

Chapter 1: Santa Claus in an Icy Hell >> Arctic Passage Rescue Operation

Part 1

One of the Legitimacy Kingdom's most well-known safe countries was the South Britain District.

The wintry Thames snaked through the central city of London, transport helicopters flew across that river, and 8-wheeled armored vehicles cautiously and slowly drove along the roads.

This was an unusual level of alert for a safe country, but the couples on the sidewalks only laughed together and occasionally aimed their phone cameras at the soldiers.

"Are we seriously on a mission to shoot down Santa?"

"Our busy commander must be so overworked she's finally lost her marbles."

While large snowflakes fell on the old city that night, Quenser and Heivia spoke with visible breaths after stepping out of one of the 8-wheeled armored vehicles that were equipped with 120mm guns.

"Why in the world are we using maneuver combat vehicles? The roads are way too small for these."

"They want to do some PR with them after spending so much tax money on them. It's all about how things will look on TV. And the stuff on the top looks really cool. It's like a tank."

Heivia was trying to complain, but that gadget nerd was not cooperating.

"They have a propeller on the back, right? The vehicle itself is airtight, so they can use the air inside to float along in the water. You think they plan to cross the half-frozen Thames with them?"

"To put it as nicely as I can manage, what possible reason could they have to do that?"

"Wow, Heivia. You're how old and you still think the military has a good reason for anything it does? It's nothing more than 'the other guys have these, so we need them too'. Humanity has been wasting everyone's tax money for more than 2000 years based on that logic."

They were terribly jealous of the couples in puffy sweaters and coats. When they were stuck on a night mission so cold their breaths stabbed whitely out in front of them, nothing killed their motivation quite like seeing those men and woman huddling together and sharing some steaming fries or roast chicken.

"Let's hurry up and shoot down that Santa SOB so we can get out of here."

“What a joke. This is really just a 2-hour escape artist special, isn’t it?”

Whether or not Santa Claus existed was irrelevant.

They only had to “create” their own Santa.

Just like a meteorological weapon gave a 100% chance of a white Christmas regardless of where the cold wave or cold front was.

Basically, they just needed some official news reports saying they had shot down Santa Claus and arrested him in the public square. With the live TV broadcasts and global internet streaming, they hoped to have as many witnesses as possible so Santa’s existence was accepted as public information.

No matter how silly it sounded, official records had a certain power.

For example, shoelaces coming untied was an ordinary phenomenon that could be explained with the laws of physics and did not require an occult explanation, but it was shocking to discover how long it actually took to prove it.

Heivia walked alongside the line of armored vehicles and trucks while armed with his usual assault rifle and a multipurpose shoulder-fired missile.

Their job was simple. First, a neatly aligned array of drones would fly by in the night sky above the city. Their lights would shine like a row of car taillights to give the appearance of reindeer and a sleigh and then the soldiers in the city would fire surface-to-air missiles at a specific point in the sky. Then they only had to capture the scorched Santa Claus waiting for them at the “crash site” set up in a park.

The bored mass media would jump at anything that would give them numbers.

And if they did not have to pay the production costs, all the better.

So if the TV cameras captured the instant of the arrest, the reporters would have gotten the exact scoop the military wanted. Muscular soldiers were not going to be combing the Scandinavian wilderness with bug-catching nets in search of Santa Claus, but this year’s Christmas would be full of smiles regardless.

Technology had come a long way.

Mysterious lights zigzagging through the night sky were easily create with drones on sale for the Christmas price of only 99.99 euros. That meant you could create UFOs or Santa’s sleigh. Unless

someone had gone to the trouble of setting up a telescope on this snowy night with clouds covering the sky, no one would be able to tell what they really were at a glance.

However, there was a problem.

“Drones aren’t as convenient as they let on. They crash pretty easily due to poor maintenance or an unexpected gust of wind and I’ve been hearing more and more news stories about them losing control due to jamming signals or IR. You can blame the online stores for that one. People can bring down those unmanned toys to get as many retail items as they like and the people who ordered the items can make up for the loss with insurance, so it’s win-win. Of course people are going to start developing interference tech.”

“Isn’t that why this job was left with us in the military instead of the police or volunteers?” whispered back Quenser while participating in what looked like part of an amusement park parade. “When you’re planning a surprise party, there’s always some asshole who will try to ruin it and laugh in your face, so we’re supposed to be on the lookout for anyone like that and suppress them as we go.”

The boy held a military mobile device that was different from a commercial smartphone or tablet.

“This is E1,” said someone over the device. “The sergeant’s group up ahead has entered the Thames.”

“So those damn armored vehicles have already gotten started, huh?”

“Despite carrying more than 20kg of equipment, they shouted at the top of their lungs before jumping into the frigid water,” they continued. “Are we supposed to follow those idiots in? What are our orders?”

“Wait, it wasn’t those amphibious vehicles!?! How cold is the water right now!?! That’ll legit kill you!!”

“I bet they wanted to show off because there was a group of cheerleaders nearby,” said Heivia.

There were a few different ways to intentionally jam or bring down a drone, but the aforementioned assholes were not espers and could not do it with the power of their minds. EM and IR signals might be invisible to the human eye, but not so to machinery. And once that signal was located, it could be killed.

“This is Monica, the battlefield idol reporter who can both sing and kill. Word is that the Legitimacy Kingdom military is about to begin an operation to shoot down Santa Claus, so several areas here in London have been blocked off to traffic.”

The TV stations would jump at anything that would bring in money and numbers, so they were facing the cameras and giving a serious report on this farce. In the studio, the self-proclaimed “experts” were having a heated debate over whether or not Santa was real, so the live broadcast kept switching between them and the local reporter.

“They’re all a bunch of actors,” groaned Heivia in annoyance.

“Of course they are. That’s how show business works. Also, that’s my childhood friend Monica. I want to stay as far away from her as I can manage, so let’s get to our position already.”

Quenser and the others were not just marching through London. They were in the process of deploying troops to different points around the city. Simply put, it was a lot like boarding a bus that circled the city and getting off at their designated stops.

“Look, Heivia, they’re selling commemorative gold Christmas coins.”

“I feel bad for the part-timers who have to stand on the street corner selling all of them by the end of the day. In a few days, they’ll be selling New Year coins instead.”

There were a lot of people who liked that kind of thing in the Legitimacy Kingdom. Although that would mostly be royals and nobles who dreamed of having their own face or full body engraved in gold.

Quenser and Heivia left the turret-equipped armored vehicles near Piccadilly Circus, a shopping street in Soho.

Jingling bells played from the speakers equipped all around them.

“Are you sure we should be using this song without permission? Isn’t this Oh Ho Ho’s Christmas song? Won’t she be mad?”

“Why are you sticking up for the rights of an enemy nation we’re at war with year-round???” Heivia looked up into the snowy night sky with his missile hanging from a sling belt. “Oh, I see it. That’s the ‘flying sleigh’, isn’t it?”

“Apparently we aren’t shooting it down right away. It has to fly around London once first as a sort of performance.”

A few dots of light were flying through the snowy night sky in perfect lines.

In reality, it was only 8 multicopter drones arranged in a 2x4 formation, but only the two rows of lights were visible from the ground.

“Strange zigzagging lights in the sky aren’t enough to surprise anyone these days, huh?”

“Yeah, even though the existence of drones doesn’t actually reject the possibility of alien spacecraft.”

The two idiots discussed the issue while leaving the line of small shop windows on the main road to instead slip into the back alley and climb a metal ladder.

“Ugh, it’s cold even with gloves.”

“Just get going, twig boy. Staring at your ass wasn’t how I wanted to spend my Christmas.”

The building was better described as stone than concrete.

Once on the roof of that stylish multi-tenant building, they kept low and walked across the snowy roof to reach their exact assigned position.

Heivia rested the long tube on his shoulder and looked through the sight on the side.

“So are we ready to go?”

“Don’t turn it on yet. I checked the manual and it only lasts three minutes.”

Shoulder-fired missiles were a lot like fire extinguishers. They were only meant for emergencies and they were meant to be single-use. They gave you some chance of victory, but they were not going to blow up any and all tanks and fighters. The big jobs still had to be left to the experts.

“God, it’s cold. Why do we have to freeze our asses off in the snow without anything to eat? Are there any Island Nation hot springs around here? Y’know, those ones that are supposed to be good for your health because they contain Immortanoid, so if you bathe in them daily, it’ll activate your cells and extend your life by 30%.”

“Immortanoid? Isn’t that stuff radioactive?”

“It’s a longevity mineral. It’s all the rage among the nobles, so it’s gotta be safe. That stuff will keep you alive forever. It’s started a health boom and become a target of investment, so I heard a gram of it is worth 200 times a gram of pure gold. If it’s that expensive, it’s gotta work, right?”

Quenser could hardly believe what he was hearing and he started to wonder if those so-called “experts” on TV would shove miniature nuclear reactors in their gut if it would healthily extend their lifespan.

Something cut by overhead while making a ton of noise.

This was not the drones disguised as a sleigh.

It was bigger and lower.

“The military sent out some damn tiltrotors?”

“They’re the cameramen.”

“Let’s just hope a crosswind doesn’t flip them right over,” complained Heivia while lowering the launcher tube and bringing his radio to his mouth. “B4 to HQ. We have arrived at our point. We will now wait for the countdown.”

“Roger that, B4. We have confirmed some laser interference from the Ferris wheel and parliament building. It is small scale for now, but it means there are enemies out there. Be on the lookout for unforeseen accidents.”

“What kind of asshole does that?” asked Quenser. “Are they like those idiots who run out onto the field during a soccer tournament with a smoke bomb in hand?”

He had been muttering below his breath, but the radio must have picked it up. The strict class rep type of female operator actually went to the trouble of answering his question.

“According to another team that arrested one of them, they are almost certainly a citizen’s group known as Realism. They truly believe that it is service to the world and to the education of children to let everyone see the world as it is. They are disliked by pretty much everyone because they pick fights with pretty much everyone, but they seem entirely oblivious to this fact.”

“They make their ideal sound nice and all, but aren’t they the same as some flasher opening his coat on the dark street at night? Plus, it sounds like they’ve appointed themselves as the arbiter of what is ‘real’ and what is not. If they’re so closeminded they’re going to seriously argue all the world’s textbooks need to tell everyone they can’t get off without stretching out their legs and fingering their asshole, I’m not about to let them join the Santa Claus debate.”

“Honestly... B4, righteous anger is fine and all, but do not let any children hear you saying things like that. Kssh.”

Some noise was already running through the radio signal.

It was a small thing, but Quenser’s mobile device was displaying a silent warning.

“There’s someone here too. I’ve detected a garbage EM signal transmitted on all bands. It’s a jamming signal!”

“Let’s measure it from two points. Distance and direction!”

The jamming signal was ongoing.

The flying lines of light were not going to crash to the ground immediately, but there was not much time. The flying LEDs had to maintain their sleigh shape, so it was all over if the lines fell out of order.

And the suspect had to be somewhere in Piccadilly Circus at the center of Soho’s shopping street below. It was the Christmas season, so the area was full of couples and families. Plus, the suspect might not be out in the open. They could be in a parked car or inside a store.

“Let’s do this.”

Heivia tossed the shoulder-fired missile to the snow, pulled out his own mobile device, and moved to the very edge of the multi-tenant building’s rooftop. Quenser moved as far away as he could get and they used their two mobile devices to check their reception of the jamming signal from Point A and Point B.

“70m away at 10 o’clock.”

“I’ve got 80m at 7 o’clock. Let’s see who’s standing at the intersection point...him!”

A young man was messing with his phone below a fir tree strung up with lights.

At first glance, he looked like he could be waiting for his date to show up, but he had a large, waterproof paper bag at his feet. It did not make sense to already have a large bag before going shopping with his cute girlfriend. It was not wrapped and he made no attempt to hide it, so it did not seem like a present either.

“Could that be the device? Realism spotted,” said Quenser. “What do we do now? Climb down the ladder and sneak up to him???”

When Heivia responded by attaching a suppressor to the barrel of his assault rifle, the invention nerd did a double take.

“Are you serious?”

“We don’t have time to climb back down every single time some idiot shows up and we’re waiting for the countdown up here anyway. I want to stay put if at all possible.”

Heivia stepped far enough back from the edge of the roof to not be seen from the ground, readied his assault rifle, and quietly fired a single bullet.

However, he had not targeted the young man on the ground.

The bullet hit the decorated fir tree, causing a bunch of snow to fall from its branches. That alone weighed a few dozen kilograms, so it appeared to have crushed the young man.

The warning on their mobile devices vanished.

“B4, enemy suppression complete. If you have time, send a patrol to collect him. Since the weight of the snow broke the device, he might’ve broken a rib or two.”

“HQ to B4. Please do not say things like that where it might be recorded. Do not drag me into the trouble you caused. But well done all the same.”

Luckily, the lights in the night sky did not bump into each other and fall to the ground. The drone formation maintained its proper course and flew off to a different part of the city.

Quenser breathed a white sigh.

“I guess we just have to wait here until the reindeer and sleigh finish their circle.”

“Unless it gets shot down in the City or Lambeth and never makes it back here. ...Still, modern drones sure are fast. They’re moving faster than the average motorcycle, aren’t they?”

Like with airplanes, distances and speeds were hard to judge at extreme distances. The eight lights appeared to be swimming through the snowy night sky, but they had actually already left Soho.

Waiting out in the snow without even some hot coffee to drink was a dreary task. Especially when the city below was full of couples. They had no choice but to kill some time with their mobile devices while covering them up to prevent the backlights from showing.

“Monica here. I’ve made my way to Trafalgar Square which is blocked off with yellow tape and with coils of barbed wire, so it looks especially threatening. It’s so scary! The square is full of command vehicles covered with more antennas than our broadcasting vans, so we suspect those are the on-site commanders for the Santa Claus operation.”

After quite a while, Quenser was dragged back to reality by the blinking light on the top-priority window that popped up to cover the screen.

“Oh, whoops. Heivia, hey, Heivia. It’s time. Ready the missile!”

“Shut up, can’t you see I’m super busy?”

It was unclear just what kind of video site the boy had accessed with that military equipment, but when Quenser heard loud moaning leaking from the headphones, he smacked his awful friend on the back of the head to drag him back from the fantasy world on the other side of that screen.

“Naughty boys get taken to a training camp from hell by the young women of the Special Training Unit.”

“Hey, don’t even joke about that!! I’ll do it, okay!?”

The military’s Special Training Unit was a friend of mothers everywhere. That warning was a surefire way to get your kids to go to bed on time, which showed just how feared that unit was. Nothing could have been a greater contrast to Santa Claus.

“Look, the countdown is about to end. Let’s shoot down Santa and get back to the maintenance base.”

“Dammit, I have to wait so long the snow piles up on my head and I only get to meet a bearded old man for my trouble? Can our next mission be to capture a dark elf running around in the forest?”

“Oh? You’re into cosplay, Heivia?”

Heivia rested the launch tube on his shoulder as he complained.

Quenser had nothing to do at this point.

The rows of drone lights doing a tour of London had returned here.

“HQ to all personnel. The countdown is at 20. On your mark.”

“Is the magic show all set up? If we screw this up, the TV shows and internet will never let us hear the end of it.”

Heivia scoffed while powering on the launch tube.

The armored trucks had increased the number of patrols, so there had not been any more interference.

The countdown continued toward zero over the radio.

“5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Merry Christmas!!”

The kind of multipurpose missile used to destroy tanks and attack helicopters flew from the tube Heivia had aimed toward the night sky. That said, the powerful blast of white smoke erupting from the back of the tube seemed to stand out more than the missile itself.

Heivia’s missile was not the only one.

More came from other rooftops, from the armored vehicles on the ground, and from the helicopters and tiltrotors flying in the sky. A total of more than 200 missiles flew from all over London like the city was a giant hedgehog and they all focused in on a single point of the night sky.

However, they did not actually have to reach that point.

Even if these were military weapons, they were still industrial products (and highly delicate ones at that), so there was always a risk of malfunction. If they fired that many real ones in the crowded city, one could fall to the ground without detonating and become unexploded ordnance. Thus, the warheads had been swapped out with harmless low-heat fireworks.

First, bright rings of red and green light expanded out.

The low rumbling shook the ground after a short delay like with thunder.

The snowy night sky was filled with a total of 200 colorful lights.

“Is that a wrap?”

They did not need to shoot down the eight drones.

Airplanes were only visible in the night sky because of their special beacon lights.

So if the drones shut off their lights at the end of the countdown, it would look like they had vanished from the night sky. The military only had to unblock the roads at the same time so the civilian TV and internet broadcasting crews could rush into Trafalgar Square. An old man in red would have been hiding below a white sheet until then, so he only had to act like he had just been shot down. And he would look somewhat scorched thanks to the harmless smoke set off on the

ground. A real escape artist would make sure they were already gone by the time the countdown began.

However...

“What the hell?” said Quenser while viewing his mobile device.

“What’s wrong?” asked Heivia. “Don’t tell me a drone or low-heat firework fell and hurt someone on this happy day.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s Santa Claus!!”

“What’s wrong with the bearded old dude?”

“That’s my point. It’s supposed to be some old guy with a white beard, right?”

“?”

“So why am I seeing a blonde woman in a red bikini spreading her legs for the cameras? What kind of crazy miscasting is this!? Did someone not get the memo that this whole operation started with a letter from a little kid!?”

Part 2

The TV cameras captured the shocking truth!!

Santa Claus exists, but he is a busty blonde woman in a red bikini that is coming untied and a miniskirt that has slid out of place!!!!!!

“Um, due to a slight misunderstanding, we shamed ourselves in front of the entire world, so our 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion is being punished. Rejoice, because our schedule for the rest of the year is going to be jam packed while we are dragged all over the world. Just assume that you are not getting any New Year’s leave.”

Major Frolaytia Capistrano had the eyes of a dead fish.

Carelessly opening the door of sexuality within a pure boy was a very serious crime.

His dreams must not be destroyed, no matter how thankful he might be himself!!

Quenser and the others were riding on transport planes at the moment. They were moving from the

South Britain District to the Legitimacy Kingdom's northern occupied territory so they could ultimately reach a region beyond even the Object-less Northern Restricted Zone. Specifically, the Arctic.

"Frolaytia sure is in a bad mood today."

"Can you blame her?"

The two idiots could not help but complain. While it looked like Dom Queen Frolaytia was sitting down to talk, there were no chairs in the transport plane's cargo space. Their commander was instead resting her butt on the sexy Santa in question who was down on all fours.

"Ah, ahhh. A-all I did was take over last minute because the old man said his back was aching from the cold."

She was a glasses woman with fluffy blonde hair who did not seem very strong-willed.

She looked college aged or a little older.

The fabric sticking out from her miniskirt was probably a swimsuit rather than underwear, but the roundness it contained was still impressive. The term "forbidden fruit" fit it perfectly. She was the kind of beautiful woman who unfortunately looked perfect with tears welling up in her eyes. Where had she been in the 37th all this time?

"Elise. Bear with it. And don't forget your manners." When her "chair" lost its balance and tilted below her, Frolaytia lightly slapped that ass with her empty hand. "We are being punished in the military fashion instead of the corporate one. That means we will begin our next battle under very unfavorable conditions, so prepare yourself for what I am about to tell you. First, I need to explain the situation in the Arctic."

She shook her long, narrow kiseru as she spoke. That fact that she did not allow any of it to fall on Miss Elise Montana's butt suggested that silver demon still had some kindness left in her heart.

"You have probably heard that the Arctic's ice grows thinner by the year thanks to global warming. Unlike the past, icebreaker ships can forcibly break their way through, so it has become a hot area where all four world powers hope to extract oil and establish new sea routes."

A large cargo ship used tens of thousands of euros' worth of fuel in a day, so being able to take the shortest route meant a lot. Also, a new route would mean more freedom of movement for Objects as well.

Panama, the Hawaiian Islands, Gibraltar, and the Cape of Good Hope.

Just as wars had been fought around the world over cornerstones of transportation, the Arctic was starting to be seen as a worthwhile spot for controlling the current Age of Objects. Its importance meant it was a scene of intense fighting, and that meant more lost soldiers.

Quenser had trouble deciding whether he should be on his best behavior here or if he should intentionally irritate his commander as a way of indirectly punishing the miniskirt Santa, but for now...

“Who’s causing the trouble this time?”

“All four world powers really, but we are directly interested in the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance.” Frolaytia re-crossed her long legs atop her chair. “The problem is the intense cold wave that has caused temperatures to plummet across the entire Arctic in the past few days. The ice has grown nice and thick again, so both the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance have all their ships trapped in the ice. Not even icebreakers are enough to escape. That means the rules of naval battles no longer apply. It looks like we need to follow the rules of land battles by walking across the thick ice to approach and blow up their stationary fortress artillery.”

Naval experts could only fight on the sea.

Even if they had received general all-around training, they could not do what actual marines and armies could do.

So were Quenser, Heivia, and the others being sent in as additional personnel?

“I will tell you everything you need to know this time.”

Frolaytia swung down her kiseru with a solid sound.

“Eek!?” screamed the fluffy blonde.

However, the busty silver-haired woman was a terribly kind person, so she had made sure to first place an ashtray on the butt of her glasses Santa seat.

“Eeeek!” The chair trembled. “H-huh? You keep building the tension and then nothing???”

“Doesn’t Elise look kind of happy as she trembles?”

Sharp-eyed Quenser’s observation went ignored.

“The direct conflict between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance comes down to

the Julius Caesar, an aurora observation ship that was forcing its way through the ice near the North Pole.”

“Based on the name, I’m going to guess that ship is ours.”

“Basically, it is an Arctic cruise ship that has no interest at all in cruising the rest of the seven seas. Its ads ask if you would like to take the world’s shortest cruise around the globe. And since they do make a full circle of the Arctic, it’s technically true.”

Quenser did not care about the aurora, so he did not see the appeal. He was much more interested in seeing Santa’s boobs.

“It was officially disguised as a Christmas and New Year’s aurora observation tour, but the passenger list shows an unusual number of the Legitimacy Kingdom’s ultra-wealthy. Also, the ship was riding awfully low in the water for the number of crew and passengers, so they appear to be carrying something rather heavy. Now, if you depart from Scandinavia, cross the North Pole, and keep going, you will arrive at a small island in the Bering Sea which belongs to the same blank zone as Alaska. And as is so common in the blank zones left around the world after the collapse of the UN, a secret bank for depositing pure gold was secretly established there.”

If Quenser was being honest, he cared about that even less than the aurora.

The military had put together this rescue operation awfully quickly when these people really should have been punished for moving their secret gold to that bank. This reeked of collusion between the public and private sectors. And even if he revealed the criminality and the gold was recovered, none of it would end up in his pocket. It would all be confiscated by the government and treated as public property and that would be that.

“For some reason, it has been trapped in the Arctic Ocean.” Frolaytia disinterestedly wiggled the foot of her crossed leg. “Even with the ice thinned out by global warming, breaking through requires a fair amount of power and they likely burned out their diesel engine by loading themselves down with too much gold. Thus began a war between the Legitimacy Kingdom who wants their money back and the Information Alliance that wants the information of that gold that they feel has fallen into their laps. Of course, both sides officially insist they are working to rescue the civilians who were trapped in an unfortunate accident while also working to eliminate the greedy enemy army that is obstructing their heroic service.”

Heivia gave a snort of laughter at that.

Both at the Information Alliance for thinking this gold had fallen into their laps and at the Legitimacy Kingdom for thinking it was “their money”. They clearly arrogantly believed they could take as much as they wanted if they imposed heavy taxes.

“Christmas only comes once a year, so why are they wasting it on that crap? They have dollar signs

in their eyes year-round, don't they?"

"That is what makes this such a pain-in-the-ass job no one wants to mess with. And the major cold wave threw off the initial schedule, so things are utter chaos out there. As thick as the ice is, it isn't enough to carry an Object. And the obvious profit at hand has both sides sending in more and more troops. ...An obvious quagmire, isn't it? And even if we win this battle, it only earns us a single point. Guarding a Christmas parade in the sunny southern hemisphere would earn us just as many points, so that would be the far better mission."

Simply put, it was time for yet another shitty job.

After all, the cold wave was so bad not even icebreaker ships could get through. Military uniforms provided more than just camouflage, but fighting in the Arctic would still require cold weather gear designed for the Arctic. Once they had permission to borrow that equipment, Quenser, Heivia, and the others pulled plastic-packaged uniforms out of a wooden box labelled "battlefield equipment".

However...

"Um, Frolaytia?"

"What is it, Potato #1?"

"We're going to be fighting in the white Arctic, aren't we? Then what is the meaning of this?"

Quenser unfolded a uniform colored bright red.

And it had fluffy white additions.

These uniforms were redder than those of Buckingham Palace's guards. In fact, were they even military uniforms? If you walked around a safe country city like this, every last person who saw you would call you Santa.

"I said this was a military-style punishment, didn't I?" Frolaytia rubbed her own temples with her empty hand. "To be clear, I have to change into a miniskirt Santa outfit myself. These are officially being called a new type of anti-sensor camouflage, but I have my doubts regarding its actual effectiveness."

"We might as well be sticking out our asses and asking to be shot."

"Pretty much. You could say we have all been put in for high-payout life insurance policies."

"I never signed up for that!!" screamed Quenser, but Frolaytia only winked.

Some parts of the world could be even crueler than the battlefield where bullets constantly whizzed by.

"Which is why the payout will have no one to go to and the government will have no choice but to confiscate it 'to avoid trouble'. Isn't this a wonderful system where they can eliminate the troublemakers and make money while they're at it?"

But the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion could not have made it this far if they would obediently fight and die as they were told. Ever since the trouble in Alaska, they had clung to life with a stubbornness that put cockroaches to shame.

"Dammit, I'm surviving this no matter what it takes," said one of those boys who could not read the room.

"Yes. I can't think of a single reason why we should die here and give those out-of-shape officers a fat year-end bonus. As always, go kill the enemy and come back alive."

"Um, Frolaytia? Is there anything else we should worry about?"

"The Information Alliance intends to do the same."

Part 3

Objects were monstrous weapons that moved their 200,000-ton weight at over 500km/h, but they were still slower than traveling by air.

That was why the Baby Magnum was traveling along international waters outside the Scandinavian Peninsula to avoid the Object-less Northern Restricted Zone.

"Hm, hmm. Hm, hm, hm, hmm."

"You sure are in a good mood."

The Princess was humming to herself in the spherical cockpit when the old maintenance lady's voice arrived over the radio.

The 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion had been issued red and white Santa-like uniforms, but that did not really mean much for the Baby Magnum. With a 50m and 200,000-ton mass, simple visual camouflage did not seem very effective, so not one really cared what color it was.

Her special suit, which had some elements of a sailor uniform design, was red with fluffy white additions.

However, she generally never left the cockpit, so standing out was not an issue for her. She saw it more like a special holiday outfit.

She kind of liked it except for the fact that the coloring was so similar to that awful Information Alliance Pilot Elite.

“We’re in the Arctic, so we might just see Santa on his way back home.”

“What?” cautiously asked Quenser.

“That bearded man is from the Northern Restricted Zone, isn’t he?” The Princess sounded legitimately puzzled by his question. “He flies around the world on the night of the 24th, so he should be getting back around now.”

“Ah ha ha. Quit playing dumb, Princess. Don’t tell me you still believe in San- bwagh!!!!?”

“Systema Special Attack: Miniskirt Santa Lover Strike!!”

“Bwah! Quenser, what the hell, man!?”

“Shut up, damn you! I won’t let you say a word more!”

“?”

Quenser and Heivia seemed to be scuffling after one of them realized something while the other did not, but the red and white Princess only tilted her head.

She had a few beautifully wrapped boxes below her seat. They remained unopened due to the urgent mission.

“I-I hear Santa Claus was once detected by a ballistic missile radar network, so maybe you’ll spot him if you’re lucky, Princess!”

“Yes. I have my active radar on, so I should detect him if he’s flying anywhere in the Arctic!”

The Princess sounded entirely innocent, but that explained why the Baby Magnum had not run into any other ships despite taking the shortest route between Ports A and B. In an Object vs. warship battle, a radar lock meant being sunk, so everyone had to be frantically moving out of the way.

“(Does this count as a hostile act, Frolaytia?)”

“Didn’t I tell you the battle has already begun, you numbskull? Besides, Scandinavia is experiencing Armageddon year-round, so they’re a little too used to fighting. This won’t even make the amateur online news unless a forgotten nuke or zombie weapon makes an appearance.”

The others must have all been together somewhere because the Princess could not make out what they were whispering to each other. Regardless, she just wanted to arrive as soon as possible.

“I hope I find Santa.”

“Wh-what will you do if you find him?”

“Well, I think I’ll wave at him.”

“Wave?” asked Quenser. “You mean with one of Baby Magnum’s main cannons???”

“Aim that huge-ass gun at him and he might just put his hands up and drop his big bag of presents,” added Heivia.

Part 4

Even further north than the Northern Restricted Zone, the island of Spitsbergen jutted up from the thick ice covering the Arctic Ocean. After the many transport planes landed on the combat airfield there, they set up the necessary radars, hangars, etc. to use it as the 37th’s maintenance base zone.

However...

“Are you kidding me? Where’s the Baby Magnum? That thing can move 500km/h on the ocean, can’t it!? Then how come it can’t keep up!?”

“The Arctic isn’t a continent. She can’t move on top of the ice that could break in unpredictable ways, so it’s unclear if she should use her land or sea undercarriage. She can’t head this deep in right away.”

“What’s the point of the base if we don’t have an Object?”

But they were on a strict time schedule, so the potatoes in red would have to do this themselves. In fact, they got the feeling the cruel old folks of the military leadership had intentionally set it up this way to pay them back for the embarrassing failure.

A white wind blotted out the world.

The sky looked pure white, so looking up was not enough to tell if it was day or night.

It was an almost complete whiteout.

Their mobile devices displayed an error, but it was probably around -20 degrees.

“We can either take a helicopter or an armored vehicle to the battlefield. Which should we choose, Heivia?”

“As long as it keeps our red uniforms out of sight, any metal box is fine by me.”

Surprisingly, the armored vehicles proved more popular.

Driving on the ice sounded scary, but it must have seemed better than riding an unstable helicopter through the powerful crosswinds.

“Or is this a result of our Object worship? Anti-air lasers are admittedly scary.”

“But neither side has an Object this time, right?”

Quenser and Heivia were late to make their choice, so they ended up in a helicopter, although it was more of a big-bellied surface attack helicopter than a large transport one. It had a two-person cockpit and missiles and rocket launchers hung from the fixed wings that jutted out to either side, but it could also load soldiers into the rear cargo room. When Quenser slid open the door and peeked inside, he found a space larger than a van. It could probably fit around 10 people if they squeezed in tight.

“Damn. Setting records for long-term sales might sound reassuring, but that just means it’s an evolutionary dead end that can’t be upgraded, doesn’t it?”

“Would you prefer to ride one of those tiltrotors? They’re brand new.”

“No, thanks. All those complicated joints and moving parts scare the hell outta me!!”

“Whew,” said another voice from the side.

The two idiots must not have been the only ones too slow to get a spot on the armored vehicles because a Santa-colored woman climbed in after them.

That college-aged woman with fluffy blonde hair and glasses looked perfect with tears in her eyes.

It was Elise Montana.

“Fuck, it’s the walking disaster zone!! Why do we have to share a helicopter with you of all people!?”

“Wait, please don’t drag a woman as pretty and kind as me to a filthy public restroom and tie me up with duct tape! And definitely don’t write lewd things all over my body with permanent marker!!”

Elise curled up in a corner of the metal box and covered her face, but her fantasies were clearly overblown since they went beyond anything those two idiots would have ever thought up. Frolaytia’s threats must have affected her very badly indeed, but those potatoes were not about to take advice that came from a source like that.

Their future remained uncertain as the roar of the engine grew louder overhead. The rotor picked up speed and the metal box shook. The attack helicopter left the ground, but Quenser was too distracted to notice.

“Hyah!?”

“Gh, ghhh.”

When the helicopter first shook, the fluffy blonde lost her balance and fell toward him. And even if she was the walking disaster zone who had gotten them into this mess, boobs were boobs. When they fell toward the boy, his face was buried in them.

“N-no, you mustn’t! The world’s rules say this is supposed to wait until marriage!!”

Now was no time to be enjoying the unexpected gift.

A quiet metallic noise echoed through the cargo room. While Miss Elise flailed her arms around, her hand happened to catch the pin of a grenade directly attached to her red Santa outfit.

They had about 5 seconds until detonation.

“Watch out!!”

Heivia had to make a split-second decision: grab the grenade from her uniform and throw it out, or just chuck Elise out of the helicopter? He ultimately chose the former.

With a dry boom, the attack helicopter tilted from something other than a crosswind.

“Are you kidding me, you walking disaster zone!?” shouted the tearful delinquent noble. “That was well past anything we can laugh off as clumsiness!! If you had less than a D-cup, I would’ve kicked you right out that cargo door just now!!”

“Sob.”

“And how in the world do you trip so your ass ends up on Quenser’s face and your face is shoved between his legs!? It makes no sense for you to be this ridiculously clumsy without me benefiting in any way!!”

Things were this bad and they had not even run into the Information Alliance troops yet. The enemy did not even need to worry about working through their year-end inventory. If the 37th was given some time off with that deadly klutz around, they would probably wipe themselves out.

At any rate, the large attack helicopter finally managed to arrive in the battlefield sky.

Without sensor support, the view outside was colored almost entirely white by the blizzard and ice fog.

They had slowed down a lot to keep their balance, but they were still moving at more than 200km/h.

Some artillery fire erupted nearby.

It sounded too light for a giant ship’s gun.

Had the weather changed or had the blast changed the air pressure?

Whatever the case, the white curtain of small ice crystals briefly vanished.

“Wow, they’re really going at it.”

“Wait, wait, wait. They’re really close. Way too close! What’s going on!?”

A ship’s gun could accurately hit a target from 20-30km away and a missile from more than 100km away, yet the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance warships were enclosed in a thick layer of ice from so close no binoculars were needed to see each other.

“Are they pretending to be old-fashioned pirates?”

“The weather is bad and the aurora might be shining overhead. If there was a magnetic storm, their radio navigation and radar would be useless. Being this close to the pole has always caused issues

with compasses. They probably didn't notice they were so close due to the white curtain."

Both fleets must have been hurrying to the north pole in order to secure that luxury cruise ship packed full of gold. They had both entered the Arctic from Scandinavia, so they had apparently been sealed in by the thick ice while unaware that their courses intercepted in a giant X-shape.

"A single blast from a ship's gun would take them out at this range."

"But that would detonate their fuel and ammo and both sides would be caught in the huge explosion similar to a fireworks show accident. Those things aren't designed to fire on each other from that close."

Using the ship's guns even against the infantry on the ice could be mistaken for an attack on another ship, leading to a shootout between the fleets. That meant they had to fight using the people and weapons lowered to the thick ice instead of using the ships themselves. That had to be the source of the gunfire and artillery fire echoing into the air. The thought of joining that brass band parade was depressing indeed.

The attack helicopter could let the troops out anywhere, but the ice might break if it tried to land on it. Instead of attempting a dangerous descent on a wire in this blizzard, it would be safer to use the sturdy heliport on one of the ships.

After spotting a small Legitimacy Kingdom destroyer, they descended toward the observation craft heliport on the stern.

"Dammit, it's finally starting. Maybe we should just stay on this helicopter the entire ti-..."

As soon as Heivia said that, another attack helicopter exploded in the white cloudy sky nearby.

"Myonriiiiiiiiiiii!!!???" screamed Quenser.

"What the hell!? So their anti-air weaponry is working!?"

The potatoes inside the one helicopter frantically ducked down as the main rotor of the other one sliced through the air toward them.

They had no time to worry about anyone else now.

Something thick could be heard scraping at the exterior of the transport helicopter.

"Myonri, you moron! This is what you get for not choosing to ride along with a big star like me. A

jack of all trades like you should've known that."

"Hey, watch out, something just stabbed into this thing!! Was that rotor Myonri's way of telling you to shut up as she died!?"

Their helicopter suddenly tilted at an angle. Some kind of alarm went off and they heard angry shouting from the cockpit. It was obvious at a glance what was coming next.

"They're making an emergency landing, so grab onto something!!"

"Then they can't go for the ice! If we break through, we'll just sink into the frigid ocean. Aim for the ship! Aim for the heliport!!"

They could not expect a clean landing on the belly. They hit the heliport while half rolled onto the side, the main rotor remained tilted like a fan, they cut across the flat plate like they were being tugged by an invisible rope, and the tools scattered around were launched like bullets.

"We're so dead. We're gonna fall. We're just barely on here and tilting like a damn seesaw."

"You're supposed to use this as an excuse to kick Elise out, you idiot."

"Where did this terrible opinion of me come from?" asked Elise. "There's something wrong with how you measure people's value!!"

The potatoes crawled out of the large helicopter that had a broken rotor and spewed black smoke. It had flipped onto its side, so they had to leave using the slide door that was now pointed up.

"Hmm. Oh, could you support me from below? Nhhh!"

"Heh heh heh. Struggle all you want climbing out, lady. Yes, more, more!"

Quenser was the capable kind of guy who could lift up someone's butt with both hands while maintaining a gentlemanly expression. Heivia had wasted his chance by climbing out ahead of her.

"A girl who can't do pull-ups on her own is a wonderful thing. Hah hah hah!"

"God, I hate working here. She's already brainwashed him."

They soon received an overview of the situation from the navy landing guidance officer and the others who had nearly been turned to mincemeat by that horizontal pitching machine.

“Th-the huge ship’s guns and missiles could sink their ships, but that would probably mean mutual destruction. Fortunately, we have no reason to hold back with anything else.”

“We are using the anti-air guns that fire a good distance off the ground and the side deck’s Gatling guns that don’t cause very large explosions, so be careful.”

“Not that any of that can sink a warship. Ha ha ha. But it is all powerful enough to make mincemeat out of those you who will be running around on the ice. Good luck.”

“Every last one of them is scum,” grumbled Heivia. “They’ve gotten so used to their comfortable warm-water bidet they’ve forgotten how to wipe their ass properly.”

“But based on those rules, they can’t receive supplies from anyone,” replied Quenser. “At least we’re not fighting a war against hunger. Try to stay positive.”

The group about to be thrown into the middle of the barrage and the group facing starvation inside the ship both failed to view the other group as fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. That was one failing of a vertical society.

“So where’s the ship’s armory?” Heivia scratched at his short brown hair. “And what kind of guns and cannons does the navy have on hand? Carbines? PDWs?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We have nothing to give to you.”

The landing guidance officer honestly seemed surprised they were asking, so the two idiots were caught off guard.

He lightly waved around the red baton-like lights also seen at construction sites.

“You’re the unit being punished for screwing up in a safe country, right? No one expects you to defeat the enemy and end this battle. Your role is to run out onto the ice in those bright red uniforms, raise a war cry, and draw the enemy fire. We’ll be safe as long they’re shooting at you.”

“...”

“And why would we waste expensive weapons on someone like that? These precious military supplies were bought with the people’s tax money, so if you want a better weapon that badly, why not kill an enemy and steal one?”

The potatoes responded by removing the safety on their gun and loading the first bullet.

The muzzle was of course aimed at the guidance officer.

“Hey!”

For some reason the shocked guidance officer crossed the red baton-like lights in front of him.

Perhaps he hoped a red beam would shoot out.

“Pardon us, mister, but we were ordered to kill an enemy to steal their weapons.”

“And the military is a vertical society, you see. Yeah, and this ugly guy here’s wearing the rank insignia of a lieutenant. None of us can hope to match that, so a lowly private like me has gotta obey that order.”

Some confusion followed, but in the end, Quenser blew open a thick steel door so they could borrow the ship’s plentiful equipment.

The world grew just a little bit kinder.

“Dammit!” swore Heivia. “All they’ve got are weapons. Now we can’t change out of these red uniforms!!”

“Would you rather steal the sweaty and lice-ridden ones they’ve been using while holed up in here?” asked Quenser. “And we’ve really cleaned the place out. The armory is completely empty. Won’t the people left on the ship be slaughtered by some Information Alliance commandos or something?”

“If you want to sound remotely convincing, you might want to stop stealing so much. You’re carrying more bombs than anyone.”

The bastards wearing Santa costumes (as a punishment the higher ups thought up mostly just for fun) climbed down the steep gangway on the side of the destroyer and found themselves on the deadly ice.

“Ugh, I hope the ice crystals and snow or whatever else cover up all the red on our uniforms.”

“Heivia, if our uniforms freeze solid, we’ll essentially be pillars of ice.”

The Arctic was covered in ice, but since it was also snowing, it did not function like a skating rink. It crunched below their feet.

Quenser’s group met up with the other potatoes who had arrived by armored vehicles. Then they

equipped Nordic skis.

“Let’s try to reach the closest one: the Information Alliance cruiser Cruise Missile 050. It focuses on using its namesake while leaving all the anti-ship attacks to its escort ships and anti-air unit, but it can’t use those missiles right now, right? It’s a sitting duck.”

Sinking the ships was the easy part. They only had to approach the side, attach the necessary amount of explosives, move safely away, and detonate it. Even though they were trapped by thick ice on all sides, they were still floating in the ocean, so a hole below the waterline would let in the seawater needed to sink the ship.

This was different from a tanker abandoned in the desert.

There was only cold water below them, so they remained in a state where it was unnatural for so much weight to be floating.

“Those huge warships are like small fortresses. We can’t let our guard down just because they can’t move. But once we sink one, the Information Alliance will lose one shield to hide behind. That means less space for them to move around in, so let’s get in a preemptive strike and gain an early lead in this struggle over safe territory.”

“Hey, something’s approaching while you blather on. Is that a recon armored vehicle!?”

“Get down and scatter!! We don’t even get Christmas off from fighting!!”

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance warships were trapped in the thick ice while within visible distance of each other. There was approximately 2km between those fortresses, so they were close enough for those neighbors to kill each other with a heavy machinegun at any time.

And since the ground was made from the frozen sea, there were no mountains or valleys.

The only prominent cover was the giant warships and the vehicles they had lowered down with cranes. Standing out on the white ice was like asking to be shot.

The armored vehicle was around 700m away. It was only a scout, but it still had a machinegun. And it was a heavy machinegun that required a team of four to operate.

“What do we do!?”

“Get down, get down!!”

“They’re not going to overlook us just because we’re lying down on this flat ice!!”

They heard the deep sound of propellers slicing through the air.

They looked up to see a large Legitimacy Kingdom transport craft soaring through the white sky. No, it was not just a transport craft. It had autocannons, rapid-fire guns, and other weapons aimed outwards from the sides of its thick fuselage.

It was customized for attacking the surface.

Quenser immediately grabbed his radio.

“Requesting air support! Blow away that armored vehicle up ahead!!”

“Hah hah hah. Why would a punished unit get that kind of service? I’m up here to shoot you in the ass. My commander ordered me to shoot you for disobeying orders if you ever come to a stop. And I get to decide what counts as ‘stopping’, so even if you survive the enemy attack, we’ll just find some excuse to kill you anyway. Have fun□”

“Heivia, fire a missile straight up.”

With the fwoosh of a launching missile, a white trail of smoke stretched sharply up into the sky and a spectacular explosion erupted overhead. Armor panels, gun parts, and other wreckage rained down over a wide area.

Quenser tearfully grabbed the idiot’s collar and shook him back and forth.

“Why would you actually shoot, you dumbass!? I was so obviously joking!”

“Shut up. Accidents happen, all right? The military is made to sacrifice individuals for overall victory. And someone who isn’t even aiming their guns at the enemy sounds like the perfect candidate for that. Also, get out from behind there if you’re going to complain! I scattered those shields with my missile blast!!”

They were kissing morality goodbye, but this had given them some cover on the flat icy ground. Even the smaller pieces were the size of light vehicles, so they could at least avoid being helplessly turned to Swiss cheese by the armored vehicle’s machinegun.

“Hey, hacker! Erase those communication logs!!”

“I feel like we’ve finally crossed a line here.”

A series of explosive sounds followed, but it was not the fallen wreckage exploding.

The Information Alliance armored vehicle had belatedly started firing its machinegun at them. That might not seem like much compared to a tank's gun, but each shot was still a giant anti-materiel bullet larger than their thumb. A direct hit to their Santa uniforms would tear them to pieces.

"We have a shield now, right!?" shouted Quenser from behind a propeller and a drum-shaped engine. "Hurry up and fire a missile to silence that can of corned beef!"

"Shut up! I just used that missile, remember!? It's going to take a little longer to reload, so find some way to buy me some time!! 30 seconds will do!!"

"20 seconds!"

"It takes 30!!"

"Then get to work instead of arguing, dumbass!!"

"You need to buy me the time!!"

Elise Montana was curled up and acting like a victim despite being the entire reason they were here, so Quenser kicked her out from behind cover. Thanks to the snow and ice below her, her attractive butt slid more than expected, making it look like a bizarre game of curling.

"Ah, ahh, awahhhhhh!!!???"

While the armored vehicle's crew stared at the busty glasses woman's bust or glasses, they hesitated long enough for Heivia to lean out from the other side of a scorched piece of scrap metal and fire the missile resting on his shoulder.

Tearful Elise scrambled back behind cover with the deafening explosion slamming into her back. Her trembling hands grabbed at Quenser.

"How, but, h-h-how could you do that to m-me!?"

"Shut up and wipe the fog off your glasses. We need to get moving. That was just a scout, so there will be more coming!!"

They heard several sounds much like sparkling wine corks being removed.

"Those are mortars!!" shouted Heivia. "Heads up!!"

Heads up or no, they would be killed if those fell on them, so the rule-breaking potatoes moved fast. Before the explosives could fall in a large curve like a long throw in baseball, they dove behind their next cover - another piece of wreckage from the custom transport craft that had rained down around them.

Heivia looked back while hiding behind the rear of the cockpit that had nearly been sliced clean off.

"Dammit, those aren't 80mm. They broke right through the thick ice trapping the ships here, so there's nothing left where we just were. And they've climbed up on top of that can of corned beef."

"Hey, can't you take them all out with a missile!?"

"Again, I just fired one. So buy me time to reload!!"

The busy blonde who looked better in a Santa costume than anyone jumped when she heard that.

More than just tearful, she had a veritable waterfall of tears flowing down her cheeks as she clung to Quenser.

"I can't, I can't, I can't!! That will never work again, so use what little brains you have to think up a way for me and my unbelievable beauty to survive! As long as I make it, then feel free to get yourselves killed! Please muster every bit of stupid cleverness your stupid mind can manage!!"

Quenser did as he was told by stripping off a piece of her red uniform and kicking her out with her plump legs bared.

"Heivia used her giant curling butt to target the distant armored vehicle.

"Hey, can I do the stripping and you do the blowing up next time?"

"You'd take it way too far, so no."

Elise Montana tugged down on the bottom of her coat with both hands (without noticing this only accentuated her large chest) and obediently returned to the same cover those two were using.

"Ah, ah ha ha. It's cold. It's so cold. Please give me back my pants. Hurry, hurry. Brr. Chatter, chatter, chatter!!"

"Huh? She isn't acting all bashful and stuff."

"It's 15 below, remember? In extreme situations, people tend to be more worried about survival than

sexiness.”

There were no advantageous positions on the open terrain. The trucks and snowmobiles could be seen as nothing more than larger targets, so they actually increased the risk. More and more infantry moved out into the open. They apparently planned to use machinegun fire to hold Quenser’s group in place while the infantry circled around behind them to the right.

“What do we do?”

“Memorize where the shields are.”

The two idiots threw a long, skinny smoke grenade in a large arc over the wreckage they were hiding behind. When the metal can fell on the ice, it scattered colorful smoke with a loud bwoosh sound. That obscured the enemy’s view. The heavy machinegun was certainly a fearsome threat, but it was meaningless if those thumb-thick bullets could not hit.

“The next shield is 50m away at 10 o’clock!”

“Eh? Eh? You want us to run out into that horizontal storm? The bullets are still flying even if they can’t see us!!”

“Then you can stay here on your own. C’mon, we’re going!!”

They wanted to crouch as low as possible, but the Nordic skis made that difficult, so they pushed their bodies forward with their legs and the ski poles to reach the next shield. It was like jumping from stone to stone in a pond. If they slowed down along the way, they would be hit by the bullets and reduced to a pond of blood. The snowy ice was a lot rougher than a skating rink.

“Eek, eek, eeeeeek!”

“Your opinion of people sure is a relative thing, isn’t it? After hearing hopelessly incompetent Elise sob like this, this scrawny boy over here starts looking like some kind of veteran hero.”

As soon as they made it behind the torn-off tail wing, the glasses woman tore off her skis and curled up on the ground. She may have been trying to cut herself off from the reality around her, but it looked a lot like an Island Nation prostration.

Quenser slapped at the round butt sticking out his way.

“Elise, Elise.”

"P-please just leave me alone."

"If you insist. The Information Alliance soldiers will circle around here soon enough, but we'll respect your wishes and not help you while you just lie there. Although the enemy will probably think you're seducing them."

Elise Montana immediately got back up.

At the same time, Heivia tossed Quenser the missile launcher tube, switched to his assault rifle, leaned out from behind the wreckage, and fired a quick burst. However, his only allies here were an explosion addict who could not even use a gun and that blonde walking disaster zone who had no apparent skills. If he kept firing from the same spot for too long, the counterattack would focus there, so he was constantly on the move either circling to the opposite side of the wreckage or climbing up on top of it to aim down like it was a fence.

The two with nothing to do did their best to cheer him on.

"Wow, glad I'm not Heivia right now."

"Kyah! Work yourself to the bone for me!"

The loss of Myonri was proving painful already.

Heivia was forced to take her position as the jack of all trades.

"You two!! Can't you at least try to help by pretending to hold out guns to distract them or something!?! Y'know, like a game of whack-a-mole!!"

"No, thanks. I don't want to get hit by a stray bullet when I don't even have a weapon."

"How about you take a look at the situation here? We're being pushed back, so I can't stop the Information Alliance infantry from gradually getting closer."

"And?"

"Once they get here, they'll circle behind us!!"

Quenser undid the clasps and removed the Nordic skis that were only getting in the way.

As soon as someone circled around the wreckage and peeked out at them, tearful Elise grabbed one of her skis in both hands and swung it around while Quenser jabbed out with his ski pole. He

managed to stab the enemy right in the throat - in the gap between the helmet and the bulletproof jacket.

He heard a gurgling scream.

Except the Information Alliance soldier had managed to pull the pin from a grenade on his chest during the confusion. Once he knew he was done for, he must have decided to take out as many enemies as he could for his allies' sake.

His heart was as good as his looks.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Quenser kicked the dying soldier out of the way and frantically tried to get down on the ground, but he ran straight into useless Elise instead. They ended up in a tangled heap on the ice.

A muffled explosion rang out.

"Hwuh?"

Elise made a silly noise while lying on her back and holding Quenser's head into her big boobs.

That good-looking guy had guts, but detonating the grenade without giving a warning first had been a mistake. He ended up taking out several of his fellow Information Alliance soldiers instead of Quenser or Heivia.

"You can get away with anything if you're good-looking, can't you?" said Elise.

"Mgh, gh. Speak those cursed words one more time and you'll regret it," complained Quenser.

"Pfh. If it makes you mad, it means you know it doesn't apply to you. Peh heh heh."

Quenser attached a stun grenade to that busty blonde and kicked her out from behind cover.

Just as everyone's eyes were drawn to the cylindrical rod stuffed into her cleavage, a nonlethal flash and bang ruled the battlefield.

"Awaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!!!???"

"Heivia, fire!!"

Quenser's desperate cry proved meaningless because his awful friend was holding his eyes and writhing in pain. That busty glasses woman was just about the worst combat partner there was, but she undoubtedly had a devilish charm. Quenser had no choice but to grab his bloody ski pole and attack the collapsed enemy soldiers.

No matter how much their athleticism had been optimized with the sports engineering of a digital society and no matter how much their bodies had been built up with the perfect diet, they were as helpless as babies while collapsed on the ground.

"What the hell? My head hurts so bad," said Heivia. "Urp, did you really have to kill them all while they were down? What's the point of the nonlethal weapon then?"

"They would've woken up as quick as you did. Did you want them to grab their guns again?"

Once the enemy's stock of infantry was used up, they only had their trucks and snowmobiles that were loaded with high-power machineguns and mortars but were fairly limited in use. The Information Alliance's boxy canned goods (designed for cold climates) tried to pull back toward their warship, but Heivia's missile stabbed through the air and blew them away before they could.

"Did you just use me as a jack-in-the-box!?" complained tearful Elise.

"Don't worry. It was a nonlethal stun grenade."

"Don't be ridiculous. I still have a throbbing pain there. Look how red it is!!"

"Eh heh heh. Elisey, you're gonna need to give me a better look than that."

While staring at the busty part of the busty blonde since she was so generously opening her collar and showing off the pink mark left by the stun grenade, Quenser put on a kinder expression.

"Seriously though, I think that had about a 20% chance of killing you."

"That's even worse than I thought. Um, isn't that riskier than a round of Russian roulette?"

At any rate, this was their chance.

Before enemy reinforcements could arrive, they moved from wreckage to wreckage and arrived at the warship they had set as their goal. Cruise Missile 050 was one of the Information Alliance ships acting as a stationary base while trapped in the ice.

Quenser's job was simple now that he was right up next to it.

After measuring the thickness of the wall with an ultrasound echo, he cut off the right size of Hand Axe plastic explosive and attached it to the wall. The explosive alone would have been too unstable, so he included something like a metal bowl. The trick was to thinly spread the clay-like explosive along the interior of the bowl like it was margarine.

“What difference does that make?”

“It’s called the Munroe effect, Heivia. The wall is only in one direction, so letting the blast spread in all 360 degrees would be a waste of energy. The blast is a lot more powerful if you focus it on a single point like a spear.”

Heivia decided only a freak could understand what a freak was talking about, so he tuned it out.

Once the fireworks were set up, they only had to move far enough away.

“Elise, move 20m back.”

“Sure, sure.”

“Everyone else, move 100m back.”

“Wait, what?”

Before she could question it, Quenser hit his radio’s switch and triggered a fairly large explosion to ring in the new year a week early.

Even if it was 200m long, a ship was still a ship. Once the cruiser had a hole in the side large enough for someone to crawl through, the seawater poured in and it began to tilt.

After getting up from a sexy pose with her legs collapsed beneath her, Elise shouted a complaint while red in the face.

“You son of a bitch! What did I ever do to deserve this!?”

“Elise, if you stay there, you’ll be dragged into the ocean by the broken ice. And what did you do to deserve this? Have you already forgotten the entire reason we were sent here, you needlessly sexy glasses woman!?”

Part 5

It meant a lot to demonstrate how it was done.

It was like jumping from stone to stone in a pond. They would approach the Information Alliance ships trapped in the thick ice, attach bombs, and blow them up to sink them.

“Infantry sinking a warship deserves a medal, don’t you think?”

“A fighter pilot sinking a ship would get a medal, but a ship blowing up a ship with one of their huge-ass anti-ship missiles is considered business as usual. Explosives are explosives, so this will be categorized like normal on all the paperwork.”

Once they had actually sunk one, they discovered that blowing a hole in warships did not actually make them sink. When they tilted too far, either the fuel pipes inside would bend and break or the contents of the armory would fall from the shelves and crash into each other. Either way, the ship would blow up from within and scatter wreckage everywhere like a volcanic eruption.

And that was perfectly fine with them.

Once they knew it was coming, they only had to make use of it. There was nowhere to hide on the uniformly flat ice surface, so those randomly-scattered “gifts” were a lot of help.

“Killing the enemy to steal from them really is the way to go. The more we attack, the fewer of them there are and the more cover we have to hide behind. It all works in our favor.”

“Yeah, I wonder what that destroyer is up to right now. Do you think the Information Alliance has sunk it in a counterattack yet?”

Quenser’s group continued on while recoloring the hopelessly white battlefield to construct their own safe zones. Eventually, the wind died down.

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance fleets had ended up frozen in place without realizing they were approaching each other in an X-shape. It was not perfectly straight, but the enemy fleet was generally arranged in a long line.

“There it is,” said Heivia while using his assault rifle’s scope to look into the distance. “That ship is completely different from the others. It’s civilian. Check your mobile device’s map. Is that the aurora observation ship!?”

“Yeah, that’s the Julius Caesar. How did we manage to reach the goal first?”

That was when the color white flashed in front of their eyes.

The sunlight seemed to blur whitely despite the lack of wind and then Quenser found he could not see even 5m ahead of him.

“What!? A whiteout!?”

“It’s ice fog. Basically, the frozen fog is reflecting the sunlight! This is really bad. Don’t rely on your compass. We’re so close to the north pole that the needle isn’t going to tell you anything worthwhile!!”

Was that low rumbling due to the inclement weather?

Quenser meaninglessly looked up into the white sky.

“Lightning in this wide-open space? We’re gonna get struck down by divine punishment at this rate.”

The tearful complaints naturally came from Elise Montana.

“B-b-b-b-but we still have a chance, don’t we? We’ll be frozen solid if we stay out here, but there’s that aurora observation ship, right? B-b-brr, I don’t think I can keep going unless we get some hot soup or something on that ship. Chatter, chatter, chatter.”

She was asking for the rescuees to rescue the rescuers, but it was true the Julius Caesar had no chance if their rescuers were wiped out by the cold or the lightning. And they had to reach that ship to save them, so they had to trudge on regardless of Elise’s suggestion.

“What exactly are we supposed to do?”

They only had their memories to go on. They did not want to end up walking in circles within that white screen, so Heivia kept his eyes down on the ground while moving his Nordic skis and ski poles.

“We’ve arrived at the goal like we were told, but that ship is trapped by the thick ice, right? How do we save them? Surely we aren’t supposed to keep fighting the Information Alliance until the ice thaws in the spring.”

Technically, the higher ups of both armies were interested in the gold onboard the ship and not the crew and passengers, but the problem was the same either way. Gold was heavy. It would be suicidal to try and carry it back through this firefight just because the ship could not move.

“Pant, pant. There is it. We’re almost there. We were going the right way after all.”

“A little more to the right, Elise.”

“Yes, yes. You’re trying to trick me into walking in circles, aren’t you? I’ve figured you out at this poin- hgee!?”

The beautiful young woman vanished into a 3m-deep hole. It was a crack in the ice - a crevice. A very unsexy splashing sound soon followed. Quenser and Heivia had a legitimately hard time deciding if they were going to bother dragging out someone who had entirely ignored their warning, but they ended up throwing down a synthetic rope since she was a busty blonde glasses woman. If any one of those attributes had been missing, they probably would have pretended to have simply lost sight of her and walked off, whistling nonchalantly.

Despite being soaked in sherbet-like seawater, she looked more pathetic than sexy and she desperately pleaded with them while her glasses froze over.

“Hurr- brr, hurry, hurry to the ship! I need a hot stove, some soup, a blanket, and so much more!! This planet needs warmth!!”

“Eh heh heh. I can warm you up right now, Elise.”

“That’s a ship for the rich, right? I wonder if they have an Immortanoid bath or something. That longevity mineral would be perfect for beauty, health, and peeping.”

“Brrr. Y-y-y-you two never change, do you!?”

The aurora observation ship was pretentiously named the Julius Caesar and it was actually larger than the destroyer they had initially landed(?) on. It was supposed to break through the thick ice as it went, but it was now motionless while partially tilted on its side. It must have tried to break through more ice than it was designed for, lost its balance, and then had the seawater refreeze around it.

But it could have been worse.

If it was the type of icebreaker that brought its bow up on the ice to break through with its weight, it may have completely rolled over onto its side after losing its balance.

“That ship is full of garbage rich people who were secretly trying to carry their mountain of gold to a secret bank, right? I’d say anything could happen once we’re inside, but that would imply something good might happen.”

“Heivia, how can you say that when you’re a noble too? Hm? Is that the gangway?”

Quenser pointed at the side of the ship through a gap in the white curtain of ice fog. A cross between a metal ladder and a stairway had been half-frozen to the hull of the ship. If that was down, someone must have left the ship. It seemed unlikely, but had some adventurous passenger or crewmember decided to walk around outside?

“Even without the battle, this is home to the world’s strongest animal, the polar bear. I’m not about

to go help out someone that suicidal.”

“Let’s not discuss what martial art is best in a fight, what sports team you support, or what animal is the strongest. Those topics without a real answer gather self-proclaimed ‘experts’ like nothing else.”

Anyway, they were lucky they did not have to throw a rope up and pretend they were rock climbing.

Their Nordic skis would only get in the way on that narrow gangway, so they removed them from their boots, strapped them to their backs, and made their way up those metal stairs. Since the Information Alliance might have already secretly taken over the ship, the potatoes made sure to keep their weapons at the ready as they reached to top of the gangway and climbed onto the Julius Caesar’s side deck.

“I-it’s so cold.”

Elise held her very (non-sexually) wet body in her arms and shivered. The thought of a heated space in their near future must have reminded her how cold it really was outside.

That was her own fault, so the potatoes ignored her and spoke to each other.

“Those VIPs’ bodyguards aren’t going to shoot us, are they?”

“That’s a scary thought. I don’t want to die from friendly fire during the countdown to the New Year!”

“Uhh,” groaned Elise. “Are you two entirely incapable of recalling the things you yourselves did not long ago?”

If they were capable of that, they would have to give up the title of idiot.

Quenser and Heivia came up with a plan while pressing up against one of the waterproof doors arranged at even intervals along the wall.

“Let’s announce who we are. If anyone reacts in a suspicious way, we can silence them with a preemptive strike.”

“Okay. We’re after the gold, after all. But their bodyguards are sure to be well-trained, so silencing them will be a lot easier said than done. Hell, we probably won’t even have time to approach them, so we can’t hope to throw them down with judo or aikido or something. We’ll have to use bullets.”

“Let’s do it with my bombs.”

“As in blow them to smithereens?”

“As in use a concussion blast. No nails or metal balls mixed in and the amount of explosive is kept low enough to only rattle their brain. It’s generally done as a type of grenade, but I should be able to pull it off with my plastic explosive. If I keep the inside hollow and adjust the amount, I can hit them with a nonlethal blast. The range might only be 2 or 3 meters, but if I throw it, it’s guaranteed to knock the enemy out if we have to fight for control of the ship. That’s a lot easier to use than a tranquilizer gun that has to get a pinpoint strike on a gap in their jacket, right?”

“Okay, genius boy, I like the sound of that. Let’s do it.”

Basically, he was going to throw balls of military explosives at civilians. No one bothered listening to Elise’s complaint that they had left ethics behind long ago. That was just how things were when you were winning the battle.

They turned the handle in the middle of the thick waterproof door and finally entered the ship.

The interior was built like a classic mansion full of wood grain and bright red carpet. This was clearly built for the rich. While ships normally kept everything from the framework to the food trays as light as possible, this one was overflowing with wasteful decorations.

As a cruise ship primarily used for carrying passengers, it was built a lot like a tall resort hotel rearranged to be on its side. It had a lot of cabins and the straight corridors were very long. On the other hand, the elevators were primarily for cargo and crew, so the normal passengers would apparently use fancy spiral staircases.

A map posted on the wall even showed a round room labeled “Observatory”. It was probably equipped with one of the giant reflecting telescopes found in Hawaii. And despite traveling in the Arctic, it even had an indoor pool. The ceiling of the top floor was made of glass, so people could view the aurora while floating in the warm pool in their swimsuits.

Quenser quietly grumbled a complaint while tearing off a piece of Hand Axe plastic explosive and rolling it into a piece the size of a golf ball. The pen-like fuses he normally used were too big for that, so he made sure to dismantle one and jury-rig a smaller version.

“What is with the interior decorating? I have a bad feeling about this.”

“What good is a prophecy as vague as Nostradamus? Say things like that and you’ll find your remarried mother introducing your crush as your new sister.”

“Don’t worry. That just makes it better.”

Meanwhile, a young maid stepped out from a linen room to the side of the corridor. The silver-haired

maid shrieked, crouched down, and moved to protect the small child next to her.

“What do we do?” shouted Quenser. “Go with the concussion blast?”

“No, don’t. This doesn’t even look like a gray zone. She’s not trying to fight!”

Now that they had encountered someone, it was obvious that the terrified maid was frozen in place while staring at Heivia’s gun. She probably had no idea what the small ball of clay in Quenser’s hand could do. That concussion grenade was not going to work well as far as intimidation went. If it could not stop someone until he actually used it, it was not the best peaceful nonlethal weapon.

Quenser felt jealous of the young boy held so tightly in the professional maid’s arms, but that boy looked past her shoulder and tilted his head.

“Army men?”

“Yeah. We’re from the Legitimacy Kingdom. Despite the getup.”

“Then you’re a knight!”

Heivia groaned and fell silent while Quenser held his sides and laughed up a storm. That was a hard thing to respond to when you had a legit noble rank.

“But why is a knight dressed like Santa?”

“We’re not dressed like Santa. This was forced onto us as a punishment!”

“But I saw that lady on the news. They said they shot down the real Santa Claus.”

“Hgee!? Does the damage ever end!? H-how far did the footage of my Bikini Santa spread? Is that digital tattoo going to cover the entire world as a permanent scar on my reputation!?”

Soaked Elise bristled and shouted, but the child’s eyes were sparkling and his body was shaking.

“John said Santa didn’t exist, but he was wrong. I need to tell Claudia!”

The silver-haired maid shouted at the boy and ran after him, so they both vanished down a spiral staircase.

Quenser and Heivia clicked their tongues, but they could not aim a gun at those civilians to stop

them. From here on, they had to assume their presence could be revealed at any moment. They needed to focus on the location of cover and keep multiple escape routes in mind at all times.

“Damn, but I guess this is better than having them follow us around and then get hit by a stray bullet or something,” sighed Heivia.

“And they must have thought my concussion grenade was just some kid’s piece of clay. Maybe a different shape would help stop people without having to use it.”

“You called it clay yourself. And the blast is just as powerful with a ball or a cube, so why not give it a shape that’ll scare people?”

Quenser was the kind of guy who could take his friend’s advice. Once he worked hard to give it a very realistic penis shape, Elise Montana blushed and hit him very hard.

“What is wrong with you!?”

“It has to be all shrunk in the cold if it’s going to remain a concussion grenade! If I made it a full-on erection, the blast would kill them!!”

“That is not what I meant! And how rotten is your brain if you can jump straight from that heartwarming scene to this!?”

“Oh, and Elise? I find it very interesting that you recognized what this was straight away. If you were really the innocent and ignorant young woman you act like, I would have expected something more along the lines of ‘Oh, how cute. What kind of animal is that?’ ”

She hit him again.

Quenser collapsed to the floor, held his cheek, and shouted up from the red carpet.

“But I don’t want to make it into a pussy!!”

“Bfhh! How many times do you want me to hit you!?”

“As many times as I can get!! C’mon, give me another!!”

Elise hissed at him like an upset cat and Heivia asked a question with his eyebrows raised.

“By the way, where are you gonna stick the fuse in that thing?”

"Wherever it would fit best...hmm, up the urethra, I guess?"

"Sorry, but that's going too far for me. Seeing that kind of kinky stuff makes my balls shrink in fear."

His awful friend could stand to be more adventurous.

Quenser had no choice but to use the same volume of explosive to create something threatening but not a penis.

"Eww," said Elise.

"Why do you work so hard to make it look so real?" asked Heivia. "You're just going to blow it up."

"It's called having pride as an artist. There, all done: the cockroach stun grenade!!"

As soon as he stuck the fuse in the rear end like a cruel child's prank, a (male) crewmember in an actual sailor uniform appeared around a corner.

His eyes widened when he saw them and he reached for the holster at his hip.

"Quenser!!"

"Eat my concussion grenade! Drop your weapon or I swear I'll throw it!!"

The intimidation factor was through the roof.

The sailor panicked so badly he started firing wildly from the hip, so Quenser and the others had to kick open a nearby cabin door and take cover inside.

Heivia climbed on top of the idiot and strangled him.

"You son of a- you piece of- I can't believe you!"

"Bweh!?! Just let me throw it already!!"

He tossed the cute cockroach out through the broken door and hit the switch on his radio. After an earsplitting blast, the gunfire came to a complete stop.

"Did I get him? Did I???"

“Don’t ask me. If you aren’t sure, kick Elise out there to check.”

“What ever happened to my rights!?”

Since no further attacks came despite the commotion they were causing, they concluded they had successfully neutralized the sailor. When they hesitantly peeked out into the corridor, they saw him collapsed face down surprisingly close to the door.

First the maid and the boy and now this sailor. They had avoided killing anyone, but the gunfire and explosion would have been heard all over the ship. They were here to rescue the people on the ship, but it hurt their position to have all this happen before they could identify themselves. They had to assume there was now a greater risk of being hit by a surprise bullet.

They continued down the long corridor.

“This really is a big ship. It’s gotta have more than 1000 cabins, so where are we supposed to search and who do we speak with?”

“That might be a problem under normal circumstances, but the pressure will get to people and being alone only amplifies it. Those rich chickens are bound to be gathered in some big room like the opera house or basketball court.”

“We are talking about a ship floating in the ocean, aren’t we?”

Quenser did not have any actual destination in mind. He was only thinking of searching the big rooms first and checking through all the individual cabins if that did not work.

“They’re here,” whispered Heivia in front of a pair of double doors.

It was unclear what the room had been for originally, but it was serving as a party hall at the moment. Long tables formed a makeshift reception counter to the side of the door, but there were no receptionists there to check invitations. There were only a few empty chairs.

Quenser was an amateur in both guns and martial arts, but even he could sense something here. This was not the cold atmosphere of an empty school at night. He could sense something warm coming from that door, like that one class alone was spending the night to prepare for the cultural festival.

“They’re through here. I hope it’s just the fat and lazy VIPs, but they’re sure to have tons of personal bodyguards with them. Be prepared for a risky situation.”

“How exactly am I supposed to be prepared for that?”

They were still worried, so Heivia opened the double doors and Quenser chucked the busty blonde inside.

They waited a few moments, but there was no roar of gunfire.

They only heard someone pounding on the double doors from the other side.

“Eeeek!! Open up! Please open up!!”

“She seems to be doing well. So is it safe?”

“Don’t let your guard down. This might be one of those cases where only the pretty are spared.”

Quenser readied his cockroach bomb and Heivia grabbed his assault rifle while they pressed against the wall on either side of the double doors and slowly opened them.

And.

They were met with something truly unexpected.

However, this was not an extra-large magnum bullet or shotgun slug blasting through the wall and their bodies as well. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

It was a voice.

The people gathered in the dance hall all spoke as one.

“Sir Heivia?”

Part 6

He had forgotten.

It had entirely slipped his mind.

“(Oh, that’s right. That little kid called him a knight and he’s some famous noble boy back home, isn’t he? It makes sense people would recognize him on a boat full of rich and stingy Legitimacy Kingdom people.)”

The ladies and gentlemen there all wore tailcoats and evening dresses, so it was hard to believe this

was the frontline of a war. In fact, they might not have been aware this was a battlefield. They might think of the ship as an isolated safe country.

The dance hall was tall enough to cover multiple floors of the ship, so it was as large as a gym. The floor was covered by fluffy carpet, the ceiling was lined with giant crystal chandeliers, fireplaces with real fire were installed at set intervals along the walls, and the stage was meant for a jazz band or orchestra instead of plays. The food was not arranged on long tables like at a buffet. The truly wealthy did not go get their own food and drinks. The many maids would probably look across the entire dance hall, weave between the people to cover as much of the area as possible, and provide the party guests with whatever they needed.

A large banner was hung up near the tall ceiling.

It said, "New Year's Charity Tour!! The children braving such painful surgeries deserve to see the real aurora!"

Quenser snorted with laughter.

"So they have so much money they can just throw luxury around like it's nothing, huh?"

"I-i-i-if they have so much to spare, surely they can give us some hot drinks and a change of clothes."

Shivering Elise Montana wanted some fresh clothes, but that was liable to land her in a tight-fitting maid uniform. That thought amused Quenser enough to keep his mouth shut and see what happened.

Heivia was surrounded by people a short distance away.

That awful friend of a noble did not look exactly pleased with the situation.

"Sir Heivia, if you are here, does that mean the Legitimacy Kingdom military's rescue operation is going well?"

"That is wonderful news. This is exactly the heroism I would expect from the Winchell family heir."

"I am sure the children will be delighted. Hee hee. Because we can tell them that the picture book Prince Charming really does exist."

Then a wealthy woman glanced over at someone else with a fan covering her mouth.

"Heh heh. But it seems you have also brought along the real Santa that the military arrested."

“Hgee!?”

Elise (who had found a way to make a soaked military uniform look hot) was forced to face her worldwide shame yet again.

Quenser sighed and thought back to the base assumptions of this mission.

Then he lightly elbowed the side of the busty blonde glasses woman who was trembling both from the cold of her wet clothes and the heat of her embarrassment.

“(Nh, hh...eek??? Wh-what? Are you still not done sexually harassing me?)”

“(Pipe down, Miss Sensitive. You need to be on your guard.)”

“What?”

A few things here seemed out of place.

There were some boys and girls even younger than Quenser and Heivia - only about 10 - mixed in with the party guests. They were wearing tuxedos and cocktail dresses, but their nervous expressions and awkward movements showed they were not used to this. Quenser felt more of an affinity with them, so they were likely commoners.

One small boy in a tuxedo noticed the bomb-wielding battlefield student was looking at him, so he hid behind a woman in an evening dress. Only then did Quenser realize he still had a cute cockroach in hand. The wealthy woman rubbed the small boy's head with a thin smile.

“Quenser.”

Heivia turned back to say something and Quenser shrugged.

“Sorry, but I'm a commoner. I doubt I could join that conversation. I don't know all that noble etiquette.”

“That's not what I was asking. What are we going to do now?”

The surrounding ladies and gentlemen's ears pricked up when they heard that question.

In fact, they even cut in like they were in charge.

"If we might be so bold as to ask..."

"How exactly do you intend to evacuate everyone? Will you be using a helicopter or a tiltrotor? Or are you sending in a submarine to break through below the thick ice?"

"We have all the children to think about, so we would like to focus on preserving human life. Would you be kind enough to tell us what you are planning in advance?"

Something bothered Quenser.

It did not sit right with him.

These nobles were so absurdly rich they could share their luxury with others, yet they would abandon their money to prioritize the lives of mere commoners without even a blood relation? Not a chance. And he was not just prejudiced or biased against nobles. That was truly how the Legitimacy Kingdom worked.

But that was not the main point here.

Quenser's group had to make their next move sooner rather than later. They had arrived first, but the Information Alliance soldiers would arrive at the aurora observation ship before long. If it came down to a direct fight over the ship, who could say how far the damage would spread.

They had to change things here, but what would that require?

He had to remember the base assumptions of the mission.

"In that case..."

"Yeah, I get the feeling we're thinking about the same thing here."

Quenser and Heivia started speaking and the rich nobles leaned forward eagerly.

"Wh-what will you do? How exactly will you evacuate us!?"

"We won't."

Quenser let the other boy say it.

This would receive less backlash coming from a fellow noble.

And Heivia Winchell did not hesitate to do so.

“Instead, we’ll throw all the gold into the ocean. Then the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance will lose any reason to attack the ship.”

Yes.

The two sides were not after the human lives; they were after the gold these rich nobles were trying to hide in a secret bank. The human lives were only at risk because that gold was on the ship.

In that case, they only had to let go of that gold.

“Gold is heavy, so if you load it into a ship container and drop it from a crane, it should break through the thick ice and sink to the bottom of the ocean. Then the battlefield will shift there. I imagine it would be a fight between submarines. But whatever it would be, no one would want to attack the ship any longer, so you can wait here until the spring thaw.”

“Um, but, Sir Heivia!?”

“What’s wrong with that? Gold doesn’t rust or corrode in seawater. It’s such a valuable precious metal because you can trust it to remain the same no matter what you do to it, right? As long as you know how much you dropped down, you can recover it just fine. You could leave it there for 100 years and the amount wouldn’t change.”

The attacks might not stop unless they could prove they had dropped all of the gold from the ship, but they likely had paperwork ready for the secret bank. And since the ship was floating in the water, the depth at which it “sank” into the water depended on its weight. If the listed weight and its current floating height were compared, they should be able to prove the veracity of their claim.

“By the way,” added Quenser. “Even if we did try holing up in the ship, the gold would end up at the bottom of the ocean along with the ship itself if the Information Alliance decided to fire an anti-ship missile or ship’s gun at us. Gold isn’t changed by fire or seawater, so they won’t lose any of it even if they have to dredge it up from the bottom of the ocean afterwards. That leaves them with no reason at all to hesitate. The gold won’t function as a shield.”

Everyone fell silent and Quenser could not blame them.

At first, it might seem like the two idiots were presenting an obvious and reasonable idea, but they were ignoring one piece of the puzzle that the rich nobles refused to budge on.

Yes.

They could not let the gold be stolen by an enemy nation like the Information Alliance.

But if the Legitimacy Kingdom took it into custody, it would mean revealing the existence of all the gold they had hoped to hide in that secret bank. They did not want to lose any of their money to additional taxes, so they could not let the Legitimacy Kingdom have the gold either.

Right now, the gold was within their reach.

Even if they knew its weight kept them from escaping here.

But if they let it sink to the bottom of the ocean, not even those rich nobles could access it. They would require the help of either the Legitimacy Kingdom or the Information Alliance militaries. They would be unable to prevent their assets from being stolen before their eyes.

So they could not do that.

They knew it was the safest option, but they could not choose that optimal answer.

“No, you misunderstand.”

However, a gentleman in a tailcoat said something that entirely surpassed Quenser’s expectations.

“Sir Heivia, there is no gold on this ship.”

At first, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes had no idea what he meant.

After all, wasn’t this entire battle predicated on that gold’s presence? If the ship was not on its way to the secret bank, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance would not have been so hellbent on sending troops to the Arctic.

So there was only one conclusion:

“You’re still blinded by greed after all this? What happened to focusing on preserving human life!? You’re the ones that said you wanted to save the kids’ lives!!”

“You can hide the gold if you want since we can’t exactly search such a large ship in a timely manner, but holding onto it only increases the risk. Like we said, the Information Alliance has no real reason not to attack the ship.”

If that happened, Quenser’s group only had to escape with the children brought along on this charity event. The Legitimacy Kingdom only wanted the money and they could recover it from the ocean

floor just fine, so Quenser's group had no obligation to get blown up along with the stubborn rich nobles.

If they wanted to die, they were free to do so.

That may have been the difference between a commoner and a noble right there.

"No, you still misunderstand," whispered a woman in an evening dress while stroking the head of the small boy hiding behind her. "There is something here we must protect at all costs. That much is true. But it is not gold, so dumping it into the ocean and recovering it later is not an option."

"What are you talking about?"

"The most important thing for us is the experience and technology needed to support the children's painful surgeries and keep them alive. Sir Heivia, we must protect that no matter what it takes. Is there no way of moving the ship or staying here and fighting? We will help in any way we can."

This time it was soaked Elise who elbowed Quenser in the side.

"(So are they actually good people? It sounds like they are paying the medical costs for these children who might as well be complete strangers.)"

"..."

That would make for a moving story, but something seemed off to Quenser.

If that was the story here, these nobles would definitely be advertising that fact. They would have a TV crew on the ship or record this conversation on a phone to upload it to a video site. For the rich, charity was a way of spending money to buy popularity, yet that piece was missing from the puzzle here.

And.

So.

The rich nobles, who had never worked a day in their lives, went on to tell the truth of the matter.

"The artificial joints and organs supporting these children are made from a very valuable rare earth known as Immortanoid. In other words, they are carriers. We can implant the necessary amount inside their bodies to smuggle it wherever we need to go."

“Thanks to the market price being intentionally driven up, I believe that longevity mineral is worth 200 times the price of pure gold. As long as we have the surgeries performed overseas, the authorities will never notice and no security guard is going to demand a child removes their medical implants just because a metal detector gate found a suspicious reading.”

“But Immortanoid will permeate water to create a mineral spring, so unlike gold, its nature is easily changed. Its value will likely plummet if it is dropped into the ocean.”

They were not reluctantly revealing the truth as a last resort and they were not tearfully confessing their sins out of guilt.

They were simply explaining it because it was relevant to the topic at hand. Almost like they were bringing up a piece of trivia about rain because people were discussing the weather.

“You...”

There was a pause.

And then Heivia Winchell shouted with every last ounce of his strength.

“You motherfuckers!!!!!!”

It was actually the child himself who jumped at how loud Heivia’s voice was.

And he was still hiding behind the evening dress woman as if he had been taught that was the safest place for him. Even though he was forced to have his body sliced open, stuffed full of unnecessary implants, and sewn back up every time those rich nobles needed to transport something. He must have been forced into such a desperate situation that this seemed like the better option. People suffering from heavy abuse could not take a step off of the hopeless path back home even though they knew they would be beaten when they arrived. Because if they were late, they would be yelled at and beaten even harder. Being spared that was the only form of “salvation” these children knew.

“Hm? There is no need to resort to foul language, Sir Heivia.”

“Immortanoid is a longevity mineral. Its weak radiation is said to activate the body’s cells and it is a rare earth worth 200 times the value of pure gold. Normally, people like them could never dream of receiving this kind of treatment.”

“And it is only natural for commoners to work for nobles. We are not making them carry anything dangerous like drugs or weapons. In fact, carrying Immortanoid in their bodies will only improve their health. This is a mutually beneficial arrangement, is it not?”

They felt no guilt.

They were not aware they had even done something wrong.

This felt like a glimpse of how nobles treated commoners.

(Santa Claus doesn't exist, huh?)

Had that child really been saying that Santa would never visit them whether he existed or not?

Those children lived in a locked-down form of peace.

They had been imprinted with the idea that taking just one step outside of that meant living in constant fear of starvation and death. Those young souls had been forced to believe that it was best to have their unnecessary branches cut away, to have supports tied on, and to give bloom to the exact flowers the adults wanted.

But that process was not complete.

Not yet.

When that child had seen Elise Montana, he had decided Santa does exist and run off to "tell Claudia".

He had clearly seen the arrival of something he found unbelievable: Santa Claus.

The idea of someone who would arrive from outside that closely-managed world and reach out a helping hand for nothing in return had seemed so implausible, and yet someone wearing red had arrived after all.

So.

In that case.

"Heivia," said Quenser while handing his awful friend what he held in his hand.

Then he walked up, took the hand of the small boy hiding behind the evening dress lady's back, and gently pulled him away.

He moved outside of a 2 or 3 meter radius to take just the one step off of the rails prepared for that

boy.

And Quenser Barbotage spoke just one word.

“Concussion.”

With a powerful boom, a shockwave slammed into the air and those goddamn nobles collapsed to the floor.

Part 7

The concussion grenade had a range of about 2 meters and the dance hall was larger than a gym and filled with ladies and gentlemen, so the one blast was not going to knock them all out.

However.

The bodyguards in black did not seem in a big hurry to protect the shitty VIPs who had hired them.

“To be honest, we’re thankful,” said the security chief while bowing. “It’s probably wrong to act like we were on your side all along, but maybe we just needed someone to give us the opportunity.”

“Who are you?” asked Quenser.

“I am technically a noble,” The middle-aged man smiled a little. “But if you will allow me some irreverence toward that title, I would ask that you do not assume all of us are quite that heartless.”

There was an absolute wall between commoners and nobles.

But that allowed them to partially ignore the need to establish ordinary relationships with each other. They could think of each other as residents of entirely different worlds.

But what about between nobles?

That closer position had bound them. They had been unable to directly face the problem because they feared incurring the wrath of the great power those richer nobles carried.

But they had chosen to act now.

They had had enough.

Another chance might not come along, so they had decided to take the risk and try to save those children while they could.

And it was not just the bodyguards.

While they said nothing, the maids and the crew in sailor uniforms silently stepped out of the way. They could not don military uniforms and they could not fight against nobles, but they still tried to come up with something they could do.

Heivia must have understood all that.

But instead of mentioning it, he spat out a question.

“What’re you gonna do with your bosses?”

“The nobles seem to have fallen ill, so we will let them get some rest. They can rest all they like inside the ballast tank on the lowest level. It cannot be opened from within, so if the battle is lost and the ship sinks, they will be forced to share its fate.”

“Heh. That should make for a good wakeup call for them. Welcome to a battlefield country.”

“And if it is not too much to ask of you, could you possibly speak with the children once all this is over? This is something we cannot do ourselves.”

“Hm? What did those kids ask Santa for???”

The security chief smiled at Heivia Winchell’s question.

And he gave the answer.

“They asked for a true knight to show up and rescue them.”

It was possible not even the children themselves knew how serious they had been about that.

They may have asked for something they knew was impossible so they would not get their hopes up and they would feel no shock when it did not happen. It may have been their way of giving up on all hope of anyone ever coming to rescue them.

So could they now tell those children that some unbeatable soldiers had shown up to do just that?

Of course, there was no thread of logic leading up to this conclusion.

The mission to shoot down Santa Claus had started with that Christmas card sent to the military, but it should have ended in success and Quenser and Heivia's presence in the Arctic was pure coincidence. And while they had set their sights on the aurora observation ship, their mission had not been one to save the children.

Nevertheless, through several layers of coincidence and happenstance, here they were.

A few mistakes and misunderstandings had forcibly kept that thread going when it should have come to an end so many times along the way. If they repeated this scenario 100 times, they would probably fail to notice the children in need and pass them by every single time, but for some reason, they had ended up knocking out the rich scum aboard the aurora observation ship this time.

This result defied all logic, so perhaps it was best described as a miracle.

"Heh," quietly laughed Heivia Winchell.

A true knight.

That concept was like a dream that the children could not abandon even after seeing how ugly real nobles were. Which was why they had tried to go through that ritual so they could finally forget all about it.

After living in the world of nobles, Heivia knew all too well that the title was far too stained by profit-seeking and that the noblesse oblige they loved to talk about was nowhere to be found.

But someone was clinging to that nonexistent dream.

And he was not narrowminded enough to shake free of that desperate grasp.

"Fine then. It's time for the knight to throw down his gauntlet and ready his rapier."

They could no longer choose to intentionally fail their mission by running away and abandoning the kids and the maids to their fate.

The Julius Caesar had no gold onboard.

Instead, there were about 20 commoner children onboard. Yet the excessive number of artificial joints and organs implanted in their small bodies rivaled the value of a great mountain of gold since they were made from the rare Immortanoid.

A health boom had been started for investment purposes.

After pushing up the price of the longevity mineral as far as it would go, it was worth 200 times the price of pure gold.

It was said its weak radiation would activate the cells and extend one's lifespan by 30%. That claim was laughable, but it was easy to imagine how some people would benefit by naming it a longevity mineral and spreading the word around. Humans were the foolish creatures who, if it was said to be good for your health, would pay large sums of money for goop made by boiling down the seaweed found growing just about anywhere.

What do we do? Do you think the Information Alliance will believe us that there's no gold? I mean, we're the enemy who boarded ahead of them."

"Why would they believe us? They'll just assume we're trying to buy enough time to carry out all the heavy gold. That means they're attacking the ship no matter what the reality is."

And if the Information Alliance did arrive at the correct answer, what would that change?

Those children were the people of an enemy nation.

Once they learned the children had a fortune equal to a mountain of gold hidden in their bodies, they were sure to pull out a scalpel and slice them open like a dissected frog to get at the precious Immortanoid. These were the people who had started a war to get at this fortune, after all. Who could say what the actual soldiers thought. They might even think they were rescuing or protecting the children, but it was highly doubtful that their higher ups would care one whit about those human lives. They would confidently and triumphantly slice up those children in the hospitals they had been sent to for safekeeping.

Which meant...

"Do we hole up in the ship, or do we take the kids out and lead them back to the maintenance base? Either way, we can't leave things as is. The rules of the battle have changed, dammit."

"Let's try to stay positive. Those kids are a lot lighter than gold and they can move around on their own. Those goddamn nobles were right about them being convenient carriers. We should have a few options other than dumping the treasure in the ocean and redoing everything."

That was when a loud creaking sound reverberated throughout the dance hall.

"What the hell is it now?"

“Emergency, emergency!!”

Elise Montana had been taking a look around elsewhere, but she ran back into the dance hall. She held her military mobile device out toward them.

“Something big is coming this way. It’s an Information Alliance ship! It’s far bigger than a cruiser! It’s over 80,000 tons!!”

“For real? That’s as heavy as a battleship. And since when did they still have a weapon like that leftover!?”

“Wait, what do you mean it’s ‘coming this way’? You mean it isn’t trapped by the ice?”

Instead of waiting for an answer, they all checked Elise’s mobile device.

The name on the side of the ship was Electric 019.

The footage came from photographs and videos. The scale was difficult to judge with nothing but white around it, but it was definitely big. Bridge windows were generally the same size for every ship, so Quenser realized he could use that as a reference point to grasp the scale of what he was seeing.

The battlefield student groaned at what he saw.

He was little more than an amateur, but there was something even he could tell at a glance.

“That isn’t just 200m; it must be 300m.”

Modern design standards focused on small size and maneuverability for any weapon other than an Object, but this took the opposite route. Perhaps there was an eccentric faction within the Information Alliance that was displeased with the current Object-centric system, or maybe this was the result of a bizarre evolutionary branch created by the Object-less Northern Restricted Zone.

“Even a conservative estimate puts those main cannons at 50cm,” groaned the student. “This isn’t just normal firepower. Those have to be railguns or coilguns. I’m amazed such heavy weaponry is being developed for anything other than an Object, but since it’s a naval weapon, maybe they disguised it as electromagnetic catapult research.”

“Hey, isn’t that thing moving? I thought the thick ice had trapped everything in place!”

“It has a weird blade covering the bow. It’s bent in a V-shape like a snowplow.” Quenser noticed

something. "Is it using its extraordinary power and weight to forcibly break through the ice? No, it's more than that. Look at that icebreaker blade, Heivia. There's steam coming from where it's contacting the ice."

"Are they heating up the metal blade with the engine's heat, or are they giving it a high frequency vibration? The damn thing's melting the ice as it goes. Is it like slicing through foam with a hot wire?"

"Whatever the case, it doesn't look like this was originally part of the ship. The blade stands out from the rest. I bet they threw it together from the parts on hand, but this just means the enemy was a step ahead of us. Since they've moved close enough that we can see them, they must intend to blast the aurora observation ship with a direct shot similar to a tank's gun."

"Why bother with that? They could just throw their ball in a long arc over the watery horizon...or the icy horizon, I guess."

"That would blast the ship to pieces, but with an even more powerful direct shot, the shell will pierce through the ship and out the other side. Just like with a tank or armored vehicle, they can demand we surrender while gradually blasting away pieces as if with armor-piercing rounds."

"..."

"Remember the problem with my concussion grenade? You can't negotiate if the other side doesn't fear the weapon until you use it. This means they want to talk too. They may have their doubts that the 'treasure' really is in the form of gold. And torture is a much better way of getting someone to talk than execution."

That ship would be blindly tearing up a civilian ship from one end to the other without knowing where anyone onboard was. They did not care at all about the human rights of the people onboard. Once they learned the treasure was actually the healthy rare earth(?) stuffed inside those children, they would be delighted to come "retrieve" it. They would be happy they did not have to fish anything out of the water with a crane.

Heivia's expression was bitter, but he did not overlook what mattered.

"If they have their doubts, then they won't sink the ship right away, right?"

"Yeah. If the treasure turns out to be paper currency or checks, fire and water are the enemy. So they're going to apply as much pressure as they can in order to figure out what it is. They want us to give away the answer."

Of course, all of this was based entirely on assumptions.

No matter what the people on the aurora observation ship claimed to be the truth, the Information Alliance could not eliminate their doubts that the enemy soldiers might be lying or hiding some crucial fact. They would wonder if they had enough information and wonder how much information would ever be “enough”.

That was just how things were when you were winning the battle.

In the end, there was always a chance they would decide to sink the ship right this instant.

“How many of the noncombatants, like those kids, the maids, and the crew, do you think they’ll let go?”

“Are you seriously asking that, Heivia? The Information Alliance will see them as low-priority people. Since they want to make enough of an impact to get us to talk, they might kill those harmless civilians first of all. They don’t know the treasure is actually inside those kids.”

He must have already suspected as much because Heivia did not press the issue further.

Those kids had asked for a true knight to show up and rescue them.

How it had happened was unclear.

There was no rhyme or reason to how that had led to this.

The path from the Santa Claus mission to this Arctic battle had not been planned out in any way and the Legitimacy Kingdom was only interested in the money. It was laughable to think they were interested in the rescuing the children. After all, they did not even know those suffering young lives existed.

Nevertheless, Heivia’s group had learned of that wish and here they stood.

It was a coincidence that defied logic.

In other words, a miracle.

“They won’t let anyone escape and we can’t hole up in here. That means our only option is to head out there and fight that 80,000-ton monster ourselves. We may not have to travel past the horizon to reach that Information Alliance battleship, but the journey is still going to be straight out of hell.”

“Are you suggesting we give up? Do we walk up to those kids, crouch down to look them in the eye, and tell them we can’t help them after all? Do we blame it on circumstances beyond our control and

tell them to abandon all hope of things ever getting better for them?"

"I'd rather die, dammit."

"Then let's give the Information Alliance hell."

Just as Heivia and Quenser had reached a consensus, the delinquent noble noticed someone looking at him.

It was that small boy.

That carrier boy had been cut open with a scalpel and stuffed full of Immortanoid joints and organs that he did not even need. The adults had abused the concept of charity to use him for their own profit, so that depressingly "ordinary" soul had to have despaired in all forms of good and justice. No, he was probably too overwhelmed to even feel that kind of hatred.

"Hey." Heivia crouched down to put himself at the boy's eye level. "Don't you worry. We'll handle it. The Information Alliance can send a warship or whatever else they want, but we won't let them lay a finger on you, so there's nothing to worry about."

"How?" That blunt question cut right to the heart of the issue. "How can you protect Claudia? John said nothing can be done for us. He isn't from the institution and has everything he wants, so he always comes to laugh at us."

"Hey, I said not to worry." Instead of answering the question, Heivia said something else. As if piercing straight to the foundation of what was wrong here. "I never said anything about only protecting Claudia, did I? And I don't care what this John says. Listen, we'll take care of everything and I mean everything. So you don't need to write yourself out of those 'what if' scenarios. You deserve to be happy too. So let's start from there, okay?"

"Eh? But..."

The boy tilted his head.

It was like he had woken up to find a present by his pillow and assumed it could not possibly be for him.

He was not used to being given things. He did not know how to step outside of the greenhouse.

Those rich scum had gone on and on about charity and justice, but they had in fact stolen every last possibility of a better life for those children. Any branch that stretched out toward freedom would be snipped away to ensure it only gave bloom to the flowers they wanted.

So it had to start from here.

The words that slowly flowed forth like some kind of curse were the result of how twisted that boy's idea of normal and ordinary had become. So no matter how horrific it might seem, Heivia could not look away.

Those words definitely left that boy's small mouth. A normal person would have a hard time understanding it, but the boy had been forced to conform to this view of justice.

"I was born with a terrible disease."

"That put my mom and dad through a lot of trouble."

"I heard they ended up in a lot of debt."

"I couldn't go to a normal school."

"But someone came to help me."

"I can't turn my back on them after they helped me."

"They say this is the right thing to do."

"But I can't stand to see Claudia in pain anymore."

"So."

"I just wanted Santa Claus to bring a true knight for her."

"You can leave me."

"I can carry them all."

"I can carry all the other kids' stones."

"So."

"Hey."

He kept making rejections.

More and more and more rejections.

He was refusing to be saved.

But Heivia Winchell softly cut in while still crouched down.

And then he continued as if slicing through something invisible with a knight's sword.

“You can relax.”

The boy broke down into tears.

It was such a normal thing, but they had never been allowed it before.

The security chief sighed from a short distance away. He had been watching that painfully twisted greenhouse without doing anything to help, so he felt like he was seeing someone grant the wish he had failed to grant.

The boy’s words were a barely intelligible mess, but Heivia Winchell definitely heard something in that mass of noise.

He heard the boy asking to be saved.

“I swear to you I’ll end this. None of you will ever transport Immortanoid again and we’ll sink that greedy battleship. I, Heivia Winchell, swear on the blood running in my veins and on the tradition of my name that I will not abandon any of you. So there’s nothing – not a single thing – to worry about.”

Then the noble son gently placed a hand on that small head.

He may have been in over his head here.

He may not have been the most morally upstanding person in the world.

But at this moment, he had to be the unbeatable knight in shining armor here.

That was his duty.

“Hey. Anything I say is probably going to sound like empty words after the garbage people you’ve been exposed to, but let me ask you one thing. Do you know why nobles like me eat better food, sleep in nicer beds, train in cutting-edge gyms, and pay for it all with the tax money taken from the commoners?”

He recalled some musty old words.

He had heard this line from his father on a daily basis until a certain incident had led to a falling out with his parents and siblings.

Nobles were those who were given land by the king to protect the people who lived there.

Nobles were those who were first to race into battle when the need arose.

Nobles were those who could do the jobs no one else could.

In other words...

"It's to hone the strength needed to protect you."

Part 8

"By the way, Elise, why did you go to all that unnecessary trouble?"

"Huh?"

Her brain must not have been working despite the glasses because the busty blonde only looked confused, so Quenser waved his own device at her.

"Your mobile device. You could have just sent us a message instead of physically carrying it to us."

"What, did you not check what it says on the screen? Um, look right here."

Part 9

Their first and last challenge had begun.

If they made a single mistake or were hit by a single stray shot while moving around outside the Julius Caesar, they would be literally blown to pieces.

They had just the one chance here.

"There it is. It's here," excitedly said Elise Montana while observing things outside through a gap in the curtain. "It's the ice fog. The reflected sunlight is turning everything white!!"

"Good, now we can stay hidden!"

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance fleets had been trapped in the thick ice after moving unnaturally close in a large X-shape. The sensors had malfunctioned and vision had been poor, but the fact remained that the hastily-readied fleets had not been equipped for an extreme low-temperature environment.

They could do this now.

Or rather, if they let this opportunity pass them by, the fearsome festival of ship's guns would begin blasting them away along with the scrap metal they were hiding behind.

The gathering of small ice crystals was a weather phenomenon, so it was all up to chance. They had no idea when it would clear up, so Quenser, Heivia, and Elise ran down the gangway and attached their Nordic skis to their boots. The snow covering the icy ground created a crunching feeling through the skis as they moved.

The disconcerting sound like the ground being torn to pieces reached them even at this distance. The Electric 019 was supposedly around 5km away, but the shaking reached their feet through the white ground.

"If they really intend to attack the aurora observation ship from one end to another, they'll want to fire on it from as parallel a position as possible. It's all over once they get into position. They have about 5km left, I think."

"5km?" said Elise. "That's only going to take them a few minutes, right? Even a battleship that big can move at several dozen knots, right!?"

"In the normal ocean, yes. But this one is forcing its way through ice thick enough to trap the average warship. It can only move about as fast as a bicycle."

That still meant less than half an hour.

If they screwed up here, they would not get a second chance.

"Heivia, Elise. Do you remember the process?"

"Yes!! If you're worried about anyone, it should be Miss Busty who finds miraculous new ways to be clumsy!!"

"I-I-I'm trying my best too!!"

Quenser glanced down at his mobile device and saw the display was almost entirely frozen. But not literally frozen by the Arctic cold.

There was another reason the military device was barely functioning.

"Let's get started."

On that signal, the three of them began moving toward the Information Alliance's Electric 019 that

had vanished behind a thick white screen. If they were right about this, they could never reach the side of that battleship no matter what. That meant they could not approach it and set up a plastic explosive like with the other ships.

Of course, nothing else they could do from the outside would damage a ship of that size. They would need Object-level firepower to defeat it in the traditional sense.

But they were not trying to fight in that way.

They had a single goal.

“It’s using microwaves,” said Quenser with his breath visible while he desperately stabbed his ski poles into the snow and ice. “The same as in a microwave oven! That battleship sends powerful microwaves out from that V-shaped icebreaker blade to vibrate the water molecules and raise their temperature enough to melt the ice!!”

“That does make sense,” added Elise while her large chest shook in time with the movement of her skis. “Something was clearly wrong when our mobile devices couldn’t communicate with each other inside the same ship. There had to be some kind of invisible signal getting in the way.”

“When coming up with a solution, they had to work with whatever they had on hand, so this was perfect for them,” said Heivia. “Do you think they maybe tore the radars off of the trapped cruisers and remade them into an icebreaker blade? A ton of military equipment emits high-power microwaves, after all!!”

“Oh, yeah. You’re technically a radar analyst, aren’t you? What are you doing out here on the front line when the pay’s the same???”

“I want to get back to the maintenance base so bad!!”

That meant they only had to cause some trouble there.

If they could get rid of the microwaves, not even that extra-large battleship could break through the ice. In fact, the ship’s own weight would work against it. The result would be worse than simply being unable to stop right away. What would happen if it was forced onward without being able to break the ice?

It would be helpless to stop it.

The battleship’s own power would crush it like an empty can.

“We can’t get anywhere near that battleship when it’s emitting microwaves powerful enough to melt

meters of ice in real time," said Quenser.

"I'm aware of that," said Heivia.

"So we'll have to stop it from a distance. And that's where your sniping skill comes into play. It'll be your finger on the trigger. We're counting on you."

Quenser let go of the object in his hand.

It too was handmade.

It was made from party decorations, so the materials had been easily obtained on that aurora observation ship: aluminum foil, helium gas, a rubber balloon, fishing line, etc.

In other words, it was a handmade silver balloon.

After filling the balloon with helium, he had fully covered the outside with aluminum foil.

"It's at the 100m line!"

"I can't see it in this whiteout!!"

"The ice fog is everywhere, so use the string extending from my hand as a guide. The balloon should be at the end of that."

They circled around the Electric 019 until they had a tailwind toward the battleship. Since they could not approach the ship, they had to release a balloon and let it approach.

Also, the 100m was not its distance to the battleship.

That was its altitude.

"My hair is feeling all frizzy," said Elise. "The small ice crystals in the air are colliding and creating static electricity, aren't they? The electrification is starting even here on the surface!!"

"Heivia."

They had no time for hesitation, so Heivia clicked his tongue and readied his assault rifle.

Lightning could in fact be induced.

A familiar example would be a lightning rod.

However, constructing a large metal pole on top of a building was not the only way. Basically, anything was fine as long as you introduced a highly conductive electrode into an electric field containing enough energy to induce a corona discharge.

For example, by dangling a metal wire from the bottom of a rocket.

For example, by unleashing a straight stream of pressurized water using a pump with even more pressure than a fire truck.

That field of research was known as lightning induction and it had seen partial practical results. It was no longer difficult to send lightning to a specific location as a form of divine punishment.

And lightning was a great mass of energy.

By sending it to the right location, it could distort and break down a powerful wall of microwaves.

So one hit to the Information Alliance's Electric 019 would protect everyone.

"Ahhh!"

A loud gunshot rang out, but Elise let out a sorrowful cry.

Nothing more than a balloon covered in aluminum foil was fairly weak when it came to lightning induction. To use the corona discharge, they really wanted their conductive material to be as pointed as possible like with a lightning rod.

That was why Quenser had tossed some Christmas decorations inside the balloon. Specifically, pointed stars.

The conditions needed for lightning induction were finally in place once the balloon had popped and its contents flew out.

They had not wanted lightning to strike early, so they had encased the stars in the balloon as a sort of on/off switch.

That was the plan anyways. However...

“Did I miss? No!!”

The white curtain kept them from seeing what had happened 100m above them, but the string Quenser held had definitely gone slack. The balloon had popped, but it had not caused the lightning induction they wanted.

“Was the electric field at a different altitude than we expected? Elise, you said your hair was feeling frizzy, right? Let’s do it a little lower next time! 80m!!”

“How many chances do we have left!?” asked Elise. “I doubt this whiteout will last forever and anyone around here would have heard the gunshot. They have to know we’re here, so if they fire a ship’s gun based on the sound, only a huge crater will remain here!!”

“They’re breaking through the ice as they go, so they shouldn’t be able to accurately detect where the sound came from!!”

“You can’t know that when we aren’t on their ship!”

“Then do you think you can escape a battleship’s EM cannon on foot? Cause I know I can’t. That means destroying it before it can fire is our only chance!!”

They shoved the decorations made of colored metal leaf into the deflated balloon, inflated it with a can of helium, and attached the fishing line. Then they covered it with the decoy aluminum foil.

And they let go so it took flight.

“Reach it, reach it,” repeated Quenser as a type of prayer as the balloon rose at the other end of the fishing line.

Repeating the same thing after failing once was nerve-racking, but changing things up without thinking it through would only lead you astray. Their theoretical calculations had been accurate, so as long as they could make up for the slight margin of error brought by reality, they could induce this lightning.

Heivia let out a white breath and aimed his assault rifle into the sky.

There was no problem here.

They should be able to do it.

And then....

"It's clearing up."

They heard a fearful voice as Elise Montana looked all around them.

"The ice fog is clearing up!! If we don't hide, the battleship will notice us and focus its fire on us!"

Quenser clicked his tongue and used a short cooking knife to cut the fishing line. Then he practically embraced Heivia while collapsing behind a nearby pile of scraps. He was still wearing his skis, so he nearly twisted his ankle.

They had to redo it all.

"Are you sure this will work?" asked Heivia in a dark voice while covered in snow and ice crystals.

Once the white screen cleared up, they were stuck in place.

Their makeshift cover was only good for hiding them. A shot from the ship's guns would obliterate them along with the scrap metal.

And they could not wait forever. Once the Electric 019 arrived in position, it would mercilessly fire on the aurora observation ship.

It was a real dilemma.

"Are you sure this entire method isn't just wrong!? We've trapped ourselves with this idea of ours and wandered into a dead end!"

"Quiet, Heivia. This is only a short gap in the white curtain, so we'll have our safe zone back soon enough. We just need to get one hit in. If we can induce lightning where we want it, we can win this!!"

Heivia aimed his rifle at his ally.

You must never aim at an ally and we must all work together to win this battle. That sounded nice and all, but he had his own reasons for needing to survive this.

His finger was on the trigger.

And he quietly asked a question.

“ ‘I just need one more’ is a warning sign when gambling. You can get two 7s pretty easily at the slots and going from two-of-a-kind to three-of-a-kind in poker is really hard. You aren’t letting the pressure get to you because those kids’ lives are on the line here, are you?”

“That might be true when you’re relying on a meaningless jinx like ‘instinct’ or ‘luck’, but we’re talking about real logic and statistics here. You’ll lose big if you change your well-thought-out plans based on your fear of some invisible factor like an unlucky streak.”

“...”

The student looked the other boy in the eye even with the muzzle pressed against the center of his forehead.

He gave the obvious answer.

“Do you want to know how to win a million euros at the horse races? Prepare 100 million euros, use an emotionless program to purchase tickets in a way that gradually builds up a small profit margin, and keep at it until you have 101 million euros. After all, it’s a mere 1% difference from your starting amount. As long as the statistical and probability theory your program uses is accurate, you can win like that. It’s not about luck or a winning streak. Sound logic and repetition will earn you a surefire victory. Listen, even if you hit a temporary setback, you aren’t going to improve things if you get scared and change your plan on a whim. Doing that will only lead you away from victory and you’ll end up losing again and again until you’re drowning in debt.”

Elise waved both her arms at them.

“P-please get down! We can’t count on the whiteout right now, so you can’t let your colorful heads poke up above the scrap!”

“Tch.”

Heivia removed his assault rifle’s muzzle from Quenser’s head.

They endured the wait behind cover.

They endured it and suppressed so much tension it felt like their hearts were leaping out from their throats.

They could feel the shaking of the battleship breaking the ice.

And.

Quenser saw a change in the wind.

“I-it’s back,” said Elise. “The ice fog is back!!”

“That ate up a lot of time. We don’t have much to spare, Heivia!!”

The world was enveloped in white, but Quenser repeated the exact same process as before. After being stuck in place like that, this was so stressful it seemed to be taking years off their lives.

His hands were numb from the cold.

Or were his fingertips trembling from fear and tension?

He had trouble setting up the balloon in the same way as before. He wanted to lash out in frustration, but he told himself that would not improve matters.

Yes, they would not get many more chances at this. He knew that. It was all over once the Information Alliance Electric 019 detected them, but this frigid world might also cause the balloon’s rubber to crack. It did not matter how many spare balloons they had if all of them were rendered useless.

“This is terrifying,” said Heivia to honestly express his mental state while holding his assault rifle’s grip.

The air was cold enough to freeze his eyelashes, but he was pouring with sweat.

Anyone would be afraid.

Anyone would want to run away.

They could not run from the fear of death here and messing up this one shot would seal the fate of the aurora observation ship’s passengers and crew. There had to be something wrong with anyone who felt nothing in this situation.

“Then are you going to give up?”

Quenser was not speaking to anyone else.

He was really speaking to himself while working with the fishing line.

“Are you going to head back to that boy and tell him we can’t do it after all due to circumstances beyond our control?”

“Heh.”

In that final moment, Heivia Winchell laughed.

Quenser did not usually think about it.

He just saw that boy as an awful friend.

But the fact that Heivia could say this may have been the proof that he was a noble.

“I’d rather die than do that.”

He pulled the assault rifle’s trigger.

A moment later, a great boom and flash of light seemed to split the world asunder as it dropped straight down and mercilessly pierced the bow of the Electric 019.

Part 10

It took a long time.

In fact, it took more than half an hour, but the gray ship made of steel and composite armor was slowly but surely destroyed like an aluminum can in a vise. First, the icebreaker blade was crushed and fell off. The ship was enormous, so it could not stop right away even though everyone onboard had to know it could not keep going.

The crew may have had a chance to escape outside.

Assuming the continuing bending of the walls did not seal the thick waterproof doors shut.

“The Information Alliance has made a temporary retreat. Or rather, they seem to be waiting to see what happens. They appear to be reassessing their fundamental strategy based on the assumption that an unknown meteorological weapon based around lightning has been introduced to the battlefield,” said busty silver-haired Frolaytia. “Anyway, it was fortunate that gave us the time we needed to evacuate the children from the ship. The greedy Information Alliance will gain nothing when they attack the aurora observation ship again. I say we let them waste months stripping off the wallpaper and tearing up the floorboards in search of some nonexistent gold.”

“Did anyone bother to remove the nobles from the ballast tank?”

“Leave them be. The Information Alliance is sure to greedily search every last part of that ship, so they might just happen across that bonus prize.”

That sounded a bit much for a simple scolding. Nobles would probably be able to find their way back home using diplomatic means, but they might still have to spend the remainder of the holidays in a cell the size of a phonebooth inside an Information Alliance internment facility.

“What will happen to those children?”

“We need to do something about their artificial joints and organs. If word gets out they are filled with valuable products, they could still be abducted by someone up to no good. Those will be replaced with standard-priced commercial products. Let’s hope this is the last surgery they ever need.”

“And who’s paying for that?”

That question might sound harsh, but unlike for nobles, it was an unavoidable part of life for commoners. If those children’s families had not been in financial trouble, the nobles could not have used the treatment of the children’s illnesses as an excuse to use them as their pawns.

But Frolaytia actually smiled in response.

“Their cooperation has eliminated the risk of all that Immortanoid being hidden in a foreign secret bank, so the proper taxes will now be paid. The government is most thankful. They say the additional taxes will add up to a large enough sum that a small ‘cooperation fee’ can more than cover for the surgeries. The strict government workers might actually send a fruit basket this time.”

Then she gently placed the long, narrow kiseru in her mouth.

After a pause, she continued.

“Immortanoid, huh?”

“Oh, are you interested in that too, Major?” asked Elise. “Um, are you perhaps interested in hot springs as part of your Island Nation hobby?”

“I have no interest at all in radiation therapy administered anywhere outside of a specialized medical facility. That just sounds dangerous. More importantly, Elise, are you aware at what percentage Immortanoid is found in the ground?”

“Um, it is worth 200 times the value of gold because it is so rare, right? I assume you would only find a fingertip’s worth if you dug through an entire desert.”

“You assume wrong,” Frolaytia smiled a little. “The answer is zero. Exactly 0.00%.”

Between the Lines 1

This is the story of a world far removed from that battle.

Specifically, it occurs behind a domed stadium. A simple container-style building had been set up within the large material storage yard to provide a dressing room. In the modern age, a 3D printer was enough to build a house.

The silver-haired, brown-skinned Information Alliance officer named Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito mentally gnashed her teeth while viewing the video news on a largish tablet device.

(A mission to shoot down Santa? Dammit, Legitimacy Kingdom, that’s actually a really good idea!! That kind of heartwarming military news is supposed to be our specialty. Ahhh, they beat us to it! They beat us to Santa Claus!!)

The Pilot Elite of her maintenance base peered over at the tablet from the side.

That girl with gorgeous ringlet curls had just finished passionately singing at a Christmas concert for about two hours, but she was intently focused on the screen here.

However, she was not interested in whether or not Santa existed.

“Ho, oh ho ho. This...this music playing in the background!! That is my Christmas song, isn’t it!? How dare they use it without permission! Royyyalllthiies, royyyalllthiies!!!!”

She started sounded something like a zombie from the Capitalist Corporations.

It was the Information Alliance style to start wars over this kind of thing, but Lendy figured nothing major would happen this time. War required the veneer of justice. If they squashed the Christmas spirit underfoot by starting a war over royalties for a major song, it would only hurt their public image. They would benefit more by playing the sensible adult and overlooking it just this once.

Similar to TV commercials and online banner ads, it was worth paying a lot of money for something as unquantifiable as a good image.

“What are you doing?” asked the Elite.

“We receive leave over the New Year’s holiday instead of Christmas, so I mentioned we are holding a military exercise at a Caribbean resort, remember? The budget for that is a little low, so I was thinking I could earn a little something extra to make it a really luxurious vacation.”

“So you’re investing tax money for personal gain?”

“Call it asset management of public funds.”

The Information Alliance was like a manifestation of virtual currencies and electronic money, but that meant it was difficult to get rich quick using the investment methods already widely known to the public. That was why Lendy was headed in a different direction.

“Immortanoid?”

“Hee hee. A bank. It’s a bank. The age of banks is upon us.”

“Huh? That’s where people store their money, right? I don’t see how that leads to profit.”

“Really? This is a new form of business where you spread disinformation among the residents of an unstable country to work up a panic, convince them their bank accounts are about to be frozen and all their assets are going to be worthless, give them a chance to convert that money into a rare earth that will ‘never lose its value’, and make sure to charge a commission for each transaction. Mwa ha ha. This gives me a 100% chance of profit! It’s guaranteed money!!”

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