unmanned weapons reached the powered suit before they were all turned to Swiss cheese by the horizontal hail of beams, they would win.

Unmanned weapons did not fear death.

The Bullmites were made to carry equipment or act as barricades, so they did not hesitate to use themselves as shields. Those serverless yet coordinated monsters trampled their allies' remains and did not hesitate to take the lead even when they knew they would be trampled next.

"Crap, crap, crap!!"

"Wh-what do we do now!? If those futuristic beam weapons don't work, our shotguns and handguns aren't going to help at all!"

And lamenting their situation would not help improve it.

They could not expect mercy or pangs of conscience from unmanned weapons.

"Dammit!!"

Heivia fired handgun bullets into the lockers lining one wall of the hallway to break the locks. Changes of clothing, cellphones, video disks, and other student property spilled out across the floor.

"It doesn't matter what, just blow everything to pieces, Myonri!!"

A shotgun blasted toward the floor nearby. Several small pieces of shot flew out and instantly turned the personal possessions to scrap. They were forcibly torn to pieces and flew up into the air as small fragments.

Wildly moving metal fragments could interfere with EM and IR communications.

Compared to her Object, the powered suit's thick armor must not have been enough to keep out the fear. Oh Ho Ho crouched down as the threat approached, so the sizzling sound of the rapid-fire beam cannons ended. But a different loud noise erupted instead. The Bullmites had been accurately coordinating their movements to act as a single whole, but now they began running into each other like a multi-car pileup.

Myonri asked a hesitant question while watching the Bullmites self-destruct thanks to her efforts.

“Wh-what happened?”

“They weren’t using their usual submarine mode, right? To move so smoothly without causing any congestion, they had to be coordinating the distance between them using IR or radar. Interfering with that using chaff naturally caused a major accident. C’mon, Oh Ho Ho! How long are you gonna lie there!? It’s over!!”

“M-mghh... How could I let you see me like that?”

With shaky movements, the 4m killer weapon got up from its maiden-like crouching position. With a dull noise, her large head shattered a fluorescent light.

“One little prank caused all this? It may have been too soon for these toys to be fully automated. Oh ho ho.”

“There’s a prank where people shine a laser pointer in a soccer player or airplane pilot’s eyes, right? What do you think would happen if you shined it into a vehicle lens from a walkway over the highway? I feel like all the arguments about these things are only focused on the plusses. It’s scary.”

Normal knives and bullets would not have their expected effect on unmanned weapons that were never alive to begin with. You needed to use a separate logic that only applied to them: magnetism, salt water, acid, high temperatures, rust, an insect infestation, etc.

If the Bullmites were coordinating over the radio, they would also notice when the transmissions ended. Thus, they could not relax just because they had wiped out the enemy here. Heivia’s group hurried on to the cafeteria before reinforcements arrived.

They wanted to keep things quiet, but a loud rumbling burst out. Heivia and Myonri ducked down and saw that the 4m Oh Ho Ho had hit her forehead like a klutz.

“Goh?”

“Be careful when walking through doorways! You’re already scraping your head on the ceiling!”

There was a giant silver refrigerator in the kitchen and the door was so covered in memos that they had no idea what its original color was.

“Here it is, here it is,” said Myonri. “There are a lot of delivery records for gyms 1 through 3. They’re all north of here.”

“Only three?” asked Heivia. “I thought they were gathering people from all over the city here.”

"These gyms are huge facilities used for international basketball and hockey tournaments. Each one can hold tens of thousands of people."

...That meant it would be difficult to locate an individual in the crowd even if they did figure out which location he was in, but they had to think of this as a step forward.

"Father..."

"Hey, old man pandering idol. If you have time to give dreams to all those wrinkly people, then get to work."

"C-could you not falsely accuse my father of being old and wrinkly!?"

"Aren't you forgetting to deny the most important part?" asked Myonri. "Weren't you claiming you didn't have a father complex!?"

While they argued, something rolled in through the kitchen's entrance. The cylinder was about the size of a hair spray can. It was a grenade with the pin and safety lever removed.

"Wait!"

They did not have time to question it.

The kitchen was immediately blown away.

Part 16

Heivia and the others were not the only ones hit by the blast and shockwave.

Wraith's group had used the building blueprint and the floral security cameras to make the attack, but they grimaced and held their ears as small pieces of wall materials fell on their heads.

"Frank! I said to use a nonlethal flashbang!"

"Don't blame him, Wraith. Flashbangs have had the harmful effects of their explosions reduced as much as possible, but the container still ruptures. They aren't as safe as they appear in movies and dramas. 110. And did you forget that using one in a kitchen runs the risk of damaging the gas pipe?"

Part 17

Despite the fierce gas explosion so nearby, Heivia's group was lucky in a few ways.

First, the blast had not been made more harmful with small metal balls like it would have been with a grenade or mine designed for military use.

Second, they had a 4m powered suit that would not budge even if an anti-personnel grenade detonated right in front of it.

Thus, the giant charming idol only had to lean over Heivia and Myonri to provide them with some makeshift shelter.

"Mghh. I was somewhat hopeful since the boobs actually jiggled, but this thing is heavy! Way too heavy!! How is this any different from a suspended ceiling trap!? It feels like I'm being suffocated with a thick plastic sheet filled with water!!"

"An idol and Elite is putting herself in harm's way to protect insignificant enemy soldiers, so I would expect a more emotional reaction. Oh ho ho."

An impact like that was apparently not even enough to cause any clothing damage on the 4m ringlet curl's special suit. She was entirely unscathed. While they argued, Oh Ho Ho raised her arm with a motion more mechanical than a machine's. She mercilessly aimed the right rapid-fire beam cannon toward the source of the grenade.

The swing of the arm was more important than the speed of the beam weapon itself.

Beyond the dust, a few figures fled from the sweeping series of short beams. When Oh Ho Ho prepared to supply the finishing blow, the rapid-fire beam cannon exploded in her hand since its barrel had been bent by the explosion. A capacitor had likely broken. The weapon had already looked like reinforced glass lab equipment with armor attached, so Heivia and Myonri cowered down as they watched it happen.

"Curse that prototype! It's like the urine sample bottle breaking in your hand!!"

"The hand is fragile because of all the joints, right?" said Myonri. "I've heard armor craftsmen can judge someone's skill by checking there. But that thing's hand wasn't harmed at all when the weapon it was holding exploded..."

Oh Ho Ho provided no comment. She switched to the left cannon, but it did not respond. The 4m ringlet curls threw the remains of the unusable rapid-fire beam cannons. Those weapons were meant to be transported by truck and staked to the ground. They weighed more than the bar of a barbell, so throwing them made for more than enough of a weapon.

"Wraith..."

It may have been as inefficient as could be.

It may have only given away his position and condition to the enemy. Melly may have been the target they needed to suppress first and foremost.

But Heivia still raised his voice.

“Wraith Martini Vermouthspray!!”

“Hello, diligent avenger. I don’t know what you’re doing here, but did you really think I would just sit idly by while you caused such a scene? It does not matter how many people you have sent into this university. I will remove every last threat, one by one.”

The explosion had destroyed both the wall and door. There was too much dust in the air to see. The cover and line-of-fire diagram in their heads had fallen apart. Heivia could only think of one option.

“Move out front, Oh Ho Ho. You’re our shield!”

“Oh ho ho. I see you are no more intelligent than a drone. You’re the type that gets angry when AI takes over his job.”

Despite her storm of complaints, Oh Ho Ho understood the situation. Her large head scraped along the ceiling and her boobs jiggled in sync with her pace as she took a step ahead of Heivia and Myonri and into the dust.

The deep sound of metal on metal immediately followed.

“Oh...?”

It was a blast into the center of her chest. The powered suit’s back wobbled in front of Heivia and Myonri’s eyes. She then fell onto her butt. The potatoes were nearly crushed by their ally’s giant butt, but they just barely managed to escape to either side. She had been shot by something incredible. Myonri reached a hand toward the collapsed Oh Ho Ho on instinct, but Heivia was different. There was no helping Oh Ho Ho when she was covered by thick composite armor and pseudo-moisture-retaining silicone woven with cellulose nanofibers. If they did not first do something about whoever had fired on her, more shots would be fired and there would be no stopping the demolition.

But as Heivia ducked low and charged into the dust, someone charged in below his chin. It was a small figure with a black uniform and long blonde hair. She had rushed in just like he had.

“Wrai-...”

A heavy impact ran through his right temple before he could shout.

It was not caused by Wraith Martini Vermouthspray's right hand or left hand. The aide young man had acted separately from her and swung a giant anti-materiel rifle's stock into Heivia's temple. It was a giant weapon meant to drop any opponent in one hit, just like that monstrous magnum made from a modified grenade launcher. But the gun's recoil was so strong that it was hard to recover if he missed at close range. He knew that. He did, but relying on your insurance and then not killing the enemy in a single shot was always a mistake.

(Gh.)

Heivia's vision shook and he could not control his collapsing body. But at the same time, his arm moved like an independent life form. It grabbed the uniform covering Wraith's flat chest and used his shifting body weight to pull her down with him. After they rolled along the hallway floor, Heivia was on top. He pressed his handgun into the center of her chest and she pushed up his chin with a small self-defense handgun.

There was no fear in Heivia's face.

The only emotion there was anger.

"What's wrong, Wraith? Did your murderer's luck finally run out?"

"Are you going to shoot me?"

"Did you think you'd get a chance to negotiate, crazy girl? I've dreamed of this chance. I don't care about that active self-denial or whatever. I haven't forgotten what you did!!"

"But unfortunately, I'm much too busy to mess with you. Melly."

Heivia had perfectly taken the mounted position, but then his body flew straight up. This was not the same as the Tomoe Nage of the Asian Island Nation. A powerful impact struck his back and he had trouble breathing. Gravity seemed to lose its hold on him and his back slammed into the ceiling like he was being thrown around by turbulence on a passenger plane.

Even now, the brown girl named Melly Martini Extradry must have been worried about the potatoes' eyes on her because she folded up her arms like a fetus on top of her giant ring. She hid her mouth with her thin game system and half-tearfully trembled as she explained.

"667. D-did you forget? This is a giant Object, so I can do that by shaking the balanced city just a bit using the gyro controls."

"Dammit... Are you saying she's the Elite!?"

"The Manhattan 000 belongs to me. I am only lending it to Capulet."

Once he felt the tug of gravity return, Heivia immediately let go of his handgun. Comics and movies often depicted characters being slammed into the ground while holding a drawn sword or a gun with the safety off, but in reality, the force of the impact could easily have you stab or shoot yourself in the gut or thigh. Holding onto your weapon too tenaciously and accidentally committing harakiri was a stereotypical mistake given in military textbooks.

"...Gah!!"

He braced for impact, but the hallway ceiling was still more than three meters from the floor. The impact passing through his entire body was far greater than from being tripped or thrown to the ground. He could not fully escape it, so he ended up groaning on the floor. Meanwhile, Wraith aimed her toy-like self-defense handgun at him from a few meters away.

"Check." The little demon smiled. "You poor avenger who could not escape the standard framework. As usual, the likes of you begin to lose as soon as an Object is involved."

"Damn...you."

"Well, that's what happens when Quenser isn't around. Not that there wasn't room for criticism in that combat engineer."

"Damn you!!!!!!"

Heivia roared in anger and forced his body up even though he was still having trouble breathing.

A 9mm bullet stabbed mercilessly into the center of his chest.

After being shot from outside arm's reach, the delinquent soldier collapsed backwards. His troubled breathing was disrupted even further and his consciousness flashed in and out. If not for the pocket containing his military flashlight and mobile device, his ribs would have broken and his organs would have been pierced.

But in addition to that, Heivia was not given time to scream.

"Keep your head down," whispered Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

Something pierced through the wall. A shot was fired in through the window. The flying sparks looked like a handheld firework or a smoke grenade. It was an armor-piercing incendiary round that could damage military vehicles and unmanned weapons by shooting through the armor and then frying the internal circuitry or fuel tank.

If Wraith had not knocked Heivia out of the way with her self-defense handgun, it would have hit him in the side of the head.

“Didn’t I tell you I was too busy to mess with you? The threat we detected was that third party. To be honest, what you are up to is irrelevant.”

“What is the meaning of this...? And who is that!? How many people are going to jump into the same bed at this crazy orgy!?”

“Don’t ask me. And for the Information Alliance, that may make this the most fearsome presence here.”

Part 18

“Tch.”

That person quietly clicked their tongue while moving their eye from the scope of a sniper rifle that used a lot of metal to increase the weight and thus the stability. Targeting people felt so much different from targeting things. That was why specialized snipers still existed in an age so full of machinery. No matter how much support a target received, they would still act on a whim.

...It seemed one of them had an anti-materiel weapon. If they deduced the sniper’s location from the line of fire and a shootout began, the sniper would be overpowered. Not only would that weapon have a greater range, but its destructive power meant walls could not be trusted for cover.

This person had never been good at sniping. They had tried to increase their ability with the support of the embedded programs, but they doubted they could beat a specialist. It was the same reason professional cameramen existed in an age when anyone could snap a photo with autofocus and anti-blurring measures.

Challenging someone to a battle in their area of expertise would be the height of folly.

The opportunity for an upset only arrived once the other side was dragged down to your own field of expertise.

“Now, it’s time to use this Hand Axe.”

Part 19

Irregular tremors suddenly ran through the entire school building.

They could not approach the windows with the possibility of a sniper, but as far as they could tell by peeking out from behind the pillars, several clouds of smoke were swelling out like cotton candy.

“Explosions?”

“It’s no use. You settle down too, Frank. In this age of cameras and sensors, I doubt they would try to hide behind a cloud of smoke with no chemical effects whatsoever. I bet that’s a diversion while they sneak in through a different entrance.”

Wraith looked annoyed, but her explanation seemed separated from her emotions.

“In the worst case, they might have even threatened some civilians into running through there, so don’t fire just because you see a shadow in the dust.”

“Tch. Hey, crazy girl, quit acting like you represent humanity’s good side.”

“What, you’re going to fight me even with all this going on? If you don’t want to be caught in a crossfire, I’d keep those thoughts to yourself, gentleman.”

Casually cruel Myonri nonchalantly aimed her weapon at Heivia to deter any rash actions and then she spoke in her usual small animal way.

“Wh-what are they trying to do...?”

“Who knows. 380.”

Myonri’s fearful question was bluntly answered by the brown girl who was still shrinking down on top of her ring. That answer carried a lot more weight coming from New York’s defense commander who had full use of the security systems. ...Of course, that was assuming her active self-denial had not gotten the better of her and her word could be trusted. It was of course possible it was all a lie.

The black uniform girl shrugged while staying far enough away from the windows to avoid being shot.

“How are we supposed to know their goals when we don’t know who they are? But based on an offline search of the explosion’s acoustic signature, that was Hand Axe, a plastic explosive used by the Legitimacy Kingdom. So do you have any ideas?”

Heivia Winchell’s temples writhed irregular when he heard that.

A plastic explosive.

Hand Axe.

“...What?”

“The accuracy of such a simple search isn’t the best, but a chemical analysis looking for carbon, sulfur, and nitrogen in the dirt at the blast site would give us the answer. Although I don’t think we have enough time for that.”

“555. By the way.”

The brown girl in a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper cut in while cheerfully sitting with her butt inside the giant ring. Since her arms and legs were sticking out of the ring more than before, she had either grown accustomed to the stimulation or she was letting her guard down around them.

“From a strategic viewpoint, there is no reason at all to attack Columbia University if your goal is to take control of the Manhattan 000 as the world’s largest Object. 200. So I doubt they’re plotting to forcibly stop or hijack the Object. They might be after me since I’ve lent it to Capulet, but very few people know I’m also the Elite.”

“Then what else is there?”

“Sorry about answering your question with a question, but why are you here?”

Heivia intentionally maintained an expressionless face, but Myonri thoughtlessly glanced over at the 4m ringlet curl powered suit. The giant girl spoke up while scraping her tilted head along the ceiling panels and fluorescent lights.

“...Father?”

“Hm. I can’t see who that is due to the silly powered suit, but I’m guessing it’s the model herself inside.” Wraith exhaled from her shapely nose. “Well, if you’d given up on negotiating with Melly, I guess it makes sense you’d go for Capulet since it’s the only other thing with power over the Manhattan 000. Given the development history and compatibility between Capulet and Juliet, it would also make sense you could hijack control of Manhattan using the Gatling 033’s Pilot Elite. She would be able to approach the AI Network from a different direction than the Martini Series. Given that, the attacker’s objective would be the Manhattan 000’s destruction. But instead of sinking it themselves, they’re trying to make it self-destruct by triggering a fight between the people on the inside...in other words, us.”

“No offense to you educated people who can achieve climax with nothing but your imagination, but isn’t that a bit of a leap? How could a little commotion between us cause this colossal weapon to blow up?”

“If that concept machine contains who I think it does, then I’m not overestimating this. The Juliet’s

experimental results continue to strengthen Capulet in real time. That puts her much closer to it than mere monitors like us. She might be able to take on the thousands of Martinis singlehandedly. If the Gatling 033's Juliet and its highly-compatible Pilot Elite attempt to bring down the Capulet AI Network using its vulnerabilities, they could be a threat to the Information Alliance as a whole. The network's hardware and scope are a mystery because its advantage is limited to the online world. That prevents anyone from pulling the power cable to shut it down if they start to lose." Wraith sounded somewhat exasperated. "Honestly, this is the problem with the age of Objects. The importance of specific individuals can vary so wildly. Aren't you here to collect her father because your plan hinges on her individual performance?"

"..."

It was the same as with Piranirie and Taratua. Whether or not the Martini Series had a conscience or good sense, they could still do the calculations. Their character could not be trusted, but there would be no mistake in the actual analysis.

So it was best to base your thoughts on those assumptions.

What would cause the most chaos in this situation?

You only had to kill Oh Ho Ho's father in the shelter which was supposedly safe thanks to the Martini Series' management. It no longer mattered who the direct culprit was. Had the Martini Series made any mistakes? Had the Information Alliance as a whole wanted it? Once Oh Ho Ho was overwhelmed with anger, hatred, and suspicions, all of her skills could pass through the Information Alliance's Capulet and send the Manhattan out of control.

The most frightening thing was not the amount of firepower on hand or the number of people killed.

It was the same as the samurai who had once tried to open up the Island Nation or a certain world-famous musician. When a single blade or bullet bared its fangs against an innocent person, it would create an incalculable shock. This faceless person who had leaned out over the game board was trying to do that intentionally instead of by chance.

Individuals were supported by a large system, but they also determined the outcome of wars.

This reversal was built on the rules of an already twisted era.

"You're kidding, right? Then their target really is Oh Ho Ho's father!?"

"B-but they don't know where their target is in this giant university, right? Then we have time. We came to this cafeteria kitchen because we needed to work out the shelter locations from the food delivery routes."

Wraith rejected Myonri's words.

Had the crazy person gained a sharper mind by sacrificing someone like the crazy person she was? She had to have noticed that the timid girl's statement contained far too much wishful thinking.

"I wouldn't be so sure. If this lawless hunter's specialty is bombs, then they can achieve their objective by indiscriminately blowing up each facility in turn. ...No, those diversion explosions may have been part of the plan. Not only did it get them safely inside the university, but they may have been observing how people reacted."

"What do you mean?"

"The shelters will be the most densely packed areas. They would react most noticeably to a commotion. It's like sending out sonar to locate the enemy. They just have to cause an explosion, note where the most voices came from, and then attack there. And that means we can't relax."

"Right. So the key is the screams of children. 497."

Melly casually supplied that extra information with her butt inside the large ring and while wearing only a crimson surgical gown. She was much more relaxed than when she had first met the potatoes. She built interpersonal relationships quickly. It probably would not be long until she reached the ennui stage.

She breathed a warm breath on the flat game system's screen and wiped it off with the paper over her chest.

"Universities are attended by a higher age group than middle or high schools, so if you ignore the few students that skipped several grades, there are almost no small children there. 119. So if 100 or 1000 children begin to cry and shout in response to the explosion, you know that has to be a shelter full of outsiders."

Another deep explosion rang out and the floor of the university hallway shook.

Everyone there exchanged a glance.

"Ignoring this much evidence would be harder than finding proof of infidelity on your lover's smartphone and pretending you never saw anything."

"And even if we're completely wrong, if that third party has plastic explosives and is headed to a shelter full of civilians, we have to stop them no matter what their reasons are."

"Yes, that's right. That's exactly right."

Heivia adjusted his grip on his handgun.

And he did not hesitate to aim it at Wraith.

“But this is a separate issue.”

Multiple dry gunshots rang out at close range.

There was so little hesitation in the pull of the trigger that Myonri was unable to react despite being right next to him.

And the aide young man stood in front of the black-uniformed girl with long blonde hair.

He had used his large anti-materiel rifle as a shield to forcibly restrain the cheap 9mm bullets.

“Did that satisfy you a little?”

Wraith did not bat an eye despite having her life targeted so suddenly.

Had the Martini Series always been like that? Or had she been modified by some external factor?

“We just lost one of our valuable weapons thanks to you. You’ll have to work to make up for it.”

Part 20

The university had a long history, so the complex and inscrutable building additions made over that time had naturally transformed it into a labyrinth. Gyms 1 through 3 were located relatively close to the edge of campus, but they were surrounded by artificial woods which made the main entrance hard to find. It was so bad that the second story walkways were more well-known.

The gyms were large enough to be used for international tournaments, including the opening and closing ceremonies. They were squares with sides measuring more than 50 meters, so they were more like small stadiums.

“Th-they must have 50,000 people in each one,” said Myonri. “That’s like a small town. Won’t it be hard for the attacker to find their target even if they are in here?”

“Melly. What do your precious cameras say?”

The swim ring girl wearing a two-piece surgical gown made of crimson paper answered the black-uniform girl’s question while holding her precious game system to her chest.

"There is one weakness to cameras that look down from above: extremely dense crowds. The people end up blocking the view of the other people. We really need to find a better countermeasure for molesters on the subway during rush hour."

"It won't be that tricky."

For whatever reason, Wraith and Melly had stopped attacking Heivia's group with the Bullmites, Multi-Gyros, and other unmanned weapons. That made travel much easier.

...Of course, whether they were always that way or they had been broken by active self-denial, could anything the Martini Series said or did be trusted? That fundamental question remained.

"As you said, the gyms are crammed full of people. I doubt the blast would spread very well even if you did set off a bomb there. Even paper can act as a bulletproof vest if you have hundreds of layers. Human flesh is no different. Enough of it and it'll stop an explosive blast. If this person wants to kill them all at once, they won't place the bomb on the flat floor."

"Th-then...?"

Did Myonri want to hear the answer or not? Or was she afraid to not hear it? Whatever the case, Heivia winked at her and pointed straight up.

"The ceiling. Have the bomb dangle down like a deadly disco ball and it can send its shrapnel down on everyone without the wall of people stopping it."

"That would be easiest. 177. The ceiling is reinforced with narrow steel beams arranged like a jungle gym. A human could walk on them, but quadrupedal unmanned weapons like the Bullmites couldn't."

"They want to kill my father... And they're willing to kill 50,000 people at once to do it...?"

"You don't need to focus your justice on the general public," smoothly said Wraith. "The one family member is more important to you than 50,000 strangers, right? There's more to relationships than numbers. There's nothing wrong with feeling that way."

Her words were not at all blunted and tore sharply into the human heart, so they may have been similar to those of a high-IQ serial killer. They seemed to carry deep meaning, but the more you thought about them, the more your mind was destroyed by a poison of your own making.

And just then, a flat electronic beep came from the game system held by the brown girl. She glanced down at the flat screen in her hands as if peering down at her own chest.

"114. Mr. Royce's phone has sent out a signal. It appears to be a phone call."

"Oh, did you give him his phone back when you released him and sent him to the general shelter? What a pain."

Wraith sounded annoyed, but the swim ring girl continued her report.

"Any idea who he might be calling? 251."

"..."

The 4m ringlet curls trembled as if stirring.

What was the girl inside the thick armor doing?

"Don't answer it," sharply warned Wraith. "There is a chance the unknown third party is monitoring Royce's phone to gather information. We would gain nothing by letting them know we're here."

She knew that.

She really did.

The beeping never seemed to end and that seemed to reveal Royce's worry for his daughter. Oh Ho Ho seemed to be clenching her teeth. Finally, it automatically switched over to voice mail and the game system in Melly's hands stopped beeping.

Oh Ho Ho spoke with a tremor in her voice.

"I'm glad..."

Myonri tried to say something, but she did not manage to get anything out.

"I'm so glad he's alive..."

Heivia sighed quietly like those forced-out words were messing with his mood. He wanted to maintain his purity as an avenger, but it was not working. And he gave a warning with that look on his face.

"Hey, don't relax just because you know he's alive. This isn't over until we've actually saved him."

"I know that. Ho...oh ho ho. You don't have to tell me that."

Melly got them back on topic while kicking her brown legs now that she was used to the potatoes' rude gazes.

"The signal is coming from the second gym. Unless we assume more is going on than meets the eye, Mr. Royce should be there. But only we should know this. 125. There are three gyms and each one holds more than 50,000 people. Now, does the attacker have any way of accurately locating Mr. Royce?"

"Didn't you mention the possibility of them monitoring his phone? Well, that's just a possibility, so let's set aside the accurate information about that middle-aged man's location. Which one would be the easiest to infiltrate?"

"551. The middle one. The second gym. You can reach the ceiling's steel beams through a maintenance hatch on the roof. That should be far easier than climbing up from below."

"Then that's the place."

"W-we're basing it on which one is easier? Ho...oh ho ho. What happened to my father's life being in danger!?"

"I really don't need that giant camel toe in my face, so back up some. And did you forget? There are more than 50,000 people in each gym. Even if there's no direct damage in one, what will happen if they learn of unthinkable casualties in the one right next to it? It's an identical facility on the same campus. They'll assume they're next, so they won't just stay put like they were told. But the exits are narrow, so they'll start trampling each other and we'll end up with tens of thousands of people caught in the secondary and tertiary damages."

"..."

"During the winter, the chickens on a farm will gather together for warmth, but sometimes the group in the center will be crushed to death. This will be even more horrific than that."

They had a plan.

They of course had to keep an eye on the first and third gyms, but the second one was their top priority.

As seen at concert stadiums, it could take 15 to 30 minutes for tens of thousands of people to enter or leave a location. There was no time to evacuate everyone and unnecessary movement could lead the attacker to expedite their plan and start the detonation.

Melly Martini Extradry, the Pilot Elite and New York's defense commander, did not seem to have any strong feelings on the matter. She must have been worried about the battery because she hooked a hand-cranked generator to her flat game system and began cranking away.

"That powered suit and I won't be able to do much of anything on the narrow steel beams. 997. And we don't want to trigger a panic, so firing up from the floor filled with civilians would be a bad idea."

"I know that. Information Alliance or not, these are safe country civilians. I'm not digital enough to calmly fire within a sea of blood to complete my mission. Unlike a certain idiot who executed a civilian to save her own skin."

"With that in mind, I have a suggestion. The second gym is the easiest to infiltrate, but it also gives us an advantage. 656. Since the ceiling beams are connected to the flat roof by the maintenance hatch, you don't have to finish off the attacker there. You can drive them up onto the roof."

"...What?"

"That concept machine and I can function just fine on the flat roof. Your reports suggest this person is nimble enough to move from rooftop to rooftop, so they're almost certainly a flesh-and-blood human. I can hardly see how we would be overpowered in a direct fight. 176. It would be nice if we could just fire at them through the roof, but then the bullets could hit the civilians on the floor."

"Are you kidding, ring girl? You're going to fight on the front line? Didn't you say something about your spine being messed up?"

"202. Then try shooting me."

The brown girl readily said that despite having her butt inside the large ring and her only equipment being the crimson paper surgical gown and the game system. When he stared at her, wondering if she really understood the situation, she began trembling.

"Are you serious? I have more curly hairs in the corner of my room than I have a conscience. To be honest, it's hard to find any reason at all to hold back against any piece of shit with the Martini name."

"That's my point. You won't trust anything I say. 081. So the only way to teach you is through experience."

Heivia wrapped a thick and fluffy scarf around a nearby plastic bottle for a makeshift silencer, pressed it against the muzzle of his handgun, and immediately pulled the trigger.

It released a muffled gunshot, but it was not Melly or Wraith who looked surprised.

Melly Martini Extradry had her butt in the large ring and her hands and feet off the floor, so she could not move around properly. There was also nothing for her to hide behind. Nevertheless, her ring spun around like the coffee cups at an amusement park and cleanly avoided all three bullets.

“Are you okay? 444. I appreciate the thought to use a silencer, but when the noise and the actual recoil are different, I’ve heard you can let your guard down and hurt your wrist.”

Her movement could not have been that fast.

But there was no way that could be explained away as a simple coincidence.

“655. To reveal the trick, I slightly tilted the Manhattan 000 below us. And unlike before, it wasn’t enough to notice.”

Melly softly exhaled and used her thin game system’s L and R triggers to rotate her ring right and left.

“The world’s largest Object is always a part of me. I take top priority. Even Capulet is only borrowing it from me. The internal parts that move the Manhattan 000 are essentially the same as the liquid inside this ring. 713. Okay? Are you familiar with carnivorous plants?”

“Carnivorous...plants?”

“Some plants can move quite quickly, like the Venus flytrap. That is done with turgor pressure, the movement of liquid between the cells. That isn’t actually all that difficult to reproduce in a machine. And it’s easier to manage in parallel than something with lots of old-fashioned motors and cranks. 409. It’s also used as the catalyst for the quantum computer needed for the balance calculations to make sure it doesn’t collapse under its own weight. In addition to lasers, Josephson junctions, and quantum dots, quantum bits can be managed with the NMR method using a liquid. You’ll even see it mentioned in comics and novels.”

Quantum computers and DNA computers were the two representative examples of non- von Neumann large-scale processors. Since they had selected something other than the Anastasia Processor that used cancer cells from Wraith’s biological mother, the Information Alliance must have had its own internal competition there, but that was not the point.

“Did you think I was dressed like this for no reason? I control it through physical contact with this ring-shaped device. 333. Simply put, my blood contains the same liquid as the supercomputer. That was the only way to make up for what the game system alone couldn’t do.”

She had predicted the ballistic trajectory in advance.

The girl was one with Manhattan.

"I have perfect calculations and the ability to physically interfere with the field itself. Plus, I command every single unmanned weapon protecting the city of Manhattan. 144. Do you still think I wouldn't be useful in a fight?"

The Object was based on plants and the unmanned weapons were based on plants and animals. With the serverless artificial life forms and the simple circuits that used swarm intelligence, Manhattan was like a planet of machines.

Wraith did not seem all that surprised and cut in as if simply confirming what she already knew.

"But the Manhattan 000 must be too large to fire on a specific individual hiding in the shelter. You'll probably have to put together a unit of Bullmites and other unmanned weapons, but will the law enforcement regulations really be enough?"

"You must be kidding. These things' greatest advantage is a tactic that would run afoul of various treaties if you used it in war. In other words, artificial organic concentration."

The ring girl spun around the flat screen to show them. It displayed a graph about the contents of the air, but they did not want to think about what it meant.

"It's the same concept as fish and shellfish absorbing plankton and other toxins from the seawater and storing them in their stomach, but there is no limit when it comes to unmanned weapons. Because you don't have to worry about the lethal level. And the basic toxins can be found anywhere in the world. How many pollutants do you think you can find in the exhaust and dirty water in Manhattan alone? But it's not even a ten thousandth of the lethal level, so they say it's safe and you don't have to worry about it. 883. So just concentrate that down more than ten thousand times and you have a deadly weapon at zero cost. You can take a human life with the prick of a needle. I don't normally do that, though."

"I see. So that's why they have air purifiers. I thought that seemed out of place."

It was well known that the hollow point bullets banned by war treaties were commonly used by the police and thugs in cities. The line between humane and inhumane was easily changed for people's convenience.

Heivia breathed from his nose and fired twice more for good measure, but the result was exactly the same. When he saw Melly spin around in her ring, he decided any more would be a waste of ammo. And if the makeshift silencer broke, he would spread confusion through the attacker and civilians.

"If you're willing to go and get yourself killed, then be my guest. But your ass doesn't look too soft, so don't expect me to support it."

"Then I will look after it on my own. 111. The best way to shock malicious people is to do sensible

things for nothing in return.”

Was the entire Martini Series like this? She too was quite crafty.

The gyms were the size of indoor stadiums. They were as tall as four-story school buildings and they had metal emergency stairs on the outside.

The roof really was entirely flat. It had no slant whatsoever.

Was the attacker already here or would they be arriving later? There was no evidence one way or the other, but they did not have time to stand around.

“Let’s act on the assumption that they’re here. Myonri, come with me.”

“O-okay.”

“What should we do?”

Black-uniformed Wraith asked that, but Heivia only gave a snort of laughter.

“Wipe that smile off your face. Do you want me to shove this right up your ass? It doesn’t matter if you were always crazy or if you were broken by that active self-denial stuff. I’m not going to trust the piece of shit that executed a supposed ally when she was told to.”

“...”

“Whatever the case is now and whatever our original affiliations were, Quenser thought of you as an ally then and he risked his life to protect you from Manhattan’s attack. And you shot him. While looking him right in the eye. That’s not even war. None of that has changed. Don’t forget that your actions are good or bad regardless of your reasons for doing them.”

That was all.

Myonri fidgeted nervously as she listened, but Wraith did not bother with it any longer. Heivia left that lonely girl and slowly opened the square trap door attached to the flat roof.

After climbing through, he found quite a few steel beams arranged like a giant jungle gym.

Naturally, there was no stable floor. If he slipped, he would fall the four-story distance down to the ground level. And people filled the stacked second and third floors as well as the fields and courts. Everyone seemed to have enough space to lie down and stretch out, but if he fell, he could not avoid

hitting someone.

"I see him directly below us," softly said Myonri.

Among the shocking number of human heads, there was one person operating a smartphone. He stood out from the many other smartphone users because he was repeating the same short action over and over instead of focusing on typing text into social media.

"So that's Royce."

"How many times has he tried now? He must still be trying to call his daughter."

Of course, he would never get through since his daughter was not answering. They were on the same university campus, but he could not even get a single word to her.

But no matter how coldly he was being rejected, Royce showed no sign of irritation. He pressed the electronic device's screen against his forehead, shut his eyes, and seemed to wish for something before repeating the same action yet again. He was simply a father hoping for his family's safety.

"We definitely have to save him, don't we?" said Myonri in a quiet voice. "Without even thinking about the four world powers or anything like that."

"We can't give her father special treatment. If we're doing this, we're saving all of them. It doesn't matter if the blast actually hits them or not. If there's an explosion somewhere, they'll panic and trample each other. It'll be worse than a swimming tournament full of sumo wrestlers. Once it starts, tens of thousands could die."

Once they climbed down, they found it was harder to walk than expected. The steel beams had lots of small bumps from all the rivets and there were also thumb-thick power cables running everywhere for the halogen lamps lined up at even intervals.

Nevertheless...

Even so...

Heivia saw a silhouette. He saw a human silhouette at his eye level. They were curled up on the unsteady beam and he recognized the way they moved their thumb to prepare something. It actually felt nostalgic. It was just like that person who had always been by his side, setting up Hand Axe plastic explosives in some unbelievable place for some trick to fight against the world's most powerful colossal weapons.

He had considered it.

Yes, he would be lying if he said he had not considered it.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had shot Quenser in front of Heivia's eyes. But he had not actually seen what happened to the corpse after it fell into the ocean. So what if? Could it be? Perhaps Quenser Barbotage was actually still alive and following some super secret plan that not even Heivia was aware of.

So.

So.

So.

He clenched his teeth, but it was not enough. The shock was so great that it forced his voice from the depths of his throat.

And his voice formed a single name.

"Skuld...Silent-Third!?"

The person he saw there was a short and undeveloped girl with long blonde twintails who perfectly wore the skintight special suit of a Pilot Elite.

She was also the Faith Organization's greatest and most horrific serial killer.

It was not Quenser at all.

Part 21

This seems sudden?

Of course it does. That was a name one must never search. The editors of an online encyclopedia that could be edited by anyone grew stubborn when the information was repeatedly deleted, so they had pushed for the public release of the Madagascar Report which had been sealed by the military. But as a result, they had been killed in a highly suspicious railroad accident. That was the kind of taboo this was.

There was no sign of it coming?

Again, it is only natural not to remember. The great war crime that Quenser and Heivia ran across in the Madagascar Report is not something to look back on. It is a memory that prevents one from

living a bright, happy, and enjoyable life.

Skuld Silent-Third.

She was one of the three Pilot Elites of the Faith Organization's Second Generation Trinity Style, officially designated Norn, but she was also a serial killer who used that position to sink her venomous fangs into victims in battlefields around the world.

That incident had supposedly been ended by Quenser's bombs.

However, that same mass murderer had cast aside her blades, guns, and even her Object. She now held a bomb.

What did that mean?

Heivia Winchell's grimaced because he knew the answer.

Part 22

"Nice to see you again, Heivia. And the girl...what was her name again?"

She smiled brightly.

If that was all, it would have been an innocent girl's smile that inspired a protective desire in all who saw it. Her bright green special suit was held tight against the minimal curves of her slender body and a large ribbon provided a florid touch that felt out of place. Her allure combined the cuteness of a younger girl with the seductiveness of an older girl. But that was exactly how she had fooled so many people, relaxed their tension, created an opening, and ultimately consumed them.

"But it's too bad. Quenser was the one I most wanted to see. Look, it's Hand Axe! I went to a lot of trouble getting the real deal, so I have to make its debut worth it."

"What...are you doing?"

He knew. He knew who this was in front of him.

But Heivia raised his voice with a look of utter disbelief.

"Why the hell did the Faith Organization let you out of your cage!? Is everyone in this world a crazy girl!?"

"Love and hate are complexly intertwined, Heivia. Just like how I came to love explosions. Ah ha ha!

It's just like the stereotype that, if you look into a serial killer's background, you'll find they were terribly abused when they were young. Y'know, where you can say everyone involved was a victim. Ha ha ha ha ha!!"

Myonri was clearly shaken and Heivia immediately switched from his handgun to his knife. It too was a "self-defense" item he had taken from the diligent New Yorkers. It was a survival knife with a blade measuring more than 40cm, but he was not trying to show off.

His enemy's primary weapon was bombs.

If he moved in close, she would have more difficulty using them without being in the blast radius herself.

"Nee hee hee!!"

One wrong step and they would plummet down. Heivia started running across the ceiling beam and the slender girl named Skuld only laughed maniacally. As the bare blade targeted her unguarded slender throat with a horizontal slash, she actually held out a clay-like block of Hand Axe plastic explosive.

Instead of blocking it with a solid barrier, she was causing the blade to slip as if with oil. Heivia shuddered when he felt the attack miss and then Skuld used her soft-looking lips to stick a pen-shaped electric fuse into the sliced explosive.

Since it resembled a party game where two people held either end of a skinny chocolate snack in their lips, the action carried a seduction not usually found in such a young girl, but the situation was dire.

Her blonde twintails fluttered around her in what seemed like a self-celebratory dance, but Skuld Silent-Third was preparing the explosive despite being less than a meter from her opponent!?

(Is she relying on her Elite special suit!?)

"Oh, while it can handle blades and bullets, this thing can't protect me from a major explosion."

She seemed to have read his mind. And at the same moment, Skuld readily detonated the bomb inside her own young hand.

"!!!???"

Something odd happened.

It was different from a normal explosion that spread destruction in a sphere from the central point. It was more like an infinitely-extending blade of light. When Skuld swung her arm, the scorching blade passed by Heivia's face and burned right through all of the jungle gym-like beams in its path.

(This is worse than at Madagascar!? What kind of movement was that!?)

The blast had been concentrated in a single direction.

The bomb had detonated in her hand, but there was not a drop of blood on the body showing its minimal curves through the green special suit. She licked from her palm to her fingertips in a very seductive way for such a young girl.

"This is nothing unusual."

"Damn you...!"

"Any old fireworks craftsman can do the same thing. Explosions are all about fluid dynamics, so it's the same as the flow of water or air. If you restrain the blast with a sheet of metal and intentionally leave a single hole open, the explosively-expanding combustion gas will be naturally guided through there. Of course, the guns you're so familiar with use the same basic principle."

There had to be more to it.

In theory, you could create a bomb with a single metal pipe. But if an amateur actually tried it, they were guaranteed to blow themselves up in the process. Massive amounts of knowledge and technique were needed to realize that theory. And the mass murderer named Skuld had done so with her own two hands instead of factory equipment.

It was just like that boy who would rely on adlibbed methods and pull them off with no practice whatsoever.

She had inherited it.

It was like the girl carried that powerful enemy inside her undeveloped chest.

Myonri frantically raised her shotgun once more, but Skuld simply held out her hand. Another explosion drowned out the gunshot. It was like a magic trick. The single shotgun shell had to contain tons of small metal balls, but the beautiful serial killer did not have a scratch on her. Had she diverted their path with a solid shockwave barrier?

No...

“...When using explosions, the most important thing is to know what your opponent is thinking.”

With a sticky smile reminiscent of sweet nectar, Skuld embraced her own slender body. Her fingers traced across her own minimal curves. She pulled in her long blonde twintails as well, her spine trembled, and she shook from self-produced sensuality.

“I thought the feeling in my wrist when I stabbed or strangled someone was all there was. But the reality was different. Bombs have their own sensation!! You set up a trap no one is expecting, you actually detonate it, and you rule their heart with fear. Ohh, it’s so wonderful!! Take...whatever her name is there. You were afraid before you even fired. You feared that shotgun couldn’t possibly kill a true monster. So even though you had the overwhelming advantage of aiming a gun at me from a distance, the sound of no more than a tiny explosion caused you to shrink down and shift your own aim. Is there...is there any other killing method that lets you feel their soul more than this!?”

“Shut the hell up...”

Their military training no longer mattered.

It was the same as the incident from the sealed Madagascar Report. Whenever this girl made an appearance, the rules of war collapsed.

“I’ve had enough of your bitching. You’re no more than a wandering ghost who lost her place to die, so I’m not going to let you sully that bastard’s name!!”

“Nee hee. Is that the Legitimacy Kingdom’s obsession with honor?”

He swung his knife and used the handgun he had decided against earlier, but Skuld jumped to another steel beam a step behind her and he could not do any real damage. She stayed the same distance from him while her twintails and ribbon fluttered around her in a nightmarish and fantastical dance.

The goddess of death and war performed an elegant dance. And seeing that, Heivia raised his voice.

“Myonri, prepare to fire!”

“B-but I can’t hit her!”

“Don’t let the title of serial killer get to you. Whether she’s ‘awakened’ or broken through her limits, she’s still human. Aim for the power cables for the halogen lights!! The footing is already limited, so fill these metal beams with a powerful electric current and not even she will be able to escape!!”

“Oh, that’s what you’re going with? Emotional sacrifices are so boring. It’s a death as bland as a

chain burger.” Skuld placed a hand on her delicate-looking hip and sounded exasperated. “Well, I don’t really care what happens after I’ve had my fun. And I believe I’ve more than half completed my initial objective.”

“?”

“Look down below.”

The twintail girl sneered as she placed her lightly-clenched fist below her navel and pointed her index finger straight down.

“I still haven’t caused any direct damage, but I have detonated a few bombs inside the gym. If everyone heads for the exits at once, what do you think’ll happen to those 50,000 people?”

“You perverted necrophile girl!!”

“Ah hah hah!!”

Heivia and Myonri knew not to, but they could not stop their eyes from briefly glancing down. And in that instant, Skuld Silent-Third climbed through one of the square maintenance hatches.

Their target had gotten away, but Myonri actually wiped the sweat from her slender chin and breathed a sigh of relief.

“That achieves the bare minimum of our objectives...right? The Information Alliance group is up there. Wraith, Melly, and the giant Oh Ho Ho.”

“...I’m not so sure.”

Heivia used his handgun to shoot out several of the large halogen lights hanging down from the steel beams. They scattered some glass and a lot of sparks.

“Wh-what are you doing!?”

“I’ve created a peaceful explanation for those explosions. Hey, Myonri, you’re good with computers, right? Rewrite that online encyclopedia that anyone can edit!! Say that in the Central American ocean the pressure change from a storm can cause incandescent and halogen bulbs to burst from internal pressure. The actual reasoning behind it doesn’t have to hold up to scrutiny. Just give them something they can look up and accept for the time being!!”

“I thought we couldn’t access the actual internet here!”

"I don't know if it's a virtual space or a fake server, but just get it out there so those people will see it!"

People were susceptible to multiple sources. You might hear rumors around you and then find confirmation on the screen in your hand...but in some cases, they both had the same source of information.

As Skuld had said, no direct harm had been done yet. There was nothing Heivia and Myonri could do here except prevent the people from trampling each other in a panic.

"Myonri, let's head up top."

"Eh? I'd rather not. A powered suit and those serverless unmanned weapons will be fighting on that flat roof. Even if the battle will end without our help, a single stray bullet can still kill us!"

"This won't end that easily," spat out Heivia. "I don't care how many of those damn Martinis die, but if Skuld escapes, she'll cause far more damage. And I'm not just talking about Manhattan. You saw the nightmare of that sealed Madagascar Report with your own eyes, didn't you? Didn't you see and agree to seal it all away because it felt like having your nose shoved into some old man's hairy asshole?"

"..."

"If you want proof, just face your own trauma. That's all you need to explain what a threat Skuld is."

Myonri gulped.

That was all. She had no rebuttal for Heivia's seemingly incoherent argument.

They both approached the maintenance hatch Skuld had left through.

They climbed up onto the flat and supposedly safe roof.

They saw the scene they had expected but not wanted.

"Oh, perfect timing. I'm about ready for a second helping"

There was a single smile there.

And it was surrounded by hell.

Despite her confidence, Melly Martini Extradry was trapped in the scraps of the many Bullmites that had protected her.

The powered suit that had supposedly carried the Information Alliance idol Elite had what looked like giant claw marks running across it and an orange horizontal line had sliced through it at about chest height. The size was larger, but it was shaped just like the real idol. The cockpit's empty space was exposed and it lay collapsed and sparking in a more gruesome fate than for a normal tank or armored truck.

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray held her small hand to the right side of the young man who lay protectively over her. She was desperately trying to stop his bleeding. It looked more like it was caused by a gunshot than an explosive blast, so it may have been a flying screw or nail rather than the actual explosion.

The girl held her slender body in her arms and her back trembled as she basked in the afterglow. Yes, the afterglow. It was already over.

She really was worse than at Madagascar. The serial killer had evolved through the acquisition of bombs.

"Well, this was a shock for me too," she said. "I really thought there was someone inside that powered suit, but it was being remotely controlled."

Come to think of it, the 4m ringlet curls controlled by that Elite had fallen on her butt during the makeshift chaff attack meant to eliminate the coordination of the Bullmites in the university building. And when she had avoided carelessly answering the call from her father, had it been to prevent Oh Ho Ho's real location from being found out? She could not have anyone tripping her up until she had actually saved her father.

"That sure was elaborate," spat out Skuld.

That was all. Her brief arousal was already cooling.

"But I guess that was the peak of my surprise. Are those all the tricks up your sleeve? If so, it just wasn't enough. I want a dinner that will really fill my belly. So bring out the next serving already. Or do I need to visit the second and third restaurant?"

"Your attempt to cause a panic in the gym failed, Skuld..."

"Does the Faith Organization need a reason to attack the Information Alliance? Or does a serial killer need a reason to kill people? It's just who we are. What more can you say?"

"It's not like you're going to follow the Faith Organization's rules either! You were convicted under

Faith Organization law, abandoned, and thrown in prison!! You expect us to believe a serial killer is diligently doing her job!?"

"Ah ha ha!! Diligently? Well, does it look like I'm doing a good job?"

If she was trying to kill Royce so that his daughter, Oh Ho Ho, would spread further chaos through Manhattan, then Skuld could not have carelessly attacked Oh Ho Ho. She had only learned the powered suit was empty after slicing it in two, so it looked planned but was fundamentally flawed. Was there no way of controlling her?

"Al - so. None of that matters and I don't care. I have no hard feelings for the Legitimacy Kingdom that defeated me in Madagascar or the Faith Organization that used me as long as they could and then judged me like they were the heroes. I have no complaints. I'm satisfied as long as I can kill. I don't even need a war. Back at Madagascar, I made myself valuable with my skill as a Pilot Elite, so the higher ups would cover things up. Those circumstances are all that's changed. I'll make myself valuable in some other way and have someone important create an environment where I'm free to kill. There were no deep reasons behind it. That cruel IV had its uses! The passage of time may have blurred, but everything but the killing and the memories of killing melted away from my mind. What is that if not freedom?"

No matter what, that mass murderer could not forget the taste of killing.

She did not need to use a vast conspiracy or a superpower's interests as an excuse. She was a purer and crueler slaughterer who faced the killing head-on.

"Still, there is one thing I want."

Skuld Silent-Third wrapped her young hands around either side of her small face and lightly twisted her slender hips as she tried to restrain the pleasure signals rising within her. Her entire body radiated something far uglier than unrequited love.

"I wanted to see Quenser. I wanted to see my teacher who taught me this new art of bombs!! See, now I can kill even more people. You were wonderful, teacher, but I can kill far more. So now it's my turn to teach you. I can give you a lovey-dovey hands-on lesson in how to enjoy bombs!! Heh heh. Ah hah hah hah hah!!"

"...You're completely insane. Do you have threads sewn between the wrinkles in your brain or something?"

"Quenser Barbotage was normal."

In an unexpected turn, there was no emotion in her voice at all.

It was the stereotypical form of someone who could not control the switch between mania and depression.

“He was normal, but he could still kill without a second thought. Had you not noticed after spending so much time with him? He was far worse than a serial killer like me. I mean, he couldn’t have survived that long otherwise. How many Objects and the armies around them do you think my teacher’ has blown away in the past? Killing and remaining normal is a frightening thing. How could he do it?”

She did not need to say any more.

Myonri was enthralled and stood stock still, but Heivia moved almost automatically. He had a knife in his right hand and a handgun in his left. He charged toward the twintail girl in order to suppress her at a range of less than 2 meters.

“Oh, right, right. What are you going to do about that?”

Meanwhile, twintailed Skuld had no gun or blade.

Her voice was as casual as someone making an invitation to chat over tea.

“Does the term Ragnarok Script mean nothing to you? What about active self-denial? A mysterious external factor was injected into the Martini Series, but where do you think it really came from?”

“Wha-...!?”

Heivia still had not shaken his doubts.

Even if this was Skuld Silent-Third, could she really have had such an overwhelming advantage on a roof full of unmanned weapons and a powered suit? What if the Martini Series had lost control there? What if a switch had been thrown and either Wraith or Melly had attacked Oh Ho Ho? After what had happened to the powered suit, would he be safe without that kind of armor? Could he really trust that those Martinis were defeated? What if he turned his back on the group that included the monster who had shot Quenser?

“That’s just in the way, don’t you think? It just ruins your fun.”

“!?”

The next thing he knew, Skuld was moving toward him.

The slender girl's right hand had latched onto Heivia's handgun. But not in order to take it from him. Quite the opposite. She pressed the muzzle against her soft-looking belly and repeatedly pulled the trigger.

Dry gunshots rang out and the impacts to her soft lower body caused the girl to double over.

"Kee hee."

But the gun ran out of ammo in no time.

The handgun in his hand was no more than a lump of metal.

"Hee hee hee hah hah!! Yes, yes. That's right. Pain is only another form of pleasure and defeat is the motivation needed to grow!! Right, Quenser? This is the place. This is the best. The most enjoyable aspect of life is the moment when you stand back up from overwhelming defeat to turn it all around!!"

Even if her suit provided some defense against bullets, that had still been suicidal. The bullets might not break through, but the shock still reached her, so it could have torn her muscles or damaged her organs.

And yet.

That murder fairy named Skuld showed only a smile of ecstasy.

"The Ragnarok Script?"

She questioned the thing she herself had just mentioned.

"Do you really think that exists? Ah ha ha!! Investigate all you like, you'll never find it. After all, it never existed."

"What are you...going on about? That's what caused this entire mess...!"

"You take something that doesn't exist and make it look like it does exist to produce a certain effect. Isn't that how the Information Alliance does things? Of course, it was based on a psychological safety device set in place by the powerful people who control the formless Capulet AI Network. If the Martini Series ever gained more popular support than those powerful people, they could leak that supposed vulnerability to end that boom. ...Our agents dug it up while infiltrating the Information Alliance and it was reinterpreted into a form we could use more easily. That is the Ragnarok Script."

“...”

Ragnarok.

That was the final battle in Norse Mythology. Afraid of his prophesied death, Odin planned out a way to stop it but ultimately earned enough resentment to get himself devoured by a beast just as the prophecy foretold. It was a merciless myth with no chance for recovery.

Yet if he had never taken the prophecy seriously, nothing would have happened in the first place.

“When their self-confidence is shaken and they lose sight of themselves, those Martinis succumb to the AI far more easily. So there was no need for active self-denial. The Faith Organization has far more experience when it comes to matters of the heart.”

Skuld sounded like she was letting them in on a juicy secret.

“In Faith Organization terms, it may be a lot like banning Mary adoration or Thor worship. And as long as the true result of the lie is effective, the rest doesn’t matter. The Martinis really are bound by the nonexistent threat, aren’t they?”

Similarly, Heivia had lost his valuable firepower due to this girl’s words.

There was nothing he could do with no bullets in his gun. Since her skintight special suit was blade-resistant, his options were limited with his knife.

“We whisper about the Ragnarok Script and the Martinis are bound. Even if they know it doesn’t exist, they can’t cleanse the damage to their soul. It’s like a curse. Maybe this is the result of controlling the Information Alliance’s fear with Faith Organization methods.”

“Tch...!?”

“Oh? What are you going to do? I don’t think you have time to swap magazines.”

He did not have time to be surprised by each and every one of her actions. As soon as Skuld let go of the empty handgun, she dropped a small piece of plastic explosive to her feet, detonated it, and used the blast to rotate her own body. Her weight shifted in a way that wouldn’t have been possible for a normal human and she sent a roundhouse kick as heavy as a demolition hammer toward the side of Heivia’s head.

As long as it was enjoyable and fun, she did not care what happened to her own body.

Heivia responded to the lunatic's joy by lowering his arm. He did not let his arm be broken to protect his head. He dropped the empty handgun and slid it into the gap between the roof and the raised heel of Skuld's pivot leg.

"Oh?"

She lost her balance and the axis of her roundhouse kick wobbled.

Skuld missed and, before she could straighten back up, Heivia tackled her childish hips. He placed the knee of her roundhouse kick on his shoulder and flipped her over. No, his hand would still have held the large survival knife.

They collapsed in a heap with Skuld on her back and Heivia on top of her. He held the survival knife in both hands with the tip in the center of her flat chest. Skuld used both hands to push back up, but he had the mounted position. No amount of squirming would let the slender serial killer escape from below the boy. As he pushed down on the knife with all his weight, it slowly moved down millimeter by millimeter. The sharp tip was definitely approaching Skuld's vitals.

"Enough..."

Heivia shouted with the bloodshot eyes of something other than a soldier who killed for his job.

"I'll kill you!! I won't let anyone else end this. We screwed up in Madagascar! We should've done this from the beginning!!"

"Oh? Are you forcing yourself? Quenser is one thing, but I thought you acted as the brakes."

Skuld was weaker. She could not overturn things here, so she could only watch as the blade slowly but surely reached her heart. Even if her Pilot Elite special suit was blade resistant, the weight would still reach her. The blade might not be able to cut the fibers, but the weight would gather on one point, like she was being stepped on with high heels, and her young ribs and sternum would be broken.

But as she lay on her back, Skuld continued to smile.

And she was not forcing it. Nor was she escaping to a paradise only she could see.

All of a sudden, Heivia realized Hand Axe plastic explosives were scattered at the vertices of an equilateral triangle with Skuld and her seductive bodylines in the center. Her inappropriate outfit added to the illusion that this was a magic circle drawn out on the floor and she was holding a blasphemous sacrificial ceremony using her own body.

The girl licked her lips in a way far too sinister for her lovely facial features.

“When using an icepick, the trick to silently breaking the window to reach the lock inside is to use a triangle. You make a crack and remove the bare minimum of glass at the vertices. And can’t you look at this roof the same way?”

“Damn you...!!”

He could definitely kill Skuld like this.

But to be certain, he had to take his time slowly pushing the blade down. He could not end it right this instant.

That was why Skuld Silent-Third’s slender white throat moved alluringly as she laughed.

“I’ve made it so I’ll fall. I’ll break off the roof around me. And there are 50,000 people below. I’m covered in my full stock of Hand Axe, so if I go out in an impressive explosion, just what color of flower will blossom down there?”

“...!!!???”

“Don’t give me that look. It might not cause that much damage at all. With that many people together, their flesh will function as a barrier. Ah ha ha! So how about you pray for a miracle, Brake Boy?”

He could not let go with his hands. It was his weight bearing down on them that was restraining Skuld. If he let go and released her, she would cause even more harm.

Myonri was overwhelmed and had fallen into a seated position, so he could not rely on her. Everyone else had been defeated, so he could not expect support from them either.

There was nothing he could do.

He knew the tragedy that was about to occur, yet he could find no plan to stop it!?

“Here’s what Quenser would do.” It was entirely out of place, but Skuld sounded like a dreaming maiden. “The options are to safely draw back or charge forward despite the danger. He would definitely charge forward. He would prioritize defeating his enemy over protecting himself and allowing the situation to grow even worse. I understand him. I understand the human being named Quenser Barbotage...”

Just then, something changed.

It was a gunshot.

Right into the center of her flat chest.

A bullet was fired from the self-defense handgun held by a small bloody hand.

“Wrai...th...?”

The black-uniform girl did not respond to Heivia.

She had walked over at some point and she had not hesitated to pull the trigger while looking down on the twintailed murderer.

“Don’t joke.” Her voice was trembling like she was about to cough up blood. “Quenser Barbotage would never do that!! He...that complete moron was such a hopeless ‘human’ that he would make a split-second decision to protect an enemy soldier being targeted by the world’s largest Object!! He was a fundamentally different creature to you or me!!”

The special suit provided some protection against bullets.

But only some.

“I...see.”

Skuld’s eyes wandered aimlessly as if seeing something that was not here and words escaped her mouth.

“Teacher. I was wondering why I didn’t see you here... So that’s what happened.”

As if to say she would not allow her to say anymore, Wraith pulled the trigger several more times. She seemed to be bringing the serial killer back to her senses through sensible pain. Skuld had trouble breathing, so she could no longer hold back the knife. Just as her limiter broke and her strength dropped, Heivia used his full weight to drive the 40cm survival knife’s tip into the center of that childish chest.

Thanks to its blade resistance, the special suit itself did not tear.

But the same weight as being stepped on with high heels would destroy the girl’s slender body.

This would end it.

This would settle the entire issue surrounding the Martini Series and the Ragnarok Script. There was no need to worry about the Object losing control. The Manhattan would no longer be a threat.

"I...will not die."

But the girl's smile was like a curse at this point.

The mass murderer announced her immortality like the monster in a cheap horror movie.

"I've killed enough to know. This pain isn't coming from my organs. More, more, more. Drive it in more. Crush my organs with my broken ribs and sternum..."

"Shut up and die. We don't need anything extra. If you'll just die here it's all over. I'm not Quenser, so I'm not going to feel sorry for you."

"Ha ha. Brake Boy, you can't do it. Only my teacher can kill me. That must have been destined from the moment we were born."

What meaning did that serial killer see in her own death?

Was it just one more for the pile? Or was she the one exception, so it was a treasure meant only for someone she cared for?

"Or so I thought. How disappointing. But in a way, I guess you could say I achieved my objective. For my purposes, it didn't have to be Royce."

"What...?"

Heivia felt like his entire body was covered in tiny insects.

She knew something.

They had already passed the minor issues of the Martini Series and the Ragnarok Script.

The world would roll toward the precipice any number of times.

She probably saw it as a way to bring herself closer to Quenser who had defeated her and had a killing method greater than her own. Just like a stalker's obsession could gather more information

than a professional detective or intelligence agent, she had thoroughly investigated everything about him. Heivia was certain of it.

If only the powered suit had not been remote controlled. If only Oh Ho Ho had been killed by Skuld sooner, this would not have happened.

This extreme evil inspired that sort of misguided regret.

"I went a little overboard and sliced it in half, but can you hear me, Miss Powered Suit? Or whoever's controlling it, I mean."

"What are you doing? What more could you do!?"

"You don't know?"

She actually looked surprised.

And then Skuld Silent-Third made the worst possible move.

"That girl over there is the one who killed my teacher, Quenser Barbotage, right? I feel bad leaving someone in the dark, so we need to make sure everyone knows."

Part 23

"Ah."

That girl was in some other location.

She should not have been at any risk there. Lendy Farolito adored that Pilot Elite, so she would never allow the girl anywhere near the scene of a battle so full of unknowns. That commander had used herself as a diversion to convince everyone the Idol Elite was actually there and she had used that "information" to protect the precious girl.

"Ahh."

But she should have considered it.

Not all danger came in the form of physical bullets and bombs. They were from the Information Alliance, so she should have known the greatest danger of all came in the form of information arriving over the internet.

Her father was safe. Royce was alive.

But her young heart was hit in the most sudden way imaginable.

Quenser Barbotage was no more.

Someone she had trusted had shot him.

[illegible]

Part 24

"Welcome to the end of the world."

The mass murderer spat out the words like blood.

But with a dreamy expression on her face.

"I too am an Elite, so I know the special treatment we get. You came here to protect her father for her own personal needs, didn't you? But what if she loses someone she cares for just as much?"

Skuld had a twisted obsession with Ouenser. She saw him as her teacher in the art of killing.

That was why she had investigated everything about him.

"If the Faith Organization's predictions are correct, she is more than just an Elite. She is a VIP who can work with the entire formless Capulet AI Network of which Manhattan is just one small piece. To the point that she could singlehandedly fight against the several thousand Martinis. How badly will she lose control when someone who she has a strong connection with dies? I can't wait to find out. Right, teacher?"

It was true the Martini Series problem had been eliminated.

An even greater threat had emerged, so of course it had.

Between the Lines 2

Situation 325 has been judged a failure.

Skuld Silent-Third's defeat has been confirmed.

It was separate from Royce, but that serial killer met the minimum requirements at the very, very end. I will honestly praise how clever she is. This will safely bring us to the ignition.

This would all be for naught if we could not bring down Manhattan, the Martini Series, and the entire Information Alliance to trigger a world war that draws in all four world powers.

The world desires chaos.

Most religions cannot advance during peacetime. God's righteousness can only be easily explained using god's enemies, an overwhelming disaster, or something else that defies human understanding.

Formless depravity should be feared most of all.

And this clean age is exactly that.

To fight against the silently approaching trend of degeneracy, we must create an obvious enemy. That process is sure to produce a great many victims, but the world must be united if we are to fight against the true, invisible threat.

This age is wrong.

The world was mistaken to support itself with Objects and humanity will never find a bright future along that path. That is simple enough to say, but very few people can explain what exactly is wrong or how to fix it on a quantitative level.

So we must do so. We will supply what is lacking and reach out our hand. Not for social status or honor, but to regain a world where people can live as people. We will solemnly carry out all necessary actions. We will not fear the critics or historians. After all, we await an unavoidable judgment by a far greater being.

Prepare Module Quenser.

I too will head out.

-From Venerable Elder Tyrfing Boilermaker to all my beloved compatriots

<http://tl.rulate.ru/book/5253/330508>