

## Chapter 1: A World Where the Flamboyant Die >> Covert Operation in the Transylvania District

### Part 1

The November sky felt more like winter than fall.

Gentle sunlight shined on a grassy land of rolling hills. The vast land was surrounded by cobbled-together wooden fences and it might have looked like a golf course at first glance. But it was not. Busty, silver-haired Major Frolaytia Capistrano lay face down on a picnic sheet while wearing her tight skirt military uniform and with a teriyaki burger and matcha latte next to her. She was peering down the scope of a semiauto sniper rifle supported by a bipod.

A few 7.62mm shots rang out in quick succession.

“You’re really going for it, aren’t you?”

“Speaking to me now is rude, colonel.”

“You’re only doing this to blow off some steam. That gun is a Technopics model, isn’t it? Really, I’m not sure you should be wielding a gun as casually as a bat in a batting cage. Oh, and feel free to keep smoking. I’ll be smoking too.”

An old man was crouched down next to her.

Smoking and sniping was the ultimate luxury only possible in training. Even the civilian hunters who helped eradicate harmful animals on the weekends had to pay attention to the wind direction. Another scent mixed in with that sweet aroma which would be taboo during a real battle. This was likely a thick cigar from Central America.

Instead of a sniper rifle, the old man reached for an observation device that was like a monstrous pair of binoculars with other electronic devices attached.

“After all, this is the perfect way to have a private chat.”

“Out in the open like this? There are satellites spying on every part of the world these days.”

“Ha ha ha. Satellites aren’t as all-powerful as they might seem. A parasol lined with a thin layer of lead is enough to block them. Although satellite avoidance can get addictive if you start getting paranoid. Also, you never would have agreed to meet me in some closed room somewhere. Although if you would prefer, I could fill a hotel bar with bodyguards in black.”

“...”

Frolaytia fell silent for a bit.

Her irritation did not come from the deer that walked calmly by the paper target, oblivious to the danger.

“But don’t worry. I’m not about to make a serious pass at someone young enough to be not just by daughter but my granddaughter. So let’s get down to business.”

“Very well.”

“I want to use your 37th. It’s an urgent matter, but I want to keep that fact hidden to enemy and ally alike.”

“My 37th is a 1000-soldier mobile maintenance battalion with a 50m Object, colonel.”

“Yes, and that’s what I want. Trying to sneak around would only stand out in this case. It’s a delicate matter that is bound to leave some noisy footsteps even if you tiptoe. So I would prefer to just make a complete mess of things. Those footsteps will go unnoticed in the roar of the stadium, right?”

...In other words, it was yet another dirty job. It felt like reaching into the campfire and burning your hand just to grab the pile of shit someone else had squeezed out.

Frolaytia sighed.

“If you can promise me one thing.”

“Sure. I quite like how you ignore our hierarchical society to worry about your subordinates’ lives.”

“We will handle everything from beginning to end. Do not send in an assassination team behind our backs.”

“So you want to keep your territory clean, hm? Fine, but this is not going to be an easy one. Let’s hope your subordinates aren’t the ones who have to pay the price for your convictions.”

“So what is it?”

“Simply put, it is a retrieval operation. I want you to take back something that was stolen. The culprits are a local criminal organization named Ivory Garden, but the details are unknown. They might actually be something else in sheep’s clothing. Also, failure here would be an international incident. The stolen item is extremely valuable, you see. If you were to rent it out to another country, it would probably be...yes, I think 2 or 3 million euros a year. Your 37th is performing scheduled

military exercises that double as a show of force to maintain our influence in the Eastern Europe area, so make it look like you happened across the item by chance.”

The military brought together the government and private sector, so everything tended to come with a high price tag. Still, this was unusual.

Both the price, and...

“Rent it out? It’s a rental item? Like an anti-air radar or datalink server?”

“No. I joined the military when I was much younger than you. It’s been 50 years since then, but this is a first for me as well.”

For the first time, Frolaytia removed her eye from the scope for something other than tending to her long, narrow kiseru.

“It’s a first for you, colonel?”

“Yes.”

“Then is it something Object related? Or one of the nukes that long since fell out of use?”

“No, it is a panda.”

Time stopped.

She thought this had to be a code word, but apparently not. She froze there with her mouth hanging open, so the serious man explained.

“A baby panda. For the culprits, it is a valuable political tool and a stable source of money from renting it out. This is a painful blow to us since it belongs to one of our zoos, I would like for you to rescue it. No matter what.”

Part 2

And in a desolate battlefield country of Eastern Europe, while the main battle was fought between two Objects, the Legitimacy Kingdom’s 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion found themselves in a harsh battle of their own on the frozen land infamous for its war crimes. Now, how to explain what it was they found there? This may be the best place to start:

The Panda War had begun.

With sweat soaking his face, Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage shouted at the top of his lungs despite knowing it would never reach the roaring jet engine passing by overhead.

“Wait, you dumbasses!! We’re on your side! Fire on the enemy!!”

“Who the hell called this a battle of love, justice, and humanitarianism? There’s something wrong when they get paid more than us!”

A double delta attack plane protected by thick armor had sprayed its Gatling gun at them right from the beginning, so the armored truck carrying Quenser and Heivia had come to a stop on the cracked asphalt. They had gone to the trouble of chasing the poachers down a curvy highway while ramming their vehicles against each other, but then that son of a bitch in the sky had fired a machinegun down at them while showing off its threatening paint job that looked a lot like the eye pattern on a moth’s wings. Thanks to that, the difference between enemy and ally meant squat. Both trucks had overturned and Quenser, Heivia, and the others were forced to use the half-scraped military truck as a shield. Idiots were never rewarded for trying to do a good deed every once in a while.

Perhaps due to the cold, the land was rough and short on vegetation.

Some conifer trees dotted the bare wasteland, a jagged mountain rose in the distance, and old monasteries and castle spires could be seen on its slope. When it came to both plants and animals, it was unclear what people were supposed to eat to survive in this area.

And now was not the time to be getting a tour. The overturned Ivory Garden truck was only about 10 meters away. They would not have been wiped out in that one blast, so a close-range battle was about to begin.

“Let’s end this quickly, Quenser.”

“Using a bomb at this range would just blow us all up, but why are you so motivated today of all days?”

“Because that thing that zoomed by overhead is making a U-turn! If we don’t end this before it comes back for a second pass, we’ll end up as mincemeat!!”

But this also meant something important.

Objects were equipped with anti-air lasers powered by the ultra-high levels of energy from their JLevelMHD reactors. So there was no place for aircraft in a clean war between Objects.

That hinted at the situation Quenser and Heivia found themselves in.



“Cut the theatrics and actually help me!!”

The idiot was doubled over, but he seemed fine. The tip of the blade had apparently been stopped by his magazine pouch. But despite Heivia’s insistence, Quenser could not use his Hand Axe plastic explosive while within 2m of the enemy. The idiot and villain were grappling, so in a split-second decision, Quenser grabbed a giant wrench meant to remove the lug nuts on the side of the armored truck’s tires and he swung it down on top of the criminal’s head.

Crash! And now the man was seeing stars.

...Well, that was the idea, but instead, blood and spinal fluid splattered around and the second man collapsed to the road. His face looked kind of funny since his skull had been split open. His skin was stretched and distorted like a robber with a stocking over his head. Quenser felt like he had even ruined the guy’s funeral.

And he was unsure what to say when the wrench proved more destructive than expected.

“Ah, ahh...”

“So what now? Is it gonna turn out shovels are unmatched on the battlefield?”

Surprise attacks lost their effectiveness once the surprise wore off. While Quenser felt his balls shrivel up at what he had done, Heivia, Myonri, and the others managed to calm down and began suppressing the enemy with their assault rifles. The rest was over in a blink of an eye. Light bursts of gunfire snuffed out lives.

“Oh?”

One of the young men on the ground held a grenade.

His courage on the verge of death was commendable, but Heivia used his foot to roughly roll the man over.

“Human shield!!”

“You’re awful!!”

There was a muffled boom, but the wall of flesh was enough to suppress a normal grenade blast. After having the enemy clean up his own mess like that, Heivia shot the bottom of the overturned poachers’ truck, opening a hole in the gas tank. The Ivory Garden members fled from their vehicular shield and were shot for their trouble.

“Man, today is nothing but disappointments. Why didn’t the truck blow up when you shot the gas tank?”

“Reality has a way of robbing people of their dreams, Quenser.”

As soon as Heivia said that, sparks scattered on the road and an explosion erupted out. The two idiots were knocked onto their asses together. Quenser did not bother getting up and instead climbed on top of Heivia and threw a straight-A-student punch.

“You dumbass!! This is what happens when an idiot tries to act smart!!”

“Ow! Shut up and get off of me or I’ll shoot you along with the enemy, Quenser! The leaking gas vaporized and reacted to the static electricity! It wasn’t the liquid gas in the tank that exploded!”

However, there was no more resistance. The explosion must have taken out the rest of the enemy. All that remained was a container that looked like a thick acrylic die. It was an incubator for the baby panda that could earn a yearly salary of 3 million euros.

“There’s something wrong when an animal gets thicker armor than our bulletproof jackets.”

“I don’t even want to imagine what would have happened if it had blown up along with the poachers. Thank goodness it’s all righ-...”

Quenser trailed off.

He picked up the large transparent die and viewed the target within from multiple angles.

“This isn’t a panda.”

“What?”

“I-it’s a bear cub made to look like one with white powder camouflage!! Who would this ever fool!? It’s like those legendary dyed chicks at Island Nation festivals!”

Part 3

The soldiers of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion were exhausted, but they were called to gather in the briefing room.

But not because some idiot had forgotten to attach the infrared ID marker to their truck’s roof and the aerial unit had wasted some bullets and reduced valuable equipment to scrap.

Frolaytia stood up on the podium and got down to business.

“Now, I thought we would be done here after recovering the baby panda, but we found a very concerning document in Ivory Garden’s truck. Ladies and gentlemen, a round of applause for Quenser whose sticky fingers led him to dig around in the dashboard and find this material.”

With shouts of “why couldn’t you have left well enough alone, you idiot!?” and “no one wants a hard worker!”, the overworked and angry potatoes surrounded the battlefield student and started kicking him.

And when Frolaytia saw the behavior of her shabby and unshaven subordinates, she only toyed with her silver bangs with an annoyed look.

“I bet that old man knew it was a dyed chick from the get-go. This is looking a lot more like one of those shitty odd jobs he always forces onto us, but we are civil servants fed by the people’s tax money and the military is especially picky about the chain of command. I might not have known what I was agreeing to, but I can’t back out now. This is a pressing situation, so we have to keep going.”

“God, what a pain in the ass.” Heivia looked dejected. “Can’t we just have the Baby Magnum blow everything up and call it a day?”

“Hm, hmm.”

The Princess must not have cared whether it was a panda or a bear cub because she was busy looking after the baby animal with a bottle in hand.

“Here, have some milk. Once you’re full, you can take a nap with mommy, okay?”

She had been in full mother mode since they got back with the bear, so it seemed unlikely she would agree to a bloody battle. The old maintenance lady had been observing her while pretending to give advice, but she shook her head. It looked like the Princess would exercise her right to refuse this mission.

The delinquent noble held his head.

“Is there really no other option?”

“Relax, Heivia,” said Frolaytia. “I’m on your side this time. I say we all beat up Quenser together. Now, I really would like to end this with a long-range main cannon blast, but that won’t work this time since we need confirmation of the target’s destruction. I want to avoid spending months digging through piles of rubble to get that confirmation. Plus, Eastern Europe is headed toward its snowy winter. If the white snow keeps piling up no matter how much we shovel it out of the way, we’ll never be able to dig through the rubble. None of you wants to die from overwork, right?”

"The target's destruction? This isn't about retrieving some rare animals that the something-or-other groups are up in arms about?"

"Ivory Garden's secret transportation route is apparently being used for a different item: an Object reactor."

That sent a stir through the room.

Those reactors had created the current age. With nukes eradicated, Objects were the new trigger for humanity's destruction.

"Let's not waste our valuable time asking questions like 'why' or 'how'. This is all based on the list of transported goods on the document Quenser found. The details and the accuracy of the document are for the intelligence division to worry about."

"Gulp. Then it would be best to act on the assumption it's real?"

"Someone punch him right in his serious face. And that's an order. Quenser, do not forget that I too am burdened by this extra work you brought us."

His inaccurate shout of "But I was only trying to do the right thing!" vanished into a flurry of blows. He had only been searching through the enemy dashboard in the hopes of finding some loose change.

Frolaytia took a puff of her long, narrow kiseru to help deal with the stress.

"Speaking of local trouble, the Transylvania District is nearby, isn't it? That is an Information Alliance safe country, but the extreme wealth disparities have led to a lot of crime. The peace-loving wealthy want to throw out the burden of the poor, so the southern tourist area known for its vampire legends is planning to declare its independence. In fact, a local referendum passed with a majority voting 'yes'. I don't know how many of them were serious about independence and how many were just trying to make a point, but now that the vote has passed, the local celebrities supporting it have no choice but to go through with it."

"Hm? But isn't that looking like trouble? I heard the overall Transylvania District refused to accept the south's independence so they've sent a giant Object to the proposed new border. They were saying something about declaring war and taking back the south less than a second after the south declares independence."

"We're only talking about a conflict between safe countries. An actual war won't break out that easily. The Transylvania District is really just threatening the southern tourist area like they have knife to their throat. ...But what if the supposedly powerless south managed to secretly acquire an Object of their own?"

“...”

An unpleasant silence hung over the room.

No one wanted to answer that question.

“Then we would have an unprecedented conflict in which two safe countries use Objects against each other. If the flames of war spread from there, it could drag entirely unrelated regions into war. Do not forget that includes the Legitimacy Kingdom safe country that borders the Transylvania District. The electronic simulation division is busy calculating out the estimated number of deaths including noncombatants, but we can be certain the war would be one of the worst in history. It would eliminate the taboo set in place by the Northern Restricted Zone when the reactor buried below a city of 5 million blew up during an intense artillery campaign.”

“But, um, squeal, we’re talking about an Object, right? Squeal.”

When Quenser was finally released with his face beaten and swollen, he asked a question with some pig language mixed in.

“Ugh, cough. I-I mean, those are 50m colossuses. It takes years to construct one. Building one in secret is easier said than done. Is it even possible?”

“The south’s independence is supported by the wealthy who have more money than they know what to do with, so they could afford the 5 billion dollar budget. And on the technology front, there were some rumors floating around for a while that the main stumbling block was the inability to build a JPllevelMHD reactor on their own.”

“In other words, they could have secretly built the rest...”

“The wealthy are all alike. Whether it’s a masterpiece painting, rock candy, an idol, or a slave, they try to fulfill every last one of their desires with money. And it seems someone is trying to purchase an extra-large gem to fill their empty jewelry box that was previously a bluff.”

Frolaytia sighed in exasperation.

Was the human race trying to wipe itself out? At this point, it was hard to tell if they were just dumb or if this was a clever form of atonement.

“The southern tourist area plans to announce their independence at midnight two days from now. In what I can only imagine is part of their vampire culture, they are apparently holding a lavish party with a fireworks show at a hotel deep in the mountains. That will be when the Transylvanian Object waiting at the new border will make its move. No, maybe I should say it will be forced to act then. Governments and militaries are all about appearances, so they won’t be able to stop when someone



camouflage specialized for mechanical eyes, the overhead searches won't find the people and trucks running and driving around right in the open."

"Why do you know so much about this?"

"If I just sat around, I was pretty sure all of you were going to surround me and shove your feet up my ass, so I worked my ass off studying. Like my life counted on it! I checked through the last few years' worth of newspaper articles and non-fiction books!! Three cheers for the modern age of everything getting a digital release!!"

Deceptive patterns meant to blend into the scenery had been used by insects and such long before humans invented military camouflage. But because the animals' predators saw colors differently, they did not always seem very well hidden when viewed through human eyes.

It was the same with cameras and sensors.

Camouflage patterns differed greatly depending on who or what you were trying to deceive. When trying to avoid detection by satellites or drones, you had to take infrared, ultrasound, and microwaves into consideration.

But on the other hand, no matter how conspicuous it might appear to human eyes, mechanical security would completely overlook it if the right conditions were met. The designers had started using terms like "AI" and "machine learning" to improve their image, but the programs were still just programs. They could not do what they could not do. No matter how minor the trouble, the entire system would freeze.

"They'll be worried about eyes in the sky, so we should be able to see something different if we view things from the ground like this."

"I get that, but where exactly are we supposed to search?"

"The enemy will be using patrol drones too. I doubt they're dumb enough to directly send control signals out from their secret base, but it looks like they have a few launch areas set up a short distance away. Let's mark a few of those points on the map and use them to draw a big circle. I bet we'll find them at the center point. In other words, around here."

"Hold on. Hand me those binoculars. Look to 5 o'clock. There's a thin trail of smoke."

"Are they having a barbecue for dinner? They must be enjoying their outdoor lifestyle."

"That's not funny when we're talking about poachers. I hope they aren't eating mermaid meat or something."

In the distance, they could see the remains of a forest burned to the ground, but it was unclear what the story was there.

The poachers had already clashed with the 35th over the panda(?) baby, so they might be on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary close enough to notice something with binoculars. So even after detecting the oddity, Quenser and the others kept driving slowly along the road instead of slamming on the brakes.

“Let’s jump out.”

“This scares me more than some flashy firefight.”

While preparing for the worst, Quenser, Heivia, and the others secretly hopped out of their truck while any attention would be on the military caravan. They could only bring around 20 people with them.

“Ivory Garden must have drones in the air. Staying low is useless if they can see us from above. What do we do?”

“Let’s not copy the poachers. We’re a proper military force, so let’s do this the fun way.”

Just then, something like a thick wall approached them, swallowed them up, and blinded them all at once. It was not quite the same as a thick fog.

The wind had already been blowing in this direction, so...

“Bweh!? Cough, cough. What’s this, a sandstorm!?”

“This is part of our standard patrol and training process, remember? The Princess is running the Baby Magnum’s static electricity propulsion device from more than 20km away. We claim it’s maintenance and stress testing for the undercarriage to make it seem unrelated. Now, let’s use this nuisance of a sandstorm to sneak in.”

This was clearly abnormal, but Ivory Garden needed to hide. No matter how much of a stench and a racket their neighbors were causing, they could not file a formal complaint.

With the sunlight blocked, the area grew as dark as during an eclipse. Quenser’s group put on dust masks and goggles so they could move freely and then they continued the investigation.

“I hope we can do something about their electronic camouflage. If it fools mechanical eyes, it might affect Objects too.”

"Is it really that effective? No one knows what color to paint their Objects because there's no way to hide something so big, right?"

"But if it does mess with the Baby Magnum's aim, we'll be the one's blown away on accident."

"..."

"See what I mean? Let's make sure to destroy it all just to be safe."

Fortunately, they found the base itself pretty quickly.

After spotting the giant silhouette and hiding in a conifer forest, they contacted the Princess and had her lower the density of the sandstorm. They could see again and the sunlight grew a little brighter. Now it was more like evening than an eclipse.

And when they peered through their binoculars...

"Found it."

"What is that? An airplane graveyard?"

"Well, it ain't a strip club, I can tell you that."

A few large passenger planes were sitting around in various states of damage or disrepair: the head portion cut away, one of the main wings missing, etc. A puddle continued in a straight line for kilometers, so that may have been the remains of the unpaved runway where the planes had made their final landing. There were also small air cargo containers lying around. Those 2m aluminum dice likely functioned as tents. People stayed in the planes and animals stayed in the containers.

"Continental Line, Citizen Jet, and Sky Hotel. They're all from different airlines. Although it feels more like an illegal dismantling yard than a shared recycling plant."

"Hey, you aren't marking this on the map are you? Once the sandstorm gets thick again, you won't even be able to see the map in your hand!"

Overall, it appeared to be about the size of a school campus. It was impressive they had managed to escape satellite and drone detection for so long.

"What are those covering them from above? Tents???"

"Those would be the satellite countermeasure. I can't see it from here, but I bet they're covered with

a striped barcode-like pattern.”

A tent of a thick, artificial material that rivaled a circus tent in size was covering each of the passenger planes. The containers and other surface facilities were covered by long, narrow tents forming roofed walkways between the big tents.

Some canopied trucks and patrolling infantry were keeping guard.

The soldiers were armed with cheap submachineguns, but their stability was forcibly increased using large wooden stocks and grips as weights. Those accessories seemed to eliminate the light weight that was the entire point behind a submachinegun. The weapons appeared to be camouflaged with a special kind of tape instead of spray paint. They looked difficult to disassemble and maintain.

Their uniforms used an unfamiliar pattern. It was a lot like the static on an old TV. Had they painted it themselves? Heivia tried viewing it through his electronically-enhanced assault rifle and clicked his tongue. It must have been screwing with all of the assistance features.

“That’s it all right.”

“But what do we do about it? The Princess’s glasses might be the wrong prescription too. The cleanup would be a pain if she did shoot them, but it would be best if she could threaten them in a nice, safe holdup. So do we just have to send her the coordinates???”

“I’d be afraid we’re working from two different sets of coordinates or something. The only real option is to get closer and do something about those tents. That sounds like your specialty, Heivia. Can I pass this off to you?”

“I had a feeling you were going to dump the whole mess in my lap before long. Although I’m praying this doesn’t end up being your specialty. Let’s get going.”

Quenser watched as Heivia and the others attached suppressors to the front of their guns.

“These are cheap, so they’ll start letting the sound through before long. We can’t just go in guns blazing.”

“That’s better than chucking a bomb into their base and starting a commotion right away. Take care of this.”

They contacted the Princess and had her intensify the artificial sandstorm again. Quenser and Heivia used that as their chance to approach the temporary stockyard of the international poaching group called Ivory Garden.

Both sides could only see 5m away at best and sounds were hard to make out through the endless noise much like scratching sandpaper.

Once they reached the stockyard's perimeter, Quenser and Heivia crouched down. This wasteland had no trees or even bushes to hide behind, but the guard walking by nearby did not seem to notice them. Heivia considered killing the guard, but he decided to let the soldier go.

“(So how far into the base do I need to get you?)”

“(To the tents. There are a few points where the thick wires are anchored in the ground, right? I'll set a bomb on each of those and then blow them all up at once.)”

The wires were thicker than Quenser's thumb and they were anchored with a J-shaped peg thicker than his arm which was embedded in concrete. The tents meant to hide a 70m passenger plane had 8 such wires. With that kind of tension, even slight damage would cause them to snap all on their own.

Inside the raging sandstorm, Quenser gently patted a peg he had finished attaching the bomb to.

“A Spider? Is it called that because of the camouflage or because it's like a spider web?”

“Hm? Why's there a product name on it? You mean these aren't handmade by the poachers?”

A sound like an electric razor hummed by overhead.

“God, that's scary. Is it one of their drones?”

Heivia ducked down, but if it had noticed them, a siren would have sounded and they would have been surrounded. After waiting for the hunk of plastic and rare earths to fly off into the artificial sandstorm, the potatoes made their way to the next peg. The size was incredible, but the shape was not all that different from the tents used to keep the sun off at a cookout.

Quenser's group was trying to locate and retrieve the reactor, but they wanted full support from the Baby Magnum before they attempted that.

“There are three planes: Sky Hotel, Citizen Jet, and Continental Line. Each tent has 8 wires, so...”

“Are you kidding me? That's more than 20 in all.”

They heard the fierce barking of a dog. It seemed to be one of the military dogs raised in the air cargo containers that looked like aluminum dice. Heivia quickly aimed his suppressor-equipped

handgun that way, but Quenser stopped him with a hand. Corpses would leave evidence of an abnormality, even if it was an animal's.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

They waited for a bit and the dog kept barking inside the fenced-off container, but none of the guards came over to check.

"They probably think it's just worked up over the sandstorm."

"These are people who can ignore the screams of the animals they kill. Yet it might have saved their lives here if they had any love for their dog at all. You could say they brought it on themselves."

Of course, if they had not become poachers in the first place, they would not have a national military bearing down on them.

After that, they finished going around attaching clay-like bombs to the Citizen Jet and Sky Hotel pegs that were on the perimeter of the facility. For the rest, they needed to move deeper into the stockyard.

"Hey, this is scary. Do we really need to attach bombs to every last one? As long as we get rid of the tents, can't the Princess handle the rest?"

"What if that partial detonation doesn't work? Then we'll have to head back to get rid of the tent properly. Do you want to go grab the hornet's nest you knocked to the ground? Besides, we haven't gotten any of the Continental Line pegs."

Despite their argument, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes were relaxing. The pleasure of success could be a tempting demon. The fear of death was fading now that they had proven they could approach the enemy without notice. The human ability to grow accustomed to most anything had a way of creating openings.

Drip.

A wet sensation hit Quenser's cheek. In the time it took him to wipe off the drop, many more began to pour down.

“Rain?”

The back of his hand was stained. The rain had absorbed all of the dust the Princess was sending into the air.

Which meant...

“Oh, no! It’s bringing down our curtain!!”

Buckets of rain poured down. The tents covering the three large passenger planes and dice-like metal containers were gigantic, but they were tiny compared to the immensity of nature. The Princess was producing the dust from 20km away, so the sandstorm was knocked down by the rain before it ever arrived.

The thick curtain blocking the enemy’s view was visibly thinning. An unfamiliar silhouette wavered quite near Heivia. And that silhouette held a customized firearm created by attaching a large wood stock and other weights to a submachinegun to forcibly increase its stability.

“!?”

Heivia immediately fired two quiet shots with his suppressor-equipped handgun, but he was still nervous, so he pulled out a knife and stabbed the guard with it.

However, that was all he could manage.

There was no safety here.

Quenser somehow managed to tug on his awful friend’s arm and dove behind a nearby plastic trashcan.

It was clearing up.

Their vision was becoming hopelessly clear.

First, one of the drones that sounded like an electric razor spotted the corpse with its cameras and then a shrill alarm sounded from the radios attached to all the guards’ shoulders.

“This is a disaster!!”

The difference in numbers was approximately 20-to-300.

They could never win in a normal fight, but they had still had the tanks and armored vehicles they had let drive right by as a diversion. Not to mention the Object.

“We need to buy some time, Quenser. 10 minutes! That might not sound like much, but a submachinegun can fire 6000 shots in that time on full-auto. If we don’t work our asses off to survive, we’ll be headed home in body bags!!”

“Wait, Heivia! There’s a smarter way to do this! Come with me if you don’t want an emotional death scene!!”

“I’m sick of your riddles! Just tell me what your plan is!!”

Quenser started by using his radio to detonate all of the plastic explosives he had attached to the pegs. With a loud boom and a shockwave, Ivory Garden was thrown into chaos and a canopied truck near one snapped wire was torn in two.

One of the tents acting as a roof collapsed and covered up the passenger plane bearing the Sky Hotel logo.

Once he knew the enemy’s view was blocked, Quenser raised his voice.

“The drones take priority! Don’t let them see us from above! We can hide from the soldiers on the ground a lot more easily!!”

Heivia leaned out from behind cover and fired a quick spray of assault rifle bullets to bring down a drone flying by like a toy.

“That took down the tents, right? So mission accomplished!”

“It’s not enough! We have to go a bit further!!”

They heard thundering footsteps. No matter how careful you were, there was nothing you could do about mud and puddles. Heivia pulled the clear plastic sheet off a nearby container, threw it over his and Quenser’s head, and got down on the wet ground.

Four or five guards arrived after presumably seeing the final image from that drone. If they fired their submachineguns at this close range, not even a pocket watch with your beloved’s photo in your breast pocket could save your life.

Quenser’s eyes bugged out, but Heivia covered the student’s mouth.

A military boot stepped right next to their faces.

Staying still required immense patience.

“.....”

Once the guards had passed by and were showing their backs, Heivia quickly dispatched them all with a spray of rifle bullets.

Heivia glanced at the suppressor at the end of the barrel.

“Green and brown aren’t the only kinds of camouflage. When it’s pouring rain like this, people will assume a patch of something shiny on the ground is just a puddle.”

Translucent jellyfish were not necessarily invisible to other creatures. When the sun was shining into the sea, they would reflect that light to hide themselves.

Stealing some enemy uniforms would be one way to hide, but the uniforms would be less than convincing when full of holes and stained with blood.

And then Quenser noticed something.

He may have had the pouring rain to thank.

He clearly saw a thin red line of light slowly sliding along in front of his nose.

“A sniper!?”

Heivia grabbed shouting Quenser’s arm and dove into the area full of dice-like containers. There was a lot of cover, but dogs started barking wildly from the surrounding containers.

“This isn’t much of a hiding spot!!”

“Heivia, check the untouched Continental Line. The sniper is on the plane’s roof. Can you shoot the tire below it? Planes are generally supported at three points, so take out one of those and the plane will fall over!!”

Heivia fired a few shots with his assault rifle, realized that was not going to cut it, and rested a missile launcher on his shoulder. With a loud sound and a line of smoke, the explosive flew out and destroyed the metal leg instead of just the giant 12-in-1 tire. The Continental Line plane wobbled to

the side and then toppled over, breaking its right main wing under its own weight. It must have only been made of an aluminum alloy. The sniper on the roof must have lost their balance and fallen.

By the way, it seemed the plane was still usable on the inside.

Quenser's eyes widened when he saw the liquid joining the rainwater after leaking out from the cracks in the right main wing. And the leftover flames from the missile were still emitting some light here and there.

"Get down!!"

His warning was meaningless.

The jet fuel ignited and caused a large explosion. The sniper must have been fried nice and crispy where they had fallen to the ground. But they had everyone inside the plane for company.

"This game of hide-and-seek isn't all bad. If not for the sudden rain, we couldn't have seen the sniper laser from the side."

But the shockwave had unlatched a few of the nearby containers.

The trained Dobermans had been released.

"It's always something, isn't it!?"

They could not hope to defeat the dogs in a test of strength or speed, so they instead used the dogs' instincts against them. Heivia held his assault rifle out horizontally, let the military dog bite it like a toy bone, and then swung a large knife down at the thing's head.

"Ugh, now this is heartbreaking. I'm gonna be having nightmares about this."

"After all the humans you've killed?"

More importantly, they could not stay in one place. They were still outnumbered after all. They had to make sure they were not caught in the smoke, but the thick black smoke from the burning jet fuel was a decent replacement for the sandstorm. Fuel fires could not be put out by the rain so easily.

"When are our reinforcements getting here? The soldiers in the Citizen Jet and Sky Hotel are going to crawl out from under the tents before long!"

"Wah!!"

Driven by fear, Quenser grabbed a nearby burning stick and chucked it toward the Sky Hotel passenger plane. That was the only way he could think of to keep back the guard he saw lifting up the thick sheet to approach him and the others.

“Ah?”

But it burst into flames.

His aim was bad and the torch did not even come close to hitting the guard, but it did land on the edge of the electronic camouflage tent covering the passenger plane and that petroleum product began burning and visibly losing its shape like a melting slice of cheese.

So what was happening here?

The passenger plane was transformed into an oven with around 100 people trapped inside the turkey’s belly.

“Wah. Wah! Waaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

“Damn. Why don’t any of the war treaties ban this?”

There was no stopping the conflagration now that it had started. Quenser quaked at the nightmarish image before his eyes, but Heivia grabbed his arm and got him to hide behind the curtain of dark smoke.

Heivia sensed a presence and aimed his assault rifle over, but it was someone else in a Legitimacy Kingdom uniform who emerged from the smoke.

“Oh, it’s Myonri. Then where’d the enemy go!?”

“M-maybe we got them all?” suggested the girl.

There was little chance of that.

It was unclear how effective the smoke was, but then a bright fog light shined in from the side.

“Watch out!!”

They quickly rolled out of the way just in time for a canopied truck to burst through the black curtain.

And it was not alone.

More heavy truck tires passed by right next to Heivia's lowered head. Like the blade of a guillotine.

The potatoes just barely managed to avoid death, but the enemy was not focused on them. Instead of making a U-turn, they continued outside the camp.

"They ran away."

"What happened to the Object reactor? Did they take it away? If we don't know, this was all for nothing!!"

Several powerful booms followed. Legitimacy Kingdom tank shells pierced the belly of the Citizen Jet passenger plane and it burst from within as it too burned.

Now all three planes were in flames.

The battle was over.

"The reinforcements sure took their sweet time!"

Quenser and Heivia hopped onto an 8-wheeled armored vehicle that drove up, climbed up the side bumper that was like a birdcage meant to scatter a light rocket blast, and crawled onto the flat roof. A young woman had her upper body sticking out of the hatch and her boobs jiggled as she fired the heavy machinegun to mop up the remaining Ivory Garden poachers. Heivia lightly slapped the back of her head. But instead of being an abusive Island Nation husband who was always overturning the tea table, he was just trying to get her attention over the deafening gunfire.

He shouted into her ear once she noticed him and stopped firing.

"Enough of that! Leave it to the tanks! Get the faster vehicles to the south and chase after the fleeing trucks!!"

"Myonri, work with the others to mop up the enemy base. Finish off the remaining poachers and don't forget to gather the animals from the containers for protection!"

With the roar of a diesel engine, the 8-wheeled armored vehicle accelerated once more.

To be blunt, tanks and armored vehicles were not designed with acceleration in mind. They could reach speeds upwards of 100km/h, but they would fry their engines if they maintained those speeds for long. Their one advantage was that the Ivory Garden trucks were driving along the open

wasteland instead of asphalt. The 8-wheels and continuous tracks were there for that purpose.

After passing through the charred remains of a forest that had burned down for some reason or another, the enemy armored trucks made their way toward the empty wasteland. Even with 4-wheel drive, they lacked the horsepower to drive right over the thick tree trunks.

“Oh, looks like the tanks are coming with us.”

“Because some stupid officer posted on social media that tanks weren’t needed when you can stick a turret on top of an armored truck. That’s a sore spot for the tanks since they’ve always had to fight against crazy ideas like multiple turrets or an open top where the entire roof comes off. And actual results in battle are the best way to shake off those old nightmares.”

Four hundred meters ahead, around five canopied trucks were struggling with the hilly terrain after the rain loosened up the ground. They must have been in a rush because plastic bottles and snack wrappers were falling from the back of the trucks. That distance was a bit much for forcibly stabilized submachineguns fired from a shaking truck, but it was nothing for the Legitimacy Kingdom heavy machineguns which were designed for a range of 2000 meters.

“Blow them away already, baby.”

“This won’t blow up a reactor, will it?”

While they discussed that, a thick tank following along behind them was suddenly blasted up from directly below.

“Hey, what just happened!?”

“It didn’t look like something flew in and hit it.”

Meanwhile, an armored vehicle alongside theirs was flipped over by an explosion. It nearly rolled into them, but their 8-wheeled vehicle took quick evasive action. Quenser grabbed onto the hips of the curvy young woman whose upper body was sticking out from the hatch. Heivia reached out to do the same, but he got a heel to the chin.

They had not heard anything being fired or flying through the air.

Nor did it seem to be an invisible laser beam or microwave attack.

Quenser finally figured out what was going on.

He pressed the top of his head against the busty young woman's navel instead of her softer bits and shouted down through the gap between her stomach and the hatch's edge.

"Don't just follow after them! Spread out to the sides!!"

"Dammit, Quenser! Quit taking the center spot and hogging her to yourself!!"

"The thought of sharing with you creeps me out. Anyway, those trucks are dropping garbage while making it look like they're having trouble, right? There are plate-shaped anti-tank mines mixed in!! That previous truck blew up as soon as it drove on top of an empty pizza box!!"

To the very end, these people were all about disguise and camouflage. After sharing that information via radio, the Legitimacy Kingdom tanks and armored vehicles split into two formations on either side to approach the canopied trucks while avoiding the booby traps stuffed in lunchboxes or sandwiched between tied stacks of pinup magazines.

Quenser held the young woman tight as he looked up at her past her ample bust.

"Get back at them for what they did! Fire!!"

"No, don't fire, you idiot! Ahh! We have them surrounded, but the bullets are flying past the target and hitting our allies on the other side! If you've tamed her, then make sure you don't screw up your instructions for her!!"

"Oh, shut up! Those are tanks on the other side, right? This machinegun can't punch through their thick armor, so it's okay."

But this was no time to breathe a sigh of relief at that news.

A shrill alarm sounded from the equipment inside the vehicle and passed through the young woman's body to reach them outside the hatch.

Heivia's eyes widened.

"An IR lock!?"

"Eh? The poachers have another weapon?"

"Don't be dumb! It's from our tanks!!"

With a low roar that shook in their gut, an armor-piercing shell flew their way. Maybe because of the

intense rain, it veered off course a bit and hit the ground nearby, but the shockwave was enough for the armored vehicle to lift up on half its wheels.

“They’re firing a tank gun when this thing’s only got thin armor!? Are those idiots seriously trying to get us killed!?”

“Okay, just take them out before they take us out! Hey, machinegun girl, use the direct-view visor! Take careful aim and you can damage the tank!!”

No one was even paying any attention to the canopied trucks as they were filled with holes and blown away. The low-IQ potatoes were too busy firing on each other. Since each tank shell cost more than 10,000 euros, they might as well have been slapping each other with stacks of cash. And it was all paid for with the people’s taxes. It was truly an unforgivable battle.

“Fire, fire! Keep firing until they stop!!”

“Toyser can go to hell! I lent him 200 euros and here he is shooting at us! Let’s just kill the bastard!!”

“Did you forget you ‘lent him’ that to partially pay back the 1000 euros he lent you?”

“There’s no way I can pay back the rest, so let’s just kill him!!”

Then they were hit by divine punishment.

The Baby Magnum finally arrived and fired a shot straight into the center of the world’s most pointless infighting.

The armored vehicle finally rolled over and the people on the roof were nearly crushed by the 8-wheeled body. The young woman at the heavy machinegun was in the most danger. If she hadn’t kicked Quenser off of her and ducked down into the round manhole-like hatch, she would have found herself on the receiving end of a game of human whack-a-mole.

“Take this seriously, everyone” warned the Princess.

“You just caused more damage than anyone, dammit!”

At any rate, not one of Ivory Garden’s canopied trucks remained intact after taking machinegun fire and shells from both sides and then having an Object railgun shell crash right down on top of them. It looked like the only option was to gather up the parts scattered over a very wide area.

However...

“So what happened to the JLevelMHD reactor?”

“...”

They checked over the radio and discovered that Myonri and the others had not found anything while searching the poachers' burning hideout and stockyard.

Quenser clicked his tongue.

“Damn, does that mean they'd already sent it away!?”

Part 5

They had advanced to the next phase.

Night had long since fallen.

Quenser, Heivia, and the others returned to the maintenance base zone, but no one came out to greet them.

Everyone was otherwise occupied.

Specifically, Major Frolaytia Capistrano was using her laptop to argue with a carefree female operator of about college age.

“What!? You can't release the information!? Now of all times!? Are you insane, operator!? The reactor has already been taken to the tourist area in the south Transylvania District. If they install that in their hollow model, there will be no avoiding disaster!! Just put me through to the colonel!!”

“Again, I must apologize, Major Capistrano. Nothing you say can give me the authority to do that. When passing strategic intelligence to another world power, Article 55 Paragraph 8 requires the establishment of a special committee made up of both military and civilian experts under the management of a royal so they can vote and approve of the release based on the principle of civilian control.”

“Time is of the essence and we sweep this stuff under the rug all the time, so why are you so picky now!? Oh, I get it. It's the end of the year, so I bet you have an auditor standing right behind you! But this isn't just about the Information Alliance! A Legitimacy Kingdom safe country sits adjacent to the Transylvania District! How many tens of thousands of innocent people do you think are going to die!?”

“Please stop this, Major Capistrano! If you pressure me any further, it will only serve to harm my health! And I can’t charge my stomach medicine, hot milk, and homemade Frolaytia body pillow cover as business expenses!!”

“Wait, hold on, don’t hang up! And what the hell was the last item on that list!?”

“Ordering the same brand of tobacco as my waifu Tia wasn’t easy, but getting the scent just right is so important. And let’s not forget this oh-so-wonderful boobs mousepad!!”

The static of a closed connection rang mercilessly from the laptop.

There seemed to be a fair amount of chaos in the chain of command during this emergency. The level of tension was entirely different. There seemed to be a discrepancy in the information they were working off of.

The superbly huggable busty silver-haired officer was extremely irritated at being brushed off by the carefree operator (♀) who was in her third year of service.

She was not a fan of the clever and efficient working style praised by those office workers who thought it made them interesting to eat nothing but curved bananas and sticky Greek yogurt.

But when the two idiots peeked inside the room to see if it was safe, they felt the same sense of despair as noticing a grenade on the doorknob only after it was too late.

After all, this was that busty sadist. Their experience told them this mood of hers never ended well for them.

“(What do you think?)”

“(If we’re lucky, she’ll just step on us with her boots. She might have us get on all fours to use as chairs, but I’m actually okay with that.)”

“(What, that’s all? Why was I even worried then? Both of those sound more like rewards to me.)”

“(I’d say borderline acceptable is that thing where she grabs your legs and steps on your you-know-what with her heel. That one’s tricky because the slightest shift in her weight can send you to heaven or hell.)”

But when Frolaytia lit her long, narrow kiseru, she spoke up in sudden realization.

“Oops, I forget my ashtray. Now, what to do with these hot ashes?”

“Whoa, whoa! That’s taking it a step too far!!!!!!”

“Whoa, whoa! That’s taking it a step too far!!!!!!”

Her love was too much for their bodies to bear, so Quenser and Heivia had to let their commander vent her anger verbally instead.

“The Transylvania District is ready to blow and the fuse has already been lit, but they’re still treating it like an Information Alliance safe country. We could end this without any victims if we act now, but they refuse to send a single warning because of the silly politics between world powers.”

“So what’s the situation?”

“Things go kablooeey the instant the southern tourist area declares independence from the Transylvania District. At this rate, there is no stopping the two safe countries from using Objects against each other. The south used their wealth to acquire a reactor, so I’m sure they’ll use that gem to fill their empty jewelry box.”

“Which means?”

“The Transylvania District sent an Object to the proposed new border because they naively assumed the wealthy south did not have an Object. If we could only inform them of the threat, they could at least avoid an unexpected battle there.”

“This is an emergency, so why not send out a pirate broadcast or post an online video disguised as a leak?”

“Heivia, I appreciate the courage, but it would never be appreciated during your lifetime. Only so many people have the necessary information, so even if you disguised the source, the Black Uniforms would still track you down. Schools around here might erect statues in your honor a hundred years after your death, but is that good enough for you?”

“...”

The two idiots responded with halfhearted smiles.

They were on the battlefield for the extremely pragmatic reason of earning money and social status, so they were not going to get themselves killed just because it was “the right thing to do”.

However.

However, they were also not mature enough to just let these things happen. After all, this would be a disaster even greater than the Northern European Restricted Zone created by historical taboo of a city with an Object reactor buried beneath it. And this was not something that had already happened. They were being asked to sit around when they knew it was about to happen. That was too heavy a cross to bear. They did not want to be stood against a wall and shot for violating military regulations, but nor could they want to struggle to sleep for the next 80 or 90 years of their lives.

Philanthropy could go to hell for all they cared.

This was for themselves. The two potatoes and their busty silver-haired commander worked together to think.

And finally...

"I guess we have to go with our last resort."

Frolaytia did not sound at all pleased with the idea.

The two idiots leaned forward.

"Eh? Eh? You have something up your sleeve, Frolaytia!?"

"I knew it. The higher ups always have a fish story or scapegoat ready to go when things get dicey. She's settling down on her nice childbearing hips and has no intention of turning tail and hauling ass. That means she's still got some hope in her gut there."

Frolaytia kicked Heivia's shin below the table.

"I really don't want to do this. It's like an AED or fire extinguisher. It's a relief to have on hand, but it doesn't fully solve the problem in front of you. Hey, Quenser, why do you think professional soldiers are willing to take in battlefield students like you? There has to be something in it for us, right?"

"You mean other than raising future engineers to increase the overall quality of the Legitimacy Kingdom military in the long run?"

"Ha ha ha. Do you really think those decrepit old councilors care about anything after their own deaths? The seven-day forecast puts them to shame when it comes to long term planning."

"..."

He was not sure what to say to that.

The busty silver-haired commander pointed her kiseru toward his nose.

“Soldiers like us are bound by regulations, but battlefield students like you exist outside that system. It’s a gray area, but there are times when you can’t be punished for acting outside of the military’s rules. It’s like playing cards or a revolution of the wealthy. It might be tricky to get the conditions just right, but by keeping the possibility on hand, we can sometimes effectively sidestep all the pain-in-the-ass politics between military units and political factions. So most large units will accept one or two students as a trump card you would prefer not to use.”

“Hold on a second. I don’t like where this is going.”

“Mister, it’s time you snuck across the national border.”

This was the problem with people who took their job seriously.

They did not know when to stop. Just when you thought they might be cutting loose for once, they dropped a major bombshell. Why did those idiots not understand how manners or wabi-sabi worked?

“Go to the southern tourist area of the Transylvania District, an Information Alliance safe country, and stop them from placing their new gem in their empty jewelry box. If a professional military unit snuck across the border for an assassination mission in a demilitarized area, it could easily start a world war, but you are the exception, Quenser. We will consult the legal department to work out the formalities. Yes, I know. We can say you were fed up with being overworked on a daily basis, so you ran off like a coward. You crossed the border without meaning to and happened across the party for the declaration of independence, but as an Object-obsessed freak, the discovery of the hidden Object put you in a geeky fervor and you ‘accidentally’ damaged some important component while poking around. But the south can’t demand you pay for the damage to the Object since it doesn’t officially exist. Well, we can work out the details later, but that sounds good as a general idea.”

“...”

She rattled it all off a little too smoothly.

He was almost certain she had worked this all out well before opening her mouth. It was like going on a date with someone while they hid a very important ring behind their back all the while.

Frolaytia had already thought up this other plan (even as she snapped at the carefree operator earlier), so now she winked while the kiseru wiggled in the corner of her mouth and she rested her elbow on the table.

“Of course, it won’t just be you, so don’t worry. Quenser, visit the intelligence division and ‘steal’ a

radio set.”

## Part 6

“Ah, ah, ahh. Test, test. Is the audio good? Is the camera working? The lights really make my skin shine, so do them right. You’re going to count down from 10? Director, give me my cue. Let’s get this done together! Okay, this is Monica, the idol reporter who can both dance and kill, beginning her live broadcast!!”

Modern idols did not have it easy. The blonde girl flapped her vampire cape with both hands to provide glimpses of her bat bikini chest and her hips as she motivated the staff with her charm before directing that charm at the audience. Quenser kept his head low and snuck around while viewing her from a distance. She likely had an insulating gel on her skin, but it was still impressive to be dressed so skimpily in November.

It was the following day.

The sun was at its peak overhead.

The morning’s milky white fog had entirely cleared away.

It was the perfect weather for an event.

In less than half a day, the south would declare its independence and two Objects would clash within a safe country.

He was at a thick oak door in a fortress wall filling the gap between a steep slope and some old stone buildings.

But this was not the city entrance.

The south was something of a fortress city with plenty of orange-roofed old castles and monasteries, so there were ancient walls and gates all over. But you could still get public wi-fi while drinking coffee at Farbucks, so the world was a strange place.

(I still can’t believe I crossed the border like that. This is the Information Alliance. If something happens, the Legitimacy Kingdom is bound to throw me under the bus and claim they knew nothing about this.)

“Quenser, we can see you with the satellite. You’re a tourist now, so act suspicious and their security camera programs will trigger an alert. Walking like normal is the best camouflage.”

“Frolaytia, what am I supposed to do with this flimsy fake ID?”

“Don’t worry. It was made using one of the real devices. After all, we found it in Ivory Garden’s stockyard.”

“Am I just doomed, is that it!?”

There was no tension in the voice in his ear. That was what it was like watching from afar.

Then he heard a dull clunk.

The heavy bar had been removed from the castle gate three times his height and it was slowly opening.

“Hurry on in, Quenser,” said Heivia who was actually there with him. “If you’re not in there, we lose our justification to be here.”

“Are you sure I should do this?”

Quenser made a home visit despite the unresolved questions rolling around in his gut. Heivia quickly recovered the synthetic rope and stainless steel piton he had used to scale the wall.

“We are acting on the pretext of retrieving the idiot who fled our base,” explained Frolaytia in his earphone. “A runaway soldier shames a military unit, so we would never want to ask for help searching for one. And it becomes an international incident if they have crossed to another world power’s territory. We could not possibly make a request then.”

“That doesn’t make it okay to send a fully-armed assassination squad across the border to walk around the back alleys.”

“But it’s good enough.” She did not seem to care at all. “Object or not, the south will face a great many trials once they declare independence. For example, diplomacy. The Transylvania District’s connections will be off limits to them. But what if they gained a supporter early on? It wouldn’t hurt them to learn of some unrelated country’s mistake or scandal, right?”

“I didn’t realize I was getting involved in such a dirty job.”

“Those dirty jobs are what maintain peace. There are times when the powerful would rather do nothing but have to take action to keep up appearances because they cannot control the public video sites and pirate broadcasts that Heivia mentioned in the conference room. But this is different.”

“Is it about deception and camouflage again?”

“Exactly. If they have any sense at all, they will overlook this. They will let you and Heivia’s team go free. Pressure from exchange rates and tariffs and embargoes on food and fuel are all ways of using money to crush a new country with little productive power. The south will be familiar with those cases, so they will want to preserve any secret connections they can set up with the Legitimacy Kingdom.”

This was especially cruel because, even if they turned a blind eye to Quenser and Heivia, those potatoes did not have the authority the south would want. In fact, they were here to take away the south’s greatest trump card. Quenser could not help but feel bad for tricking them like that.

“Don’t relax based on what she says, Quenser,” said his awful friend. “Everything she said assumes the south will act rationally. They’re about to declare independence remember? They’re at their highest moment. If they’re high on adrenaline while shouting nonsense about autonomy and sovereignty, they might just follow their emotions and gang up on us without considering the consequences. So be on your guard. We know from experience just how bad a day you have when you rest your hopes on that busty commander’s predictions.”

“So there’s no such thing as safety around here, huh?”

“This is enemy territory. Now get moving, turkey.”

With Heivia, Myonri, and the others pushing him forward, Quenser ran through the old fortress streets with stone paving and distinctive orange roofs while surrounded by curving fortress walls and wild mountain slopes.

The old city was built along the base and slope of the mountain, so its stone walls and sloping roads formed something like a tiered field. But instead of crops, spires and chimneys stuck up and the people were all gathered inside stone and brick apartments. More and more walls had been built over time like the rings of a tree, so the inside was somewhat labyrinthine.

It felt like the solid city was clinging to the ground amidst the dark mountains forests surrounding it. It did not look like a kind place for moving companies and online stores.

“We’re just talking about one province, right? Do we have any guesses where the reactor is?”

“That southern city is almost entirely registered as a world heritage site. What you see on the mountain slope is just the tip of the iceberg. The underground is riddled with wine cellars, catacombs, and secret torture chambers.”

“Ugh.”

“Post-independence, 80% of their income will be reliant on tourism. They wouldn’t want to destroy their old fortress area to hide the Object.”

That explained why the roads were still paved with bumpy stone despite the trouble that caused for cars. Quenser pulled a free pamphlet from a stand that functioned as a visitor’s center.

“Hm, looks like the higher up on the mountain you are, the higher up in the hierarchy you are. Sounds inconvenient. I guess it’s just like high-rise apartments. Or how they say idiots like to climb as high as possible.”

“The very top will be covered in clouds depending on the weather, so I imagine it’s more about gravity than the view. Both rainwater and sewage flow down through the pipes.”

“Can you see anything with the satellite?”

“At the very least, there is no sign of a 50m machine.”

“Then is it underground? But it must not be directly below this old fortress.”

A crumbling wall was decorated with a banner saying “History Changes Tonight at Midnight!” Mobile homes were lined up on the side of the road, so all the hotels remodeled from old castles and monasteries must have been full. A digital countdown was running on an electronic sign decorated with Halloween-like bat characters. To Quenser, it looked like a giant time bomb. To go with the vampire motif, the small child passing by with her mother was holding a bat-shaped balloon. Quenser walked past them while marking the pamphlet’s map with a red pen.

“Frolaytia, have they bought a ton of bricks in the past few years? They could have claimed it was for a pizza oven, a kiln, or whatever else, but I mean bricks that use alumina.”

“A young wife with too much time on her hands gambled on a large quantity of futures. She lost a ton of money, but she didn’t complain much on social media. Her posts don’t sound like someone who ran across an unexpected accident of that magnitude. Could this be it?”

“Those are used in blast furnaces too. Bricks with alumina for heat resistance have a higher melting point than iron, so they’re perfect for lining the buckets to carry molten metal.”

Quenser always grew loquacious when it came to topics like this. Frolaytia’s fish story may not have been as implausible as it might seem. Even if the human race threw out their weapons and advocated love and peace, this boy would still be chasing after Objects with a sparkle in his eyes.

“Frolaytia, given your obsession with the Island Nation, I’m sure you’ve heard of their giant Buddha statues. Those bronze statues can be several dozen meters tall, but they weren’t built up with nuts and bolts from the bottom up. They started by making a giant mold out of earth and bricks and then

poured molten metal inside.”

“Are you saying the same could be done with an Object?”

“It isn’t that simple since the onion armor requires a bunch of thin layers of armor, but they can use the general concept. The people here have a long history of building underground rooms. They could have built a framework and scaffolding like they were digging a mine and then used the entire mountain as a giant womb. And of course, they would make sure to select a silhouette-obscuring wedding dress to hide the pregnancy necessitating the marriage.”

When red-banded sand wasps captured a caterpillar, they would take it back to their nest alive and lay eggs in its body. Once the larvae hatched, they would grow while gradually consuming the host’s soft body from within. This Object was similar. Instead of creating a single giant space all at once, they had dug into the mountain bit by bit and then gradually carried in and assembled the metal armor and mechanical parts until they had an entire colossal weapon underground. It had been waiting all this time to break through the mountain surface and emerge, almost like it had consumed the mountain from within to grow its metal body.

It sucked the mountain dry.

Like a blood sucker.

“...”

Quenser placed a finger on the pamphlet map and then looked to the mountain slope a short distance away.

“Frolaytia, check Moldoveanu Peak. The info on the pamphlet doesn’t match what I’m seeing. There are a few extra monasteries.”

“Based on the database of a local university, there was a risk of acid rain eroding the limestone slope, so all of the valuable buildings were moved and evacuated to safe locations.”

“And were those the world heritage sites you mentioned, or everything else that could be wrapped up in packing material?”

“...”

“It’s camouflage. Unless this is an elaborate trap, that mountain must be the womb. It’s like using leafy branches to hide a tank in the grass.”

“I can’t believe it. Even if they missed out on being world heritage sites, that monastery has a history

four centuries long.”

“When you’re at risk from an aerial bombing, you’ll break off a thousand-year-old cedar’s branches to hide your tank. Your life is on the line after all.”

The completed Object could not be removed without breaking through the frame of dirt and sand. It was like a piggy bank in that sense. The southern tourist area was not joking around.

“What should I do?” asked Quenser.

“You don’t need to head inside. Just wander around near the monastery in question. Heivia and the others can search inside on the pretext of pursuing you. They can ‘happen across’ anything they discover.”

With a sound much like an electric razor, a drone arrived overhead. The delivery box it gave him contained extra equipment, including glasses for blocking the facial recognition of security cameras. Then he walked against the flow of tourists to make his way across the stone pavement, through the fortress walls, and up the mountain slope.

On the way, he passed by some high school girls who wore submachineguns over their shoulders. The wood stocks had a very Eastern European feel and they folded up like a wire hanger. The girls wore what must have been the uniform to their school: a vampirish bat-patterned black cape worn over a blazer. Their legs were bare even in November. It looked like he might be able to blend in here better than somewhere full of camouflage uniforms. But as courageous as the girls might look, their weapons showed no sign of local production. They all had different caliber guns from different companies and different sling belts.

“Do they have a draft system or universal conscription here?” asked Quenser.

“The suggested new constitution they’ve released online says their military will be entirely voluntary,” answered Frolaytia. “Although that volunteer service might come with certain advantages.”

“If they make it so you can’t enter higher education, get a job, or get married without serving, then is it really any different from conscription?”

There was also a nervous-looking glasses girl holding the leashes of a bunch of Dobermans, but it was unclear if she was taking them for a walk or if they were dragging her around. Was she from the school’s animal care committee? Quenser was honestly more afraid of them than the drones made of lightweight materials. Their drool-covered teeth were quite intimidating.

Quenser kept his pace unchanged and continued his casual stroll.

“On-site team, I’ve arrived at the suspicious part of the slope. I’m going to ignore the monastery that was clearly added only recently. I just walked past it, but there is a truck parked unnaturally alongside a cliff here. I bet it’s covering the manhole used as an entrance, but I’m not a legendary ninja. I doubt I could move the truck and get inside without anyone noticing.”

“Leave it to us. We just needed to know where to check, so you go search elsewhere. Pretend you’re lost and sneak right into their bedroom.”

In order to help out Heivia’s group, Quenser dropped an SD card with wireless LAN support and kicked it underneath the truck. It would be unnatural for them to search there for no reason, so they would want some kind of hint or excuse to use as justification.

“Agh!”

A high school girl on the slope groaned, but Quenser did not want to stand out by turning his head to look. Someone from Heivia’s team had likely snuck up behind her and eliminated the obstacle before heading underground through a vent or whatever they had found. It was not often in life that you got a chance to sneak up behind and knock out a miniskirt high school girl instead of some filthy old guy, so the potatoes may have been more motivated than usual. Quenser walked away with an oblivious look on his face and the free pamphlet in hand.

He knew more or less where to go.

He stopped to think at about 50m from the first point. After climbing some stone steps to reach a higher level of the slope, he took out some of the “evidence” he had gotten from the drone - an electronic dictionary, a translation device, and other electronics with just enough personal information to make them a security risk - and dropped them in the ditches and manholes. Heivia’s team had already made their way into the secret area to begin their sabotage, but it was best to give them as many openings as possible.

Then Frolaytia contacted him.

“Quenser, wait just a second.”

“Am I leaving too much evidence? Sorry, I wasn’t sure how much was best.”

“Not that. We’ve lost contact with Heivia’s team.”

At first, Quenser was unsure what she meant. But this did not seem to be a metaphor or a joke.

“We have no idea if they’re even still alive. This is entirely unexpected and the satellites and drones can’t tell what’s happening inside there. Be on your guard, Quenser. You are alone out there!”

“The enemy took them out? But we’re talking about people who could only just barely manage to gather the parts of an Object using their excessive wealth. The soldiers I saw were normal high school girls. They were wearing vampire cape cosplay! I’m not about to claim we’re the world’s best special forces or anything, but I seriously doubt we would lose to them!!”

“At the moment, we can’t rule anything out. Maybe this is only technical trouble and maybe the south hired a PMC to strengthen their forces. But we need to prepare for the worst, so take a weapon from the drone, Quenser. You need to ensure your own safety first! Don’t die on us before reinforcements can arrive!!”

Part 7

The situation had changed.

With his anti-facial-recognition glasses on, Quenser used the body of a car parked on the curb and the show window of a musical instrument store to get a look behind him without turning around. He desperately tried to gather information as naturally as he could as a way to keep the anxiety from crushing him. He was in enemy territory. This was the Information Alliance. Running around screaming wasn’t going to help.

He passed by a drunk with a balloon tied around his head like a headband. Since this was a vampire tourist location, the food carts all sold mystery foods like garlic-free peperoncino or garlic rice sans garlic.

Everything looked like a threat at the moment.

He met up with the drone in a deserted area.

The package it delivered also contained a knife and handgun, but Quenser only took the Hand Axe plastic explosive and electric fuses he was familiar with. If he tried using a gun or blade, he could easily shoot or stab himself in the thigh if he tripped.

It was already evening.

The sun set early in November. The loneliness crept up on him along with the chill.

Nothing he did would rid him of the same sense of despair felt by a small child left behind at a tourist location. Any further attempt would be like a person with OCD endlessly washing their hands.

Heivia and the others skilled in normal combat had vanished all at once. Even if a spirit of justice awoke within Quenser, entering that secret area alone was not an option. Any rash actions would only add another name to the list of victims.

But if he turned tail and fled, the countdown would end at midnight and tens of thousands of civilians, if not more, would be transformed into lumps of flesh and blood.

“Still no response from Heivia, Myonri, or the others,” reported Frolaytia.

“...”

So he could only stay where he was.

He gathered the same useless courage as someone standing tall in an open field when a sniper was lurking somewhere.

“This is Monica, the idol reporter who can both dance and kill! I’ll be bringing you the latest news from the southern tourist area in a vampire costume made from a black cape and bat bikini!! Just six hours to go until they declare independence. If you think of it like a nice round pizza, this cuts it neatly in half. Make sure to tune into cable channel 2929 for this historic moment!”

Six hours to go.

After coming this far, it seemed unlikely the south would let go of their reactor and not place that gem in their otherwise empty jewelry box. They would want to use their Object to deter the Transylvania District and to impress the reporters from around the world gathered at the ceremony. The disappearance of Heivia’s team had not changed things. It best to assume the 3D puzzle was already complete.

The Legitimacy Kingdom would only get one more shot at stopping this master plan.

And with Heivia’s team defeated, it was unlikely a rushed attempt would accomplish anything.

“Quenser.”

“Yes?”

“We’re using the satellite to check the exact coordinates where Heivia’s team disappeared, but multiple sources would be best. Tell us the location based on your observations. That will help us make the final decision.”

“Is there anything left we can do?”

“What we most need to avoid is a direct clash between the Objects of the Transylvania District and the southern tourist area and a chain reaction spreading the flames of war to other safe countries.

We need to assume that will lead to millions upon millions of civilian deaths.”

“Um, meaning?”

“If it comes to it, we will have the Princess fire.”

That hit him in the chest.

Hearing it was like having a stake driven into his heart.

“The south’s Object is in the mountain, right?” continued Frolaytia. “We can use the location where Heivia’s team disappeared to judge where the chrysalis is located. As long as the two Objects don’t directly fight, we can avoid that worst-case scenario. If we make a preemptive strike, the south’s Object can’t dodge since it’s hidden in the mountain.”

“Wait just a second. Wait!”

Pointing out that Heivia and Myonri were in there would not stop Frolaytia. Saying you would never abandon your fellow soldiers was lovely, but it made no sense to sit back and let millions of civilians be engulfed in flames because you were waiting for some subordinates who might very well be dead already. He knew that. He understood it.

But was it really over?

Could they only act on the assumption that their missing comrades were dead?

He needed something.

He needed some way of arguing back.

“Oh, I know. Officially, no one knows there’s an Object in the mountain. So no matter what our goal is, the Princess would be using an Object main cannon to attack an enemy safe country, right!? That would start a war!”

“But that would be one of the clean wars contained to the battlefield countries. It would do a lot less damage than the chaos that would burn through so many safe countries if we let this continue as is.”

“The Princess would be executed for treason!!”

“Don’t worry, Quenser. Everything we say is being recorded, so if the bored masses demand a dead body, it would be me, the rogue commander, on the gallows. I’ll make sure of it.”

“That’s not what I meant! We need to sit here and think up a way of saving everyone: you, the Princess, and Heivia’s missing team!!”

What would they do?

What could they do!?

With the anti-facial-recognition glasses on, Quenser came to a stop, bit his thumbnail, and racked his brains. He did not have it in him to act all clever at the moment. He had to be standing out from the crowd to a comical degree.

He gave up on immediately coming up with an answer. He could go with the process of elimination. He started ruling out every option that was entirely out of the question in order to approach the right answer, much like chipping away the stone to find the sculpture within.

Doing nothing and letting the Transylvania District and the southern tourist area clash was not an option.

That clash might be avoidable if they could get word of the threat to the Transylvania District, but they had no way of doing so.

Even if he disguised it as a leak of military secrets through a pirate broadcast or video site, the Black Uniforms would see through it and he would be charged with treason.

Now that contact with Heivia, Myonri, and the rest had been lost, there was almost no chance of finding and destroying the reactor before it was installed in the Object. They had to assume the south’s Object was complete.

They could end this by locating the Object before it left the mountain and having the Princess fire a main cannon at the slope.

But then the Princess or Frolaytia would be criticized by the ignorant international society and ultimately shot for treason.

“...”

He honestly found himself ruling out every option that came to mind. But that did not mean he was stuck. Instead, it meant he had chipped away so much of the stone that he had nearly completed the sculpture of the butt-naked young man.

Yes.

That was right.

Quenser placed his hand on the window of a privately run electronics store which had TVs of varying sizes on display and he stared at his own face with the anti-facial-recognition glasses on.

“Reinforced glass, huh? Even if it doesn’t use a film, it could use a wire mesh.”

“Quenser?”

“A swing of my fist could shatter the window, but if I slowly press my palm against it, the glass can support my weight without breaking. A hierarchy based on gravity. That Object is a red-banded sand wasp larva. It fattened up to 200,000 tons while gradually consuming the mountain. Camouflage. To avoid detection by satellite or drone. But since it’s in the mountain, it can’t move like it might want to.”

Would it work?

There was hope.

But he needed more concrete proof. He wanted as accurate a map of the southern tourist area as he could get. He would also need to calculate out the necessary amount of materials, the placement, and the weight distribution.

He was lucky he still had a connection to Frolaytia. If had been truly alone in enemy territory, he really would have been without options.

“Frolaytia, can you connect me to the electronic simulation division? And tell material management to get ready for some work. Yes, the ones who construct the mobile maintenance base zone!!”

Part 8

Happy Tepes!! It is now 10 PM!

I’m here in the mountains of the southern tourist area where excitement is building in advance of their declaration of independence. The area is known for its fog, but that apparently really only happens in the early morning. Look how clear the fireworks are in the sky!! Black cape flap flap!!

Fireworks decorated the night sky with red, green, and other colored lights that reflected brightly off the walls of the old castles and monasteries on the mountain slope.

The time limit was only 2 hours away.

The world would not end the instant that time limit ran out, but the die would already have been cast. There would be no turning back at that point. No one could guarantee the south's success. In fact, they might be entirely wrong and fail miserably. But despite those anxieties, they could only charge full speed ahead at this point.

(The 'insertion' was successful, but it stinks a lot worse than I expected.)

A faint smell like burning rubber and the chill of November had arrived at the mountain fortress city. Quenser could see his breath as he felt impatient. Fortunately, the children with their parents were carrying vampire balloons and the drunks had a long, skinny balloon wrapped around their heads like a headband. It would help if the newly arrived Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes would notice that and sabotage a balloon seller to give another reason for the smell.

He was on the mountain slope.

A small hand grabbed Quenser's while he weaved through the crowd of people in a circular plaza surrounded by fortress walls. It was one of the new potatoes. Without looking in that direction, he glanced down at the note he had been given.

(Still no word from Heivia's team.)

Quenser, who was still wearing the anti-facial-recognition glasses, was honestly worried about what had happened to those idiots. Was it simple concern for his friends? That was definitely part of it, but it was not all that pure. This was enemy territory and he could easily be next. He wanted to believe nothing bad had happened to them.

Colorful fireworks burst overhead.

He could feel the tremor of stadium-like cheers. They reached him from ahead and behind like waves and they really did shake the mountain slope and the city's fortress walls. The large live-viewing monitor set up in the plaza had changed channels to show a variety show with a battlefield idol reporter. It was being broadcast from some old castle or monastery and it showed a stone balcony carrying a speaking podium and an old man.

"Frolaytia, the ceremony has begun."

"We can see it on the online video. And I have some bad news. The satellite caught plenty of maintenance soldiers leaving from a disguised entrance on that mountain slope. Did you call the Object a red-banded sand wasp larva? Well, all of the tunnels should cave in once it leaves, so we should assume they are evacuating before that happens."

"They're already preparing to act? But their declaration of independence isn't for another 2 hours."

“They might be jumping the gun because they’re so eager to get going. Damn that southern old man. He’s nothing but toxic masculinity in a suit. I bet he wanted to give his speech while showing off the Object that symbolizes their power.”

“So he’s an exhibitionist with delusions of virility? We need to expedite our schedule before he opens his coat and pulls out his tiny you-know-what.”

“Yes. It looks like they might clash with the Transylvanian Object before midnight. Quenser, how are things on your end?”

“The insertion is complete, but it will take time to stabilize. We only have one chance at this, so failure isn’t an option. We should wait an hour to give it plenty of time.”

“Then buy the necessary time. Do whatever it takes. Formal ceremonies are accident prone, so find some way of drawing out the principal’s boring speech to fit our timetable!”

(Are you kidding me with this!?)

Quenser cut in front of a security camera since he wore the anti-facial-recognition glasses, joined the new Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes blending into the crowd, and made his way to the site of the speech. After smiling and speaking to some cheerful men unsteadily holding mugs of a local beer colored oddly red (likely due to being mixed with blood orange or tomato juice), he easily learned the speech was being held at a luxury hotel made from an old monastery. The men with balloons around their heads like headbands did not seem to find his question suspicious.

One of the new potatoes, the busty young woman who had operated the heavy machinegun in the armored vehicle, tilted her head.

“That would be the Weinrichius Monastery.”

“Isn’t that the vampire known as the Shoemaker of Breslau who the city council took official measures against long ago? Why would they name a monastery after him?”

“Probably because this region is known for an even more famous count. I mean, everyone’s dressed in costumes when it isn’t even Halloween and the souvenir shops are all selling bats and coffins and things like that.”

They had no time to spare. While hurrying to the monastery in question, Quenser and the others held a quick strategy meeting.

“If the hotel was made by remodeling an old castle or monastery, it can’t have many rooms. Every room will essentially be a suite,” said the young woman. “And with the ceremony occurring there, I imagine the entire building will be rented out to keep normal people away.”

“So you think it won’t be easy to get in? You should work at gathering some more information before jumping to conclusions.”

“?”

“It’s being televised. Your strictly-guarded ceremony is meaningless as a press conference if you don’t let any cameras in. In the crowd shots earlier, I even saw a Legitimacy Kingdom press team. Let’s sneak up behind them and swipe their IDs.”

“Understood. We can handle the dirty work.”

The busty young woman who had dealt with the armored vehicle before was apparently the carnivorous type.

They worked out the frequency the target press team was using to relay their signal, used some pinpoint targeted jamming, and snuck up behind the staff members that came running tearfully out to their broadcast equipment to see what the problem was. The one knocked out by the busty young woman had a smile on his face since she had pressed against his back to strangle him.

“Huh? That discount battlefield idol reporter is here. A vampire costume? A bat bikini on a November night? Even with insulating gel, that’s impressive. ...Now I wish I’d gotten her autograph.”

“Monica’s here? Why does that childhood friend have to be here? She’ll crush my balls if she notices me.”

Quenser was nervous, but they used plastic tape and zip ties to tie the TV crew’s hands behind their backs and checked through their possessions to borrow their film equipment and professional makeup. You never knew what would come in handy down the line. And those possessions of course included the ID cards they had originally wanted.

“Say cheese,” said Quenser.

“Phones sure are handy,” commented the young woman.

“C’mon, don’t cover your eyes with one hand give a peace sign with the other. This is supposed to be an ID photo!”

They received a portable card printer from a drone’s delivery box. All they had to do was cut out the photo with a knife and paste in their own photo and data. They also borrowed the staff jackets just to be sure. They disassembled their guns and stuck them in the duralumin camera cases. But in the cushioning on the sides instead of the normal storage space.

With their cards hanging from their necks, the new potatoes walked right on into the luxury hotel made from Weinrichius Monastery.

They were immediately surrounded by the gentle air presumably created by a fireplace.

“They aren’t even doing an X-ray scan of our bags. How careless.”

“They assume our backgrounds were checked when we entered the country. And even in this age of digital cameras, a lot of professionals still use strange kinds of film.”

Quenser had expected a monastery to be all patchwork robes and pea soup seasoned only with salt, but he instead found red carpet, giant chandeliers, mysterious oil paintings in pure gold frames, marble statues of naked men and women in an embrace, and beautiful maids pushing around wagons carrying bottles of vintage wine and various foods cooked in a garlic-free al ajillo style. (Do not point out that this is nothing more than soaking the food in olive oil. It’s part of their culture!) It was apparently an age of excess even in the monasteries.

It was about 20 past 10 at night. The old man was so excited at having everyone’s eyes on him he was about ready to blow his load early, so who could say when his precious Object would break out through the mountainside.

“Let’s interrupt that old man who might as well be a pervert out on the streets in a trench coat. This is all over once he gets carried away and flashes his Object.”

“Fine, but we can’t just go in guns blazing.”

“We only have to get his tiny you-know-what soft, so avoiding a serious incident would be best. Let’s cause some kind of trouble or accident while keeping things peaceful.”

“Such as?”

“Prepare a prepaid phone with no private information on it.”

Quenser stopped in front of a map of the building on a hallway wall. His anti-facial-recognition glasses did not have prescription lenses, so he could read it just fine. The old man was giving his speech from a balcony on the third floor, but the boy pointed to the floor below that.

“All of the press will have their phones on silent during such an important speech. But the balcony sticks outside and there are no walls, so sounds from the other floors will reach him there. Let’s set off a ringtone at max volume to ruin his speech. And if we play a bunch of words you can’t say on TV, he’s done for. The broadcast will be cut off. He’ll have to postpone his greeting until they find the out-of-season cicada.”

"I'm praying you will learn to grow up someday," said the young woman. "Okay, let's download as filthy and dirty a song as we can find. Something you could never play in the family living room."

"Yeah, the more obscene the better. Like Lady Sprinkler."

"Don't you dare speak ill of LS in my presence!! Those lyrics are perfectly calculated out based on the principles of Satanism in a complex and high-level approach to finding the universal beauty in the destructive and the ugly!!"

You found fans of the weirdest things sometimes. She had also reacted positively to Monica's vampire costume, so she may have been the type who enjoyed wearing black roses, silver crosses, and plenty of frills and lace. She just about sent Quenser to heaven as she strangled him with both hands, but he was actually kind of into it.

That was when they received a radio signal. He focused on his earphone, assuming it was from Frolaytia, but it was not.

It was a very staticky signal, but he did manage to hear a male voice over the sandstorm.

"...need help...captur...tell you our location...rescue team..."

He felt like someone had directly squeezed his heart.

But when the busty young woman started to respond, Quenser quickly stopped her.

"Wait, wait! Send out a signal and you'll give away our position. They would definitely question a signal coming from within the monastery hotel and everything would fall apart!"

"Those are our comrades! Heivia was asking for help! The radio signal had the appropriate identifier."

"Heivia's team was lost and it seems likely they were either captured or killed."

"And that's why we have to help them ASAP!"

"No matter what happened, it's almost guaranteed they had their equipment taken!"

Quenser and the young woman glared at each other.

They had been placed in a very dangerous situation without warning.

“That transmission didn’t mention any names, units, or ranks! It tried to sound legit, but there wasn’t really anything there! They were afraid any details would give them away!”

Of course, neither of them had any solid proof that would hold up in court.

This was enemy territory.

They could not gather any real evidence, so they could only base their arguments on speculation.

“If that was really them asking for help, you’re telling us to ignore our allies’ screams.”

“And if it was an enemy act, we’ll be turning our backs on the many safe countries we could have saved from the flames of war. Our names will go down in history as utter scum.”

“...”

“If that happens, millions of civilians will be crushed and blown to bits by stray Object shots. Those shells will kill babies and the elderly alike, even if they take shelter in schools or hospitals. Is that what you want?”

“~ ~ ~!!”

“We have no time whether we head back to save Heivia’s team or continue on. That spirit of justice is fine and all, but you’re in no position to just get angry and shove all responsibility for the choice onto me. You can’t act like a prophet after it’s all over and claim you knew what was going to happen. So tell me clearly right here and now: which will it be!?”

“Okay, fine!”

The young woman shouted as she cut off the screams coming from her earphone. They did not throw everything out despite a lack of evidence, shirtlessly grab a Gatling gun, and go on an emotionally driven rescue mission. That was what proved they were a proper military and not a rural gang of delinquents.

“You’re going to lose friends like this,” she said.

“You really think giving into emotion and responding would be the considerate thing to do? Don’t be ridiculous. Once the enemy learns this works, they’ll escalate things just for fun. Do you really want to see a live feed of a torture show?”

“...”

“Did you think I hadn’t thought this through? We only have one shot at this. People’s lives are on the line, so we can’t impulsively roll the dice early.”

They climbed the stairs to the second floor. They wanted to be directly below the third-floor balcony where the old man was giving his speech. But just as they turned a corner to reach their target room, they quickly ducked back around the corner.

The young woman suddenly grew all cute and flustered.

“Why are the bodyguards ditching their jobs to have some, uh, quality time together? Now we can’t get to the room. Do we have to wait until they’re done making out!?”

“We have the TV crew’s equipment, right? Someone get a camera ready.”

“?”

“No one wants their adult ‘quality time’ revealed to the world. Especially when they’re supposed to be working.”

They showed no mercy.

The pen was mightier than the sword, so they drove the bodyguards away without firing a bullet. Once that was complete, Quenser and the others walked down the hallway once more.

“We can find the key in this floor’s linen room. There should be a master key for cleaning.”

They were finally inside.

Quenser cut across the empty suite to reach the balcony sticking out from the window. The chill of the November night immediately hit him. The balcony was large enough for a decent sized tea party, but he was focused on the next floor up.

“Yes, so we decided to gauge the will and passion of the south’s chosen people via a public referendum. To build a better future for ourselves, we must declare our freedom and free ourselves from the bonds of the Transylvania District’s methods.”

Cameras flashed intermittently and the old man’s microphone-amplified voice reached him. Was this a form of camouflage as well? Was he shifting blame away from himself and onto the referendum’s result?

But from this position, the old man could hear Quenser if he spoke loudly. After confirming that

proximity, he placed the prepaid smartphone in a gap of a planter filled with small flowers. It was a plausible location for a dropped phone, but it would also go unnoticed at first glance.

“It’s in place. Time to make some noise.”

“Hold on.”

The busty young woman was checking on the hallway through the cracked-open door.

“There’s a maid diligent enough to be cleaning rooms this late at night. We might be in trouble if she catches us leaving a supposedly vacant room.”

“The phone is already playing the vulgar song. Someone will be by to look for it soon.”

“LS is one of the greatest cultural products of the modern era, you pleb!! This is only the 2nd floor, so couldn’t we jump down from the balcony?”

“No. They’d be sure to see us from above!”

Quenser held a hand to the side of his anti-facial-recognition glasses and hurried across the large room to reach the door. He and the young woman huddled together to check out in the hallway and he found she was right.

This was not a fake one squirting ketchup on some omurice. A maid with a standard long-skirt uniform was moving up and down the hallway. She seemed to be suspicious of something, so she may have found evidence of them breaking into the linen room.

“She’s trying to buy time. I bet she’s waiting for security.”

“This really isn’t good then.”

The young woman’s eyes grew dangerously sharp.

She was clearly wondering if they could eliminate just the one maid. But Quenser preferred kindness when it came to kittens in the rain, little match girls, and courageous maids, so he thought for a bit. He really did not want to see the fierce woman-on-woman battles that were fought every day in break rooms and locker rooms.

“So we just have to find a way to leave without worrying that maid, right?”

“?”

Quenser walked across the large room and opened the giant closet. This was a luxury hotel with a classic motif, but he found more than just silk gowns there.

After all, this luxury hotel had been remodeled from an old monastery. When it came to simple equipment, it could not hope to match an apartment made from modern materials. And the hotel existed partially for cultural preservation purposes because empty buildings fell into disrepair quickly. And why would people bother visiting a hotel deep in the mountains? Delicious food? To relax and forget all about the passage of time? No. The people who came here were paying all that money to enjoy noble pastimes. Quenser was from the Legitimacy Kingdom, so he knew exactly the kind of scummy desires were bred by those class differences.

He knew exactly what he would find there.

“I really shouldn’t be doing this, but it looks like the day has come to break the seal and bring her back.”

“Her?”

“I’ve got no choice. And if we’re doing this, we need to do it right. It’s time to get all dressed up with the ultimate camouflage.”

Part 9

Quenser and the others could not turn invisible. Nor was there a secret rotating door in the wall or a blind spot in the hallway they could hide in.

And yet.

The diligent maid overlooked the new Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes. They were in view, but she did not see them. Even though she would have found it highly suspicious if anyone but hotel staff left a room that was supposed to be vacant.

So what had happened?

The answer was as follows:

They changed into the maid uniforms supplied in the closet.

That of course included the busty young woman.

But it also included Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage (♂).

“Good evening.”

He greeted the maid by grabbing his skirt in both hands and giving a polite curtsy. No one questioned glasses maid Quenser.

Yes.

It would look unnatural for anyone but a cleaning maid to be in a vacant room, so they only had to become internal staff. Instead of sneaking around, it was best to walk out like they belonged there.

The real maid did not doubt him for a second, so it was the young woman who whispered in disbelief.

“(Are you serious? Why do you look so at home in a maid uniform!?)”

“(Heh. I am Quensette, the legendary star of my safe country’s local cultural festival. Although I’d sealed this away ever since Monica tearfully kicked my ass for stealing the spotlight from her when she was just getting started.)”

Adding a thick layer of makeup to the surface would not help. Creating a proper foundation underneath mattered more, so it was lucky they had acquired some professional makeup equipment after attacking Monica’s group earlier.

This was not about the insulating gel that let the idol wear a black cape and a bat bikini during a November night.

Quenser did not have the subcutaneous fat of a girl, so the collagen gel helped prepare the skin which would act as a foundation for the makeup.

(But this means Monica is still using that same gel. She’s upgrading to a more professional version, but it’s the same brand. Is she still using the makeup technique I taught her way back when?)

...No one could ever be allowed to know that an idol like Monica had learned how to put on makeup from a boy!!

Only beginners used the chest, hips, and thighs to show off their femininity.

The nape was much more destructive.

Quenser had always been androgynous enough to look like a boy when wearing pants and a girl when wearing a skirt, but everyone was forced to consider the wonders of the human body when

they saw that “transformation”.

They heard some hurried footsteps. The men in black were likely the old man’s bodyguards. They walked right past Quensette and the rest of the culprits and barged into the room where the phone was hidden.

“It worked.”

“It’s been about 10 minutes since the speech was interrupted, right? We need to buy another 30 minutes, but won’t they find the phone almost immediately? I know you hid it in a planter, but it’s making noise. You can’t hide it like that.”

“Knowing this works is enough. Next, we’ll go one floor above the 3rd floor balcony. And to fix the flaw you mentioned, I want something they can’t remove so easily. Yes, a rotten stench would work nicely. But something utterly ridiculous instead of something that might be a toxic gas. We can walk around the back of the hotel in this maid camouflage, so let’s put something together using what we can find in the staff rooms and storage.”

“Do you get bolder when you crossdress? Like someone whose personality changes when they get behind the wheel?”

He ignored her nonsense and got down to business.

“A hotel should have a powerful industrial acid detergent. We use the undiluted stuff as a base, add raw eggs and mayo, and maybe include some onion and garlic...well, if they have it. Add some alcohol even if it’s only disinfectant. Crab and shrimp would be nice if you can find it, but the real secret ingredient can be either vinegar or Italian dressing.”

“You sound like you’re planning a meal, but some of the ingredients don’t fit. What are you trying to make?”

“A powerful vomit smell.”

“...”

“Stomach acid contains hydrochloric acid. Pure gastric juices don’t actually stink very much; it’s the food being dissolved that really makes an odor.”

The young woman fell silent with her mouth forming a small triangle.

That was the proper reaction for a woman...no, for a human. There was something wrong with anyone who could discuss it with a straight face.

Let us discuss the school Quenser attended.

The professors there had made historic discoveries directly linked to Object development and they all fell under the category of “something wrong with them” because they would laugh their butts off while doing this kind of thing. If you forgot your homework, it was not unusual to be punished with an iron claw to the face using an extremely intimidating glove. Quenser remembered when the usually indomitable Monica had ended up in tears after receiving one of those. It was a bitter memory because he had been punished in the same way for trying to cover for her.

“Although it’s a lot faster to run into the bathroom and shove a finger down your throat than to try to precisely reproduce it with chemicals in the lab, so you could say this is the world’s most pointless field of research. But when building it up from scratch, you can adjust the concentration to your liking, so you can create a much more pungent odor than the real thing. Now, old man, how long can you preserve the serious atmosphere you’ve created?”

Part 10

Of course.

The old man on the podium knew some unseen person had infiltrated the hotel to ruin his time in the spotlight.

A biting chill ruled the November night.

So he could see the fireworks, he spoke from a balcony large enough to hold a tea party.

“For my next question, urp, I imagine the rivers flowing in from outside your borders - cough! Oh, excuse me - will be your primary water source after independence, but...ugh!!”

The press were forced into a constant battle with themselves. Smells were invisible, but their footage would not be fit for broadcast if they vomited. They had spent an absurd amount of money for their press passes, so they could not ruin it all by replacing their live broadcast with a “please wait a moment” graphic.

It was truly a trial.

The press’s pride was being tested.

This is a rather vulgar topic, but while shit and piss are the usual examples used for odors, vomit was actually more “contagious”. Few people would vomit the instant they set foot in a public bathroom, but it was easy to imagine other people following suit after someone used a barf bag on a closed bus or plane. Different smells affected the vomiting center of the brain differently.

With dangerous chloride gas or propane gas, they would probably have put on serious expressions, called off the press conference, and quickly evacuated.

But this was different.

Could they really call off a historic event because something smelled like puke? This was the south's independence, the first page of their new history, and their first national event, so how could they cancel it over something like that? It would forever remain in the public record!!

“(Where is that coming from? They are serving alcohol here. Someone didn't drink too much, did they?)”

“(This is an old hotel. Maybe a pipe in the wall burst.)”

There was no denying this was out of the ordinary.

But no one was willing to say anything about it. They were afraid of that wise old adage: whoever smelt it, dealt it.

“Calm down. Please calm down everyone.”

The old man's low, deep voice was not enough to settle them down. It was looking more and more like anyone who tried to take the situation seriously would be seen as a fool.

His schedule was being delayed.

The more this was drawn out, the further he would fall behind. And the more delays, the more the damage would grow.

The old man knew what to do at times like this.

Namely...

(I must get things moving to reset their impression of me before this gets out of hand.)

“There are no more barriers standing in our way. Any problems we face have been transformed into mere hurdles which will only strengthen us as we overcome them. We have gained the power to grow. Just as a snowball grows as it rolls down the hill, there will be no stopping us now that we have picked up speed! Allow me to introduce you to the power we will use to take an equal position in international society. This is the Shield Machine 002!!”

## Part 11

The maids stared in shock at the TV app on the smartphone they held sideways.

“The son of a bitch just blurted it all out there real quick!!”

“I don’t think he’s even stopping to breathe.”

“It’s 10:50. We have to find a way to stall for 10 more minutes!”

“But how can we interrupt now? We already used the 4th and 2nd floors located directly above and below the 3rd floor balcony!”

According to the intelligence division, the Object had a scorpion motif. It weakened the enemy with the two coilgun main cannons on either side, approached once the enemy had lost mobility, and then rotated 180 degrees. The circular shield machine on the end of the tail on its back would tear through the onion armor to finish them off. It was equipped with the bare minimum of anti-air lasers and such, but it was mostly just a hunk of steel. Quenser wanted a chance to see it to help learn about Object design, but he was not going to sacrifice the world for that chance.

Was there any gimmick he could use to interfere with the large room and balcony where the speech and press conference were being held?

“This declaration of independence is meant to state their intentions to the world. It’s meaningless without any cameras.”

“Then are you going to target the TV crews? But how!?”

In his anti-facial-recognition glasses, Quenser thought of all the vertical pipes he could think of: the water pipes, the sprinklers, the air ducts, the fiber optic cables, the power cables, and the chimneys. But...

“No, that won’t do it. We would be cornering ourselves in a dead end.”

“Quenser?”

“Since we’ve used up the 2nd and 4th floors, there’s only one option left: the 3rd floor!”

“They’ll notice if we go there now! Cameras from all around the world are focused there!”

“Then what about the next room over? I need a few of you to collect a few drones from the windows.

Can you do that for me!?”

They would have been too conspicuous dressed as classic maids and carrying lightweight drones on their arms like hawks, so they stuffed them in translucent laundry bags and carried them around like that.

“Are you going to send some drones down to mess with the old man on the balcony?”

“Flying off with his toupee while the cameras roll would be pretty funny, but we don’t have time to mess around. Just come with me.”

The master key from the linen room apparently worked on every floor, so they had no trouble entering the room adjacent to the press conference.

“Frolaytia, check the list of press in attendance. Do any of them use a pacemaker or breathing device!?”

“They’re all healthy. Why do you ask?”

“You’ll see.”

Quenser the Maid (whose anti-facial-recognition glasses were perhaps the least interesting part of his outfit) entered the room so none of the hotel workers could see him, placed the drones on the floor, disassembled them with a flathead screwdriver, and bound some of the internal parts together like honeycombs. Altogether, it was about the size of a tray.

The busty young woman tilted her head.

“The collision-avoidance microwave radars?”

“The event is ruined if the press can’t broadcast it to the world. We don’t have to pass through the walls or ceiling ourselves. And a centuries-old monastery won’t use rebar. It isn’t as flashy as an EMP, but it should be enough for the exposed electronics of civilian devices.”

He pressed the honeycomb device against the wall with both hands and flipped the switch with his thumb.

“After all, microwaves are used in anti-electronic EM bombs.”

The actual attack produced no light or sound detectible to their eyes or ears.

So the thunderous explosion of sparks they heard beyond the wall would have come from the press's cameras, digital recorders, and communication devices after the microwaves hit them.

"Did that do it!?"

"I can't tell," said the young woman. "The TV broadcast, online video, and official account have all gone silent!!"

"Then it worked. If none of them are getting an exclusive scoop here, then they were all wiped out. Either way, it's 11 at night. We bought enough time!"

A moment later, they felt a rumbling.

Not a single lightbulb survived in the adjacent room or the balcony. With all the communication devices out, the old man and his aides could not get their instructions to the Object on a different mountain.

But the go sign had been given beforehand.

Their Pilot Elite would be unsure what to do, but they would normally decide their orders stood until they heard otherwise. So they were starting to move despite their doubts.

The Object had grown fat while devouring the inside of the mountain like a red-banded sand wasp larva and it was preparing to break out. Even if that meant destroying a 400-year-old monastery and dumping dirt down on the city as if building the foundation of their new country.

The busty young woman grew pale.

"This is bad."

"No."

The new Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes, the old man who kept running into trouble, and the Pilot Elite, who was being pressed to decide whether or not to act, all felt fear and anxiety about the unpredictable future.

There was one exception.

Only Quenser Barbotage had a fearless smile on his face.

"It's past 11. That means checkmate."

There was definitely a muffled rumbling.

But that was all. The mountainside did not crumble, the city was not buried, and the 50m weapon did not appear.

Yes.

“It would be one thing if the Object had a running start, but right now the mountainside acts more like a straightjacket. And if it tries to blow some holes in that using its coilgun main cannons and laser beam secondary cannons, it should just blow itself up since the barrels are all plugged up.”

He had bought the time needed.

He had wanted at least an hour to be sure.

That was the entire reason he and the others had been risking their lives moving back and forth through the monastery hotel.

This was the crux of the issue.

“With normal dirt, it could probably force its way through using its reactor and propulsion device. That’s why I needed an extra trick. With the ditches, storm drains, manholes, and so on, there’s a network of pipes running across the entire slope, so I poured in the filler material used when creating the maintenance base. That created something like the wire mesh used to reinforce windows.”

He only had to reinforce the mountainside.

Then the Object could not break out. Its greatest weapon was the shield machine on its back, but not even that excavation device could use its full power while buried alive. And even if it could, he doubted it could bore a hole wide enough for the entire Object to pass through. And since it did not officially exist, it would vanish into the darkness if it never showed itself. If its public debut failed, it would never clash with the Transylvanian Object.

The south’s path to independence was gone.

“Now for the finishing touch.”

“Eh? Isn’t the Object trapped in the mountain?”

“There’s still an important job left.”

He no longer needed to rely on the anti-facial-recognition glasses.

Quenser the Maid removed the unfamiliar glasses, threw open the large door, and walked into the chaotic press conference without worrying about camouflage or his footsteps.

The doors to the balcony were wide open, so the winter chill reached him.

He walked to the back of the dark room and shined a phone's LED lights on the large balcony.

The 100 members of the press?

He did not care about them at all. It did not matter how many there were when none of them had anything to record him with. They could witness the truth of the world here, but they could not leave with any objective proof.

"Hi, old man! I don't know your name and I don't care to find out. A legendary maid is here to say what must be said, so make sure your senile old brain is paying attention. A mistake here would destroy what history you do have here."

The bodyguards belatedly aimed their handguns Quenser's way, but he only scoffed and continued without putting his hands up.

"Are you sure you want to try that? Powerful EM waves do more than mess with electronics. They can also cause malfunctions in sensitive fuses and detonators. Do you want to see one of your precious bodyguards get a hand blown off by their own gun? Or a bullet could fly off course and blow out your brains. This hotel is made of solid stone, so are you sure you can calculate all the ricochets?"

"..."

"Was it a satellite weapon? Or a drone? Maybe a bomber? Did it come from above at all? Hell, it's possible this was the work of geomagnetism or volcanic activity."

It was okay for this to be a bluff.

It was already over. The old man and his bodyguards had no idea how much this EM attack could do. They were trapped in the darkness with no information, so they would grow paranoid all on their own. The greatest camouflage was not a pattern of colors or light; it was the activity of the human brain itself.

"I have one demand."

The southern tourist area, the global press, and the Legitimacy Kingdom maid potatoes, who had shown up a little late, were all taken aback as Quenser faced a definite goal.

Yes, he had needed to raise his own status to the point that he could make a demand.

“We will be taking back our kittens that wandered into your secret base, so we would like them returned immediately. If you say you can’t, then you will regret that decision until the day you die.”

The old man must have realized the many members of the press were of no use right now.

This had clearly become a negotiation between just two people.

“What if I told you they were already dead?”

Quenser casually tossed a plastic explosive toward one of the bodyguards. It did not have an electric fuse, but it was enough for the tough-looking man in black to panic and fall onto his ass.

“The next one will have a fuse, so let’s cut the crap and actually negotiate. If you try anything, I just have to blow you up and try again with your #2.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Do you think your life has infinite value or something? To me, you’re nothing but one possible contact point. If you aren’t working, I’ll swap you out for another.” Quenser showed no mercy. “Also, I’ll be telling the Transylvania District that the south secretly built an Object to slaughter them and their people, but ultimately failed. But I’ll make sure to mention that your foolish desire for mass murder remains. I doubt they’ll show any mercy after hearing that. They’ll make me seem downright friendly. Now, do you really think you can survive that without an Object?”

“...”

“Think carefully and either nod or shake your head. If you make the right choice, this legendary maid will tell the Transylvania District a very different story. We are from the Legitimacy Kingdom, but we don’t want to see the unilateral slaughter of civilians in an Information Alliance safe country. If that is what they try to do, then we will have a humanitarian reason to view the Transylvania District as a battlefield country and we will destroy their Object and all of their major military facilities. So which will it be?”

“What makes you think I have to choose?”

“Is that how you see it? You can try to act tough if you like, but the Transylvania District will act at midnight no matter what happens here. Let’s hope you can come up with some kind of miracle plan

before then. Now, if you want our help, you need to release all of the kittens you captured. If even one is missing, I'll wrap a bomb around your neck and move on to your #2. So which will it be: yes or no?"

Part 12

And so he had a tearful reunion with his awful friend once they had both returned to the mobile base zone.

Quenser yawned while back in his usual military uniform.

"So where were you while we did all the work? It seems unlikely they had the help of some mysterious foreign mercenary unit that took you out in a flash."

"They blew up the tunnel and buried us alive. It was like a mineshaft, so we were too deep in the mountain for our transmissions to get out."

That was what had happened.

It had seemed unlikely the southern tourist area had any proper army when they had cosplay schoolgirls out on patrol, so when Heivia's team of potatoes had suddenly been lost without a single scream or SOS signal, there had really only been one option: a surprise attack that cut off their communications.

In the end, that had been another form of camouflage for the south. They had wanted to keep out any unseen intruders by hinting at the presence of some highly-trained assassin squad. Although the phony call for help with the proper ID signal suggested they might have a competent hacker.

Yes.

That was supposed to be the whole story. But was it?

"There's one thing I don't get."

"Yeah."

If the south had really been complete amateurs in military matters, how had they managed to build an entire Object?

And how had they acquired a Pilot Elite who required a high-level and complex training program? Elites could not be mass-produced. They were a unique element that had to be created alongside the Object built exclusively for them.

“Someone supplied them with what they needed. Someone who was targeting them for their immense wealth.”

Someone had provided them weapons at a high price.

The assault rifles and landmines were one thing, but this included a colossal Object and a Pilot Elite.

Whoever that was would likely be the potatoes' next enemy.

“A weapons dealer.”

Between the Lines 1

See, what did I tell you?

It didn't work.

It's true this is the golden age of Objects. You can't do business while ignoring that fact. However. A 50m and 200,000-ton mass isn't going to go unnoticed. There are too many watchful eyes. And our clients don't want to stand out. Because they don't want international society to gang up on them. The supply and the demand are both off base here. There's no point in even criticizing the marketing. The entire business model is a failure.

It costs 5 billion dollars to build a single Object and it takes years to reach completion, so if it's discovered midway and international society puts a stop to it, our precious clients will be obliterated before they can pay us. You get that, don't you? It's too risky!!

That's why I've always said that way won't work. And just because it's the age of Objects doesn't mean we have to build a whole damn Object.

We aren't a world power with tons of backers. But that's also why we're free to do things they can't.

We shouldn't let our situation restrict us.

Motivation is crucial and thinking outside the box is the key to success. It's all about innovation, creativity, and...what other word was I looking for?

Well, the exact words don't matter.

Now, let's enjoy war!

I can start putting together the Parasite Plan now, right?

<http://tl.rulate.ru/book/5253/775207>