

Chapter 2: Between the Year's End and the Year's Beginning >> Uyuni District Salt Flat Suppression Operation

Part 1

Let's all enjoy the end of the year together!

The final big event of the year begins now!! Are you ready for the Royal Cleaner!?

"Hmph."

Now, this was a major problem.

Inside the maintenance hangar large enough to contain the entire 50m Object, the blonde Princess looked something like a small animal with too many acorns in its cheeks. It was honestly very cute, but she would probably hit you if you said that in front of her.

"It feels like no one even needs me anymore. Quenser and the others get to have all the fun."

"We were thrown out into the Arctic without those armor panels or even the bare minimum of a bulletproof jacket!! It was awful! It was so awful I can barely stand it! It was just the worst!!"

Quenser Barbotage was half speaking his mind and half trying to earn himself some sympathy, but the more he said, the worse the Princess's mood got. She was curled up in the corner and refusing to look him in the eye.

A short distance away, the old maintenance lady breathed an exasperated sigh while holding a huge hydraulic tool.

She could not believe that damn fool did not understand the basic fact that talking on and on about how "awful" everything was could be devastating to the kid who missed out on the field trip.

"I hear you met Santa, Quenser."

"Hmm?"

"The kids on that ship said Santa saved them, so you must have seen him, right?"

The information had gotten twisted along the way, but correcting her would not be the kind thing to do here.

“Ha ha ha. Well, it wasn’t as exciting as you’d think.”

“What kind of person was he?”

“I’m on the naughty list, so I didn’t get a present.”

Also, the Baby Magnum was the foundation of the 37th and only the Princess could pilot it. Any damage to her mental health could harm their future operations, so the old lady casually joined the conversation.

“Here, Princess. If you’re so bored without anything to do, I have plenty of work I can give you. There’s a lot of salt in this area, so we need to clean your Object as often as possible.”

“Hmph.”

“It isn’t the quality of the work that helps make memories. Simply spending time together strengthens our bonds. And this can double as that Royal Cleaner event too.”

She was still reluctant, but the Princess lifted her butt from the ground. More than just looking reluctant, she actually kept her lips pouted like a small child as she grabbed the cleaning equipment with both hands. The equipment was larger than a mop. It was most likely a larger version of the polishers that used polishing discs on the exterior of a car.

Meanwhile, Quenser actually looked surprised and glanced over at the old lady.

“You actually keep up with that kind of stuff? And here I was wondering why everyone was talking about that Royal Cleaner thing all of a sudden.”

“Because I’d rather not become a geek who can’t even make small talk.”

“Agh!?”

That one hurt coming from a wrinkly old lady.

In reality, the old lady’s geek levels far surpassed Quenser’s, but that just meant she knew exactly what to say to hurt the kind of person who had gotten way too into one particular interest.

The battlefield student dripped with sweat and gestured wildly while trying to explain himself.

“I-I-I-I know what it is! I’m up on all the latest trends! That’s the new event they created to fill the empty spot between Christmas and New Year’s, right!? And it’s a time for cleaning!! Everyone

gathers together and cleans up the town!! I was only pretending. Yes, only pretending not to know so I would blend in!!!!!!”

The safe countries would likely be full of young people dressed in swimsuits, maid uniforms, and other outfits that kept the filth off of their normal clothes during this midwinter cleaning. While the event was meant to be about cleaning, it was mostly enjoyed for the sense of unity and to have a big party while dressed up in costumes. But since they were cleaning up as volunteers, the adults could not get mad at them like with the wild partying that happened at Halloween.

In fact.

Based on the cheers and excited cries coming from outside the hangar, the festival had reached the maintenance base zone as well. The maintenance team was simply too strict for that.

“(Well, life in the Island Nation was enough to see plenty of this before. Businessmen are always inventing and altering traditions to create whatever kind of event they need to make some money, so this hardly new. Just like with Halloween, Christmas, and Valentine’s, the people just want to party and don’t give a damn where the holiday came from or how it was originally celebrated.)”

The old lady sighed and tossed Quenser a metal water sprayer nozzle that was leaning against the wall nearby. It had a thick tube attached and it was far more than just a firefighting hose. That thing looked more like a small beam weapon.

“You can take care of the main cannon joints. Sand and salt are the enemy, so spray it all off. Use the ALS to detect any left behind.”

“Sure, sure. What wavelength?”

“385 nanometers. It’s nothing but normal salt, so stick to the basics.”

The Baby Magnum itself was a huge sphere, which meant little space to stand on, so it was surrounded by steel beams and scaffolding like a jungle gym. It also had stairs and simple lifts, so it looked a lot like a small piece of modern architecture.

Quenser circled behind the Object, attached his lifeline to the metal railing, and then squeezed the trigger on the metal nozzle he held at his hip. He meant to start out with a weak blast, but the water pressure was so powerful he was nearly launched backwards.

“Bwah, ah!?”

The old lady looked as exasperated as ever from the floor below him.

"No one's interested in seeing a guy like you all wet. Get to work."

"Do none of you maintenance workers have a healthy fear of heights!?"

What he had to do was simple: blast the Object's joints with the powerful water gun to remove the caked-on salt. However, the stubborn salt could not all be seen with the naked eye, so he had to wear special goggles and shine a purple light on it to see where the "stains" were.

"Okay," said the Princess from directly above him.

Her cleaning device was something like a monstrous electric toothbrush larger than a mop. It was primarily used on the sensors, so it was most efficient to let the Pilot Elite herself do that job. That meant Quenser had to work separately from her this-

"Bfhh!? Um, uh! Princess, what are you doing!?"

"You have to ask? This is the Royal Cleaner."

Something had changed.

The short-haired Princess had been rummaging around inside the crane's box seat, but when she emerged, she was wearing a classic maid uniform instead of her skintight special suit.

It was true people tended to wear things like that during the event, but...

"Wouldn't your uniform have been good enough!? If you were only worried about getting dirty!?"

"You don't like it?"

He was on a lower level and she was on a higher level, so the result should have been obvious. The classic type had a long skirt, but their positioning meant he could see right up it. However, she did not seem to have noticed that fact. But he could not let himself rejoice. What exactly he could see will have to remain unsaid!! Because if he rejoiced here, she would catch on!!

The old maintenance lady was working on the level below Quenser, so she would see the same thing if she happened to look up.

(How can I keep myself in this paradise for even one second longer!?)

"Hiyahh!!"

With a cry like the star of a Capitalist Corporations action movie, he somewhat bent the jointed light attached to the railing nearby. Using bright lights to cover up indecent things was a trick invented for Island Nation TV broadcasts. Who better to take inspiration from here than the geniuses who had first introduced Objects to the world?

“Hm? What is it, Quenser???”

“Nothing!! Just working to get out a stubborn bit of salt!! Out, damned spot, out!!”

He poured all his efforts into washing away her suspicion.

Meanwhile, the old lady did not seem to notice that her vision was unnaturally obscured.

“It’s all about probability and statistics. In other words, they’re after an economic effect. I bet the Royal Cleaner had its beginnings in the Capitalist Corporations and spread to the other world powers as word of it leaked out. The marketers were fine with any event they could use to get people fired up between the 26th and the 31st.”

“Ehh? What’s wrong with that if we can all have some fun together? Grin, grin.”

(Th-this is working. I’ve finally set things up perfectly!! Now no one can intrude upon my paradise!! Oh, light blue, huh? I see, I see. Such a lovely and refreshing color reminiscent of mint ice cream. Grin, grin, grin!!)

“Nh.”

The panties overhead made a weird noise.

She was still holding the monstrous polisher in both hands and carefully polishing up the area around the delicate sensors. That meant she had nothing left to hold down her skirt...or she shouldn’t have, but that “umbrella” was unnaturally bent inwards.

She was working at close enough range that she had bent her arms in to hold the polisher up against her body as she worked.

She was holding the monstrous cleaning device like a body pillow while its powerful motor caused it to vibrate.

“Nhhh?”

(W-wait, is something awakening inside her? Princess, are you experiencing an awakening from that

vibration traveling through your body, just like with a bicycle seat or the corner of an old washing machine!? Yes, this is fantastic news. This is a most wonderful thing, Princessssssssssssssssssss!!!!)

“Ah.”

Quenser’s thoughts were cut off by a silly sound of surprise from the girl.

Because he was staring so intently overhead, he saw something slip from the Princess’s hands thanks to all the slippery cleaning fluid.

And a moment later, that mass of metal and a motor fell from the level above and hit the idiot square in the face.

Part 2

“Ohhhh. Ohhhhhhhh, Myonri!! How the hell are you still alive after your helicopter got shot down!?”

“Um, I’m really not sure what you’re talking about, but I wasn’t on a helicopter during the last mission. And, Heivia, if you use this outburst of emotion as an excuse to hug me, I will shoot you between the eyes and blame it on an accidental discharge.”

“And farewell, Quenser! I’m choosing this capable jack of all trades as my buddy, so you can work with that clumsy young woman who can find a way to trip on a perfectly flat floor!! Hahhh hah hah!!”

“Nooo!! Don’t shift all the blame away from yourself and run away! Why don’t I get a break from this nonsense!?”

Quenser could only cry on his own after Heivia and Myonri abandoned him.

And Elise Montana was muttering to herself with an even darker look on her face.

“Why am I being treated like some kind of god of poverty by this king of the railroad nerds? Does no one in the goddamn 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion have a user’s manual for how to treat girls?”

But their complaints meant nothing when it was a job.

Quenser and Elise climbed up the side of an armored vehicle parked nearby to reach the flat roof.

“Oh, and, Elise? We’re headed into battle, so you should remove those cat ears.”

“Eek!? What, no, you’re kidding!? Now you’ll know I wore cat ears and a school swimsuit and covered myself in soap bubbles to clean the bath with my entire body!!”

“That’s not the right outfit for someone as curvy as you!! Why didn’t you invite me!?”

Why hadn’t she? Because Quenser had been busy looking up at the Maid Princess’s panties. He could not be in two places at once, so if he wanted to attempt to enjoy multiple sexy events simultaneously, he would have to destroy the concept of an alibi and accept the existence of parallel worlds.

They ended up bickering like usual, but Elise Montana seemed in a bad mood. She removed her cat ears headband and pouted her lips like a child.

“Besides, I am a sergeant, you know? I outrank you, so you need to show me the respect I deserve!!”

“I dunno why you’re expecting a student to care about rank.”

“Respect!!”

“Okay, okay, Sergeant Pacifier.”

“Ehh!? Not even a rank of colonel or general can hope to make a dent in a word like pacifier!! It’s smothers all the other flavors like mayonnaise!”

Their uniforms were pure white this time.

But not because the higher ups were continuing to harass them by having them attend the battlefield in wedding attire.

“The Uyuni Salt Flat. Hyah, that’s incredible,” said Elise. “It’s nothing but salt as far as the eye can see.”

“It looks flat, but they say the elevation here is about 3600 meters. That’s about the same as the Island Nation’s Mt. Fuji, so make sure you don’t get altitude sickness.”

“Um, is that something you can prevent by being careful?”

It was December and they were in the Southern Hemisphere where the seasons were reversed, but it was still chilly at this altitude. On the other hand, they could feel the bright sunlight piercing into their skin. They were not on the midsummer beach, but they would probably get a tan in no time if they were not paying attention. That may have been another unique trait of a tall mountain

environment.

"Allll of this is used to mine salt to be sold, right?" asked Elise.

"That's a real Capitalist Corporations way of looking at it. But that may be why we were given these weird things."

Quenser banged the heel of his boot against the flat roof of the armored vehicle they were sitting atop.

It was not a tank.

It was likely based off a tank's design since it used a continuous track (because that reduced development costs and was easier to maintain), but it did not have a rotating gun on the top. Instead, a device that resembled a giant pinecone was attached to the end of a thick shaft. That was a drill, so this was a tunnel-drilling vehicle used to quickly create shelters or tunnels during wartime.

Heivia and Myonri's vehicle was kicking white dust(?) into the air a short distance out ahead, but it had two mantis-like arms folded up and a bulldozer-like dirt-pusher attached to the front. That was known as a military engineering vehicle and it was used to move fallen trees out of the way or to level out the runways for an airfield.

Frolaytia's voice arrived over the radio.

"Our objective today is to defeat the Capitalist Corporations' Second Generation Police Queen."

"Let me guess, she's wearing a police uniform and carrying a whip," commented Quenser.

"Our busty commander already has the dom in a tight skirt thing covered," said Heivia over the radio. "So enough of that creepily nice voice. Hit me with the whip already!"

Quenser frowned because Elise shook her radio up and down with a puzzled look and then scooted over next to him. All the salt in the air had apparently broken her military equipment already.

"Their entire military is a crazy collection of PMC forces, but this one is especially bizarre," continued Frolaytia. "This Object was built by their police special forces instead of their military."

"A police Object?" asked Quenser.

"What good is that?" added Heivia. "Chase after a criminal in that and they'll reduce the entire city to rubble."

The military and the police were very different categories even if they were armed with the exact same machineguns.

If the military performed police work, it would mean they were aiming their guns at their own people. If the police did military work, it would mean they had crossed national borders to arrest someone and were thus forcing their rules on another country. That was why any threats were designated as either terrorists or another nation's soldiers and those two organizations pursued them accordingly. Of course, it would sometimes turn out that the supposed terrorists were really elite commandos trained in a military facility.

"The Capitalist Corporations always pursues the most efficient and profitable business model. Going to twice the effort is a waste of funds, so they have previously tried to combine those two organizations. The Police Queen is another example. Although it may be less of a serious answer and more of an extreme answer meant to shift public opinion in the direction they want."

"Wait, but don't Objects cost 5 billion dollars each?"

"It's the same as TV commercials and online banner ads. Manipulating public opinion is apparently worth the cost to them."

That was quite something. Quenser was more interested in getting access to tangible technology than in acquiring formless influence, so this felt a lot like someone paying large sums of money just to become first in their class.

"If the Capitalist Corporations military and the police are squabbling, we can use that to our advantage. We just have to widen the existing crack into a large rift."

"Hm??? Then why are we destroying the one police Object they're testing out? Wouldn't it be more effective to attack the plentiful military Objects to weaken that side of the equation?"

"Why am I hearing Elise's voice coming from Quenser's device?"

The two of them were sharing the one radio. The vehicle was shaking, so the busty blonde's soft cheek and the side of her glasses would sometimes bump into him while he exchanged information, but...

"And you need to look further ahead than that, Elise," said Frolaytia. "If the Capitalist Corporations military and police are fighting, everyone will expect the military to win with their superior numbers. Pretty boring conclusion, right?"

"..."

"But what if the police Object actually fights an enemy Object and is defeated and then the military

adds insult to injury by continuing to attack the surviving police officers? They'll be attacking the allies of the people who just lost their precious Object, so can you imagine the backlash? We all know who everyone in the safe country will side with. They'll all curse the PMCs, say they don't need a military that attacks their own people instead of the enemy, and decide the police should build more Objects. Yes, all those people with too much time on their hands will let emotion get the better of them and support the losers. And they will never even think about what the ensuing chaos and standstill will cause."

Their mission was as godawful as ever.

This was not a lack of understanding how people's minds worked. The military intellectuals were out of control because they understood that too well and abused it.

"Wow..."

Busty blonde Elise Montana held the side of her glasses and stared off into the distance as if trying not to face the reality in front of her.

A giant form rose up there.

However, it was not an Object. It was a mass of salt the size of a large tour bus. Salt was rolled up in cylinders like the bales of hay on a farm and then stacked up in pyramids. It was not much different from how pipes were stored, but the sense of scale was entirely different.

Humans must have unconditionally felt awed when faced with enormous things or with a countless array of identical things.

"At 9000 square kilometers, this is the world's largest salt flat and salt producing region," said Quenser.

"Those pyramids can provide cover for an entire Object," said Heivia. "Are we supposed to be the bugs crawling along the floor of a giant kill house?"

However, there was no sign of the Police Queen itself. There appeared to be a few more pyramids beyond the horizon as well, but where was it hiding?

"We cannot rely on the satellite images," bluntly stated Frolaytia. "The Uyuni Salt Flat is entirely made of salt, so it acts like a giant greenscreen. Normal photos come back entirely white due to the reflected sunlight and laser range-finding is thrown off by the reflectance. We are scanning with radar on the ground, but that will not detect something hiding behind those salt pyramids. It keeps vanishing and reappearing."

"But I guess that also means the Princess can hide from them too."

"The Princess is following behind all of you and she will provide the finishing blow. Your job is to construct beneficial terrain. The ground is all salt, so you can dig through it all you want. The Police Queen uses an air cushion system to keep it afloat with the power of air, so whether on land or water, it will be greatly influenced by the bumps and dips in the surface. Stop it with a pitfall so the Princess can shoot it. That will end this."

"There's no way it'll be that easy," groaned Quenser while staring off into the distance.

"I would normally be right there with you in your pessimism, but not this time," said Heivia. "I mean, that walking disaster zone is with you!! Hahhh hah hah! You're carrying all the misfortune yourself, Quenser, so you can shield us from all the bullets! Meanwhile, we'll have a nice, relaxing-"

With a strange rumbling sound, Heivia's military engineering vehicle vanished from view up ahead.

Quenser quickly grabbed his radio.

"Stop! Stop for a moment!! What was that!?"

"Bgyah!?"

To make sure she was not thrown off by the rapid braking, Elise clung to and squished her large chest against the thick shaft of the drill rising up in front of them. It was nerve-racking how they slid forward a bit despite using the same continuous track as a tank. They must have been tearing off the top layer of salt on the white ground.

With the utmost caution, Quenser moved to the edge of the flat roof and peered down from the front of the tunnel-drilling vehicle. They had just barely stopped in time.

Stopped in time for what, you ask?

"Oh, ohhhh. A-are you for real with this?" someone groaned from below.

"Well, that's no fun," complained Quenser. "Heivia's just fine."

They had fallen.

The white salt flat looked like a single smooth mirror-like surface, but it actually had a large trench in it. This did not look at all natural. That abnormal blank spot was shaped like one of those tour bus-sized cylinders. More and more of those gaps were connected together to create a long, long labyrinthine series of trenches.

"I know they say the white salt flat messes with your sense of perception, but it looks like that works vertically too. You can't tell how deep the hole right in front of you is."

Frolaytia had said laser range finding from a satellite was unreliable on the all-white Uyuni Salt Flat, so they would have to walk around themselves to see how far that trench labyrinth went.

"Ughh. Is this an anti-tank trench?"

"You were driving that thing, Myonri?" he said into his radio. "But you might be overthinking it. Couldn't they have just been digging out the salt they sell?"

Myonri really was a jack of all trades.

The military engineering vehicle had fallen onto its face(?), but its butt was wiggling side to side. But that mass of armor was not trying to seduce him. It was using the two mantis-like arms to try to right itself.

"Huh? It can do that?"

"This thing's arms have previously proven their worth by punching through a thick fortress wall and letting in a bunch of soldiers during a battle in Oceania," said Heivia. "As long as it gets close, it can tear away a tank's front armor with brute force alone. It's like using a sickle on an aluminum can."

"Yeah, but I feel like the 'getting close' part wouldn't be easy. I'll admit everyone loves crab claw weapons, though."

"If you have time for exasperated sighs, then how about you help out!?"

"I would very much love to, but how do you suggest we drag out a hunk of metal weighing nearly 30 tons?"

Quenser's exasperation continued, but then he realized something.

Elise Montana had not said anything in a while. That was usually a sign of her causing some kind of trouble that no one had asked for (which she would apologize for with her boobs).

"Elise?"

"Huh?"

She was not looking into the trench where Heivia and Myonri had fallen. She was staring off into the

distance, so Quenser followed her gaze.

“Do you see some kind of shadow extending out to the side from behind that salt mountain?” she asked.

A short distance away, the white cylinders forming one of the salt pyramids collapsed without warning.

A 50m mass of metal came into view.

The giant rolls scattered every which way, some of them rolling their way. While they were made of salt, they were still the size of large tour busses. The relative density of salt was greater than 2, so they would weigh twice what an equally-sized tank of water would. A hit from that would flatten the average car.

They were a mere 1500 meters away.

They could not rely on satellite footage and it could hide from the surface radar scans by hiding behind things, but still.

“That’s way too close!!!”

“What, did Elise step in something again!?” shouted Heivia from within the trench. “I think it’s about time we slapped those tits of hers!!”

“Am I the only one who feels like I already repaid my debt during the Arctic mission!?” protested Elise.

“Capitalist Corporations Second Generation Police Queen detected,” said the Princess over the radio. “If I do not move in, everyone will be killed!”

“Understood, Princess. And the rest of you toilet brushes! If you don’t want to be demoted to helpless baggage, then get to work!!”

“Get to work!? You’re the one sitting back in your comfy command chair!!”

Danger was coming from ahead and behind.

Quenser gulped and grabbed Elise’s hand just as the first wave arrived. They had no choice but to jump down into the trench where Heivia and Myonri waited. Just as they rolled off the flat roof instead of jumping down, the giant cylinders of salt smashed into the tunnel-drilling vehicle

equipped with a pinecone-shaped drill.

Part 3

Things were not going well.

A mere 30 seconds into the battle and they had already lost their work vehicle.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what do we do!? We need to save the tunnel-drilling vehicle’s driver!!”

“Wait, Elise!! Rush out there without thinking and you’ll just inform the Police Queen that there were survivors!! That thing has thick armor and a first-aid kit, so as long as it doesn’t blow up, they’ll be safer inside that scrap metal!!”

“Dammit,” complained Heivia. “Why do you two sound so much more serious about rescuing them than when it was me?”

A giant form cut by overhead, but it was not one of the salt cylinders rolling around. It was much bigger. It was hard to tell from the split-second glimpse of the underside, but it was probably the Police Queen. Air rushed into the salt tunnel like a solid wall shortly after it passed by.

“Bwehh!?”

“Cough, don’t breathe!! It’ll damage your lungs.”

The ridiculously powerful gust of wind was a problem on its own, but it was also carrying fine salt. The amount was far different from what was found in the shaker on the dinner table. When it was dumped over your head, it was more like a slow-acting poison.

“What the hell is going on up there?” asked Quenser.

“Hey, wait!” shouted Heivia. “That’s our vehicle. You don’t get a free ride after showing no interest in saving us earlier!!”

Quenser ignored that useless comment while climbing onto the roof of the military engineering vehicle that had finally righted itself. The trench’s depth was about the same as a large tour bus, so standing on that tank-based vehicle and stretching up was not enough to see what was happening on the surface.

“Hey, a little help, Myonri?”

“Sure, sure.”

Quenser tied his mobile device’s strap to the end of one of the crab-claw arms, set it to video recording mode and had it lifted up like a periscope.

It had only been a minute, but being left behind for just that long was enough for impatience to burn in their chests. It felt like being in a foreign country during a disaster and hearing all the speakers play an urgent warning in the local language you did not understand. Was it saying you were in a safe spot and should not to move, or was it saying to get out of there because that area was dangerous?

They were starving for some accurate information.

They wanted to know what to do to survive.

The footage was mostly useless since they could not see what they were recording, but when freeze-framing it, they finally got a good look at the Police Queen.

The giant spherical main body had three arms attached at the top and evenly spread out along the front 180 degrees like a fan’s frame. The weapons were hanging down from those.

“I-it actually has flashing lights on top? Is this some kind of joke to them!?”

“That’s probably meant to emphasize that they’re only the police.”

The main cannons...were unknown.

Were they low-stability plasma cannons, laser beam cannons, railguns, coilguns, or rapid-fire beam cannons? There should have been some slight identifying features to figure that out, but the battlefield student could not find the answer from viewing those colossal cannons. They may have been able to switch between types like the Princess’s could.

They had already known it used an air cushion system, but it specifically had two ski-like floats that extended back behind the spherical main body. Those were held together when moving straight, but during turns and rapid stops, it could apparently spread the backs out into a V-shape to adjust its balance.

“Damn, it’s fast. And not just its top speed. It can move side to side faster than the Princess too! She’ll be overwhelmed like this!!”

“I can see why our busty commander was so insistent we stop it for her. But why the hell are we challenging an opponent we know we can’t beat spec-wise!? That’s just asking for a painful battle

full of sorrow!!”

At any rate, they knew that moving up onto the surface would end badly.

There was no saving them if that Capitalist Corporations Second Generation locked onto them. The unidentified main cannons were bad enough, but it could also directly crush them by approaching while it whizzed all over the battlefield.

And with that in mind...

“This thing’s arm can drag the stuck tunnel-drilling vehicle down here, can’t it?”

“Hey, didn’t we just conclude going up there is a bad idea!?”

“I can’t just leave them! We’ve waited this long and there’s still no sign of the driver. Keeping the Police Queen from realizing there were survivors is our top priority, but there’s no saving that driver if they’re crushed again either by accident or on purpose. We’re free to move down here, but we have to get them somewhere safe to wait for rescue!!”

Heivia scratched at his salt-covered head.

Of course he was hesitant.

It was all over if they were noticed. This was like climbing into the lion or gorilla cage to save a child who fell in. Even if you knew it was the right thing to do, the fear gripping your heart was very real. Doing it by the book would be difficult for anyone.

After a loud click of his tongue, Heivia finally gave a shout.

“Fine, let’s do it!! Oh, hell, there’s no escape is there? Nothing good ever comes of being around that walking disaster zone!!”

“Um, excuse me!? I had nothing at all to do with this one!”

They ignored the busty blonde glasses woman who grew tearful at this unfair criticism.

Quenser looked at his radio.

“Princess, where’s the Police Queen!? The dot on our devices is based on the maintenance base’s ground radar, so we can’t see it when it’s hidden behind those salt pyramids. Is Zone C5 safe!?”

"I am currently engaging it in Zone D5. That is fairly close to there. What are you planning?"

"I want to drag a stranded ally into the trench labyrinth."

"Understood. I will lure it to D3. Rescue them ASAP."

They only had one chance at this.

They started by crumbling the salt wall with a plastic explosive and using the military engineering vehicle's crab-like arms to smooth it out into a diagonal slope. The continuous tracks brought the vehicle up with a grinding noise, but a layer of softer crumbled salt got in the way. The student ducked down when he heard the loud squealing. If that 30-ton mass slipped down on them without warning, it could easily kill them while they watched on from below.

Once at the top of the salt slope, the crushed and stranded drill vehicle was right in front of it.

But a voice spoke over the radio while the vehicle's arms wandered hesitantly back and forth.

"It was damaged a lot worse than I thought. If I grab it with the claws and try to pull it down, it would probably tear apart. It might even explode."

"God, really!?"

Quenser rushed up to the surface where explosive booms continued shaking the air and pulled a thick wire from the winch reel on the back of the mass of metal Myonri was driving. He climbed on top of the scrap, made a circle of the pinecone-shaped drill turret to tie the wire in place, and then spoke into his radio.

"Pull now! Hurry!!"

"If the wire snaps, you'll be slapped by a piece of steel thicker than your thumb. Jump down!!"

The white ground was torn away as a fairly forceful game of tug-of-war began. Myonri was probably using a camera to see, but watching that heavy machinery back up like that was a powerful sight.

And a panicked voice cried out just as it was disappearing down the slope.

"Gyahh!!"

"Ah!? Myonri!!"

The military engineering vehicle descended the slope first and the tunnel-drilling vehicle followed afterwards.

That was simple enough, but the latter vehicle had been reduced to scraps and could not use its gas or brakes. The junk had apparently slid down the slope and collided with Myonri out front.

A normal tank or armored vehicle might have been pushed all the way down and crashed into the opposite salt wall, but that military engineering vehicle had two mantis-like arms.

“Ghhhhhhh, take this!!”

The crab claw ends held the scraps back while Myonri had her vehicle slowly descend the slope as if slipping back bit by bit. If she used too much or too little force, they could easily lose their surviving vehicle too.

The student shouted down from the surface.

“Is there anything I can do to help!?”

“Stay back! These are two 30-ton vehicles, so getting caught between them could take off a limb!!”

Instead of using the slope, Quenser jumped directly down from the edge of the large trench opened in the ground.

He had made the suggestion, but he could not find anything to do.

While he anxiously searched around, the two vehicles completed their one-minute descent down into the trench.

They were both safe.

“Well done, Myonri! I’ll buy you a drink or something later, so figure out what it is you want!!”

“Please don’t talk about what will happen ‘after the battle’. It’s bad luck. More importantly, can someone pull out the tunnel-drilling vehicle’s driver? It would be safer to bring them in here with me, wouldn’t it?”

Luckily, the hatch was not particularly bent. As instructed by Myonri, Quenser pulled out the driver and found it was a 13-year-old girl with bright brown skin.

“I’m so glad we didn’t abandon them.”

"Why are you treating her so differently from me?" asked Elise. "Do this world's rules favor the small or something?"

She may have cut the inside of her cheek because there was a bit of blood dripping from the corner of her mouth, but there was no sign of broken bones or serious internal bleeding. The blood in her mouth was probably not coughed up from an organ injury. They worked with Myonri to load the injured girl into the functioning vehicle.

"U-ughh." A weak groan escaped the silver-haired, brown-skinned girl's young lips. "Save me here and there's a good chance I'll fall in love with you..."

"That's an awfully self-interested reason for love. And I notice she's hedging just like those disinfectant sprays that say they kill 99.9% of germs."

With the sound of scraping metal, several of the Legitimacy Kingdom's gold Christmas coins fell from her breast pocket. The filthy schemer had apparently been ensuring peace of mind by converting her money into pure gold in between battles.

"Yup, she's a member of the 37th all right. You call her type a fortune hunter, right? Y'know, the people who marry a much older rich person and then get divorced three days later. I won't be surprised if I see her on a millionaires list through nothing but alimony."

She did not look on the verge of death or anything, so Quenser let the fancy noble treat her wounds while he instead looked through the materials left over in the crushed vehicle.

"Here, Myonri. I brought over the first-aid kit and PDW from the other vehicle. Plus a shovel, a fire extinguisher, a smoke grenade, and a few rations. And if you can believe it, she had a whole coffeemaker set in there. And I mean one with a mill to grind the beans before putting them in the dripper. There's no point leaving it all in there, so store it all in here, will you?"

"Can't we ride in here too?" asked Heivia. "Being outside scares the hell out of me."

"Sigh. You can if you like, but the trench's walls are made of fragile salt," said Myonri. "If they collapse and cover up the hatch, we'll be trapped in here until we all suffocate, but if that's what you want, be my guest."

The two idiots' balls shriveled up and they declined, as did the busty woman who had no balls.

They needed someone to dig the vehicle up if disaster struck.

After removing the winch wire from the scrap and retrieving it, they finally got back to work.

The Baby Magnum and the Police Queen were still locked in combat. Any chance they had was gone as soon as the Princess lost. Frolaytia had apparently been focused on the spec differences from the beginning, but that only meant they had no chance unless they could stop the Police Queen according to plan.

“Ksh, kssh. Quenser, can I make a request?” asked the Princess. “If you can do it, anyway.”

“What are these?”

Some bright glowing dots were flashing on the map of the Uyuni Salt Flat displayed on his mobile device.

“I will drive the Police Queen into position, so please split open the salt ground at the point I give you.”

“This is something human legs can handle, right? I’m getting dizzy just thinking about trying to keep up with your 500km/h speed!”

“Like I said, if you can do it.”

The original plan had been to spread their troops out across the area and have whoever was at the requested point do the detonation or drilling, but it sounded like the unexpected circumstances had prevented the potatoes from reaching their designated positions.

“Where should we start?” asked Myonri over the radio.

“All of us survivors lose any support if the Princess loses, so we need to destroy the ground below the Police Queen, don’t we?” said Quenser. “We may not be able to cover all of them, but it seems safest to work out which spot is closest to the greatest number of points and wait there.”

“Hey, wait,” said Heivia. “We don’t know where this trench goes, do we? Can we really reach where we want to go by following this? Doesn’t figuring out the layout of the labyrinth come first?”

Both of them had a point, but they could do the computer work while checking out the labyrinth. They could work out the spot closest to the greatest number of the Princess’s possible request points in advance.

So...

“Point F9. That’s our goal!!”

“Now it comes down to whether or not this trench reaches that point. We might have to dig into the wall and climb to the surface.”

Heivia was about to say more, but they once more fell victim to their inability to judge perspective or the flatness of the terrain.

It looked like a single straight path, but some men and women with carbines suddenly appeared up ahead. They were Capitalist Corporations soldiers. No, according to Frolaytia, these would be police officers and not soldiers. It was hard to tell since the dark blue bulletproof jackets and synthetic clothing would have been the same either way.

The only real difference was the distinctive flat police hats, the star-shaped badges on their chests, and the tight miniskirts on the women.

They were about 100m ahead, so there must have been a T-junction there.

The encounter came as a surprise for both sides.

However, the Legitimacy Kingdom group was in the middle of a straightaway and the Capitalist Corporations one could use the turn as cover. Once the latter group regained their cool and started shooting, the former group had no chance, so Quenser immediately shouted an instruction.

“Run them over!!”

“What, but the miniskirts!”

Panties could not save the world.

The tank-like continuous tracks tore into the salt ground as Myonri drove the mass of steel straight ahead. It bumped into the salt walls a few times along the way and tore off white chunks. The space was as wide as a tour bus, but that was barely enough. When they charged forward, the infantry would have a hard time dodging to the side.

The potatoes clinging to the roof were in a fairly risky position as well.

If this bluff failed, they would be riddled with bullets in no time, so Quenser felt the need to give a shout to seal the deal.

“Hah hah hah!! Don’t blame us! Blame your bad luck and your lack of equipment! This is how things are when you’re winning the battle!!!!!!”

Just as he was getting carried away, his vision dropped straight down.

To repeat, the pure white surroundings messed with their sense of perspective. That was why Heivia had not noticed the trench in the ground and why they had not noticed the T-junction that allowed these enemies so close.

Also, the ground was made of salt. There was no real limit there, so you could dig as deep as you wanted.

In other words, it was like a river interrupting the straight-line path.

The military engineering vehicle driven by Myonri fell to a second level of the trench labyrinth.

Part 4

Now that their vehicle had fallen, Quenser's group was in a bind.

They had to assume the worst at all times.

For example, what would they do if their opponents had fallen into a silly pitfall?

"Get down! Hurry!!"

Quenser kicked the busty blonde from the roof she was so stubbornly clinging to and then jumped down himself. A solid metallic thunk reached his ears before she could cry out in protest.

A grenade sans pin had been thrown down before bouncing off the military engineering vehicle's roof.

"!!!???"

They managed to shove themselves in the slight space between the two tank-like continuous tracks just before the powerful explosion erupted out. More than a simple explosion, it came with the added bonus of small metal fragments. If they had not gotten below the vehicle so quickly, they never would have survived.

Since the anti-personnel grenade used fragments to injure, it could not destroy the tank-based vehicle.

The ringing in Quenser's ears was too loud to hear anything, but he tapped Heivia's shoulder and pointed upwards.

The Capitalist Corporations group had to be delighted.

But just as they peeked over the edge of the cliff to check on the results, Heivia aimed his assault rifle up and let loose a quick spray of bullets. Heads were blown away along with their distinctive hats, but they could not relax yet.

"We don't know how many of them there were!! Find some way to check!!"

Their enemies were human too, so they were not going to just stand there after being hit by a surprise attack. They would likely fall back and use the salt walls for cover.

"Nhh."

A deep hydraulic sound rumbled without warning.

"Now I'm pissed!!"

Myonri appeared to be a tad upset about falling for a trap and then having a grenade thrown on her head, so she spread out the folded-up mantis-like arms and made a horizontal sweeping blow to the trench a level above them.

Except this functioned as more than sweeping the enemy's legs out from under them.

With a disturbingly raw slicing sound, the police officers (were they too privatized in the Capitalist Corporations?) had their upper bodies separated from their lower bodies.

Heivia quickly pulled his head back under the vehicle to avoid the shower of blood and gore.

"Not the women...ugh!!" shouted Heivia. "Wh-wh-what is wrong with you!? I'm so sick of this war!!"

"Says the killer," replied Myonri. "Minding your manners now is not going to make you seem refined."

Myonri used one of the crab-claw arms to grab a grenade from one of the enemy's corpses. She could not pull the pin out like that, but it did no matter. She held the arm up on the higher level and crushed it with the hydraulic power to detonate it. The blast scattered metal balls across that entire space.

All the gunfire and screams ceased.

"Some might be playing dead, so please go up and check for me," said Myonri.

"Who do you expect to do that? Because I know I'm not peeking up at that upper level full of mutilated corpses. That's the kind of thing that traumatizes-"

Myonri grabbed the stubborn child by the back collar of his uniform and lifted him up.

"Gyah! Not the sexy policewomen in tight skirrrrrrrts!!!"

Heivia's sensibilities were far from normal, yet what he saw up there still managed to elicit a scream from him, so Quenser and Elise huddled together like kittens below the bed while their teeth chattered in fear.

Human Periscope Heivia was slowly lowered to the ground while his soul tried to escape from his mouth.

"Okay, I checked. They're all dead. So very, very dead."

"U-um, they technically count as police officers, so should we have killed them?" asked Elise. "I don't want to be accused of slaughtering foreign civilians."

"They have an Object. Once you've acquired the right to fight a battle, your life is fair game."

It was unclear how the trenches had been dug, but the second level ran perpendicular to the first level. It was like a river cutting across the path, or like an intersection shifted vertically. If they were not prepared to further crush those mutilated corpses with the continuous tracks, it would be better to continue along the second level instead of returning to the first. Although that was more about their mental health than pure logical reasoning.

Elise must not have wanted to sit on the roof while it was filthy with red blood and guts, so she sprinkled some salt all over the roof and then pulled a device out of the vehicle. It was a polisher, a car-washing device that used a motor to rotate a polishing disk that would get the exterior of a car nice and shiny in no time.

"Things are finally feeling in line with that Royal Cleaner event."

"N-now I'm worried there might be a third and fourth level as well."

"I will follow the second level for now, but the ceiling above us introduces even more risk if the salt collapses," said Myonri. "Be careful, everyone."

"How is being careful supposed to increase our odds of survival, dammit?"

Myonri was right that the salt above them made the second level a true tunnel, so they did not even have the sunlight anymore. She switched on the vehicle's headlights, but that felt terribly inadequate. This was very different from a highway tunnel that had orange lights installed every so often.

Heivia gave an annoyed look down at his staticky radio.

"What, did it get some salt inside and break?"

"Yay!" celebrated Elise. "I'm not the only clumsy one!"

"Wait, I don't want people thinking I'm as clumsy as her! Anything but that!!"

Of course he did not. Heivia did not wear glasses, he was not busty, and he was not a young woman, so he would receive none of the breaks she had.

However, Quenser had a more optimistic view.

"I bet the connection is just blocked by the tunnel. Myonri, radio check."

"Feeling lonely, Quenser?"

That exchange proved two radios in the tunnel together still worked.

"Based on my mobile device, we should be approaching F9."

"Thank god the map was stored on the local device. But what if we reach the goal and find we still have a salt ceiling above us?"

Luckily, there were no traps that detonated the entrances on either end to bury them alive. After driving about 200m along, the ceiling opened up again and connected back to a large trench on the first level.

Quenser blew up the wall, Myonri used the arms to smooth out the ramp, and the military engineering vehicle drove up to the higher level.

"We're finally here," said Quenser while walking out ahead of the vehicle instead of returning to the rusty-smelling roof. "I see Point F9 up ahead. Now we can finally help out the Princess."

Without the oppressive ceiling of salt, they could receive the blessing of EM signals again. Gaining updated data on their mobile devices was their top priority, but they could not stay still in the meantime.

“Myonri, a little higher.”

On Quenser’s instruction, the thick folded-up arm extended upwards. It was as thick as the steel beams used in buildings, so after it came to a stop in a diagonal position, Quenser climbed up it and straddled the crab-like end.

He had risen above the first level to arrive at the front line on the surface.

When he peeked out, he saw the vast expanse of salt and the white pyramids made from stacks of cylinders. He also saw the masses of salt rivalling large tour busses in size that were rolling every which way after those pyramids collapsed. There was also a trench labyrinth dug all over the salt land like the underside of a circuit board, but he could not see that with his sense of perspective thrown off. The battlefield was as hellish as ever. They did not want it to be as flat as a mirror, but all these things covering it also created more opportunities for death.

However, that was not the first thing he noticed.

He first noticed the odor that reached his nose.

(What’s that burnt smell?)

He could see Legitimacy Kingdom military vehicles here and there. He could not believe they had actually driven up onto that dangerous salt land. A supply vehicle was relatively close by. It looked something like a boxy snowmobile on continuous tracks, but it was actually a support vehicle filled with replacement pinecone-shaped drills for the tunnel-drilling vehicles.

Since that supply vehicle appeared to be alone, the tunnel-drilling vehicle it should have been paired with may have been destroyed. It could have fled back to the maintenance base zone, but it must have been driven by an overly obedient soldier who wanted to continue gathering intelligence.

An intermittent low rumbling shook the air.

This was not anything as contradictory as a safe war and they were not an audience viewing a fireworks show. The Baby Magnum and the Police Queen continued their intense battle even now. Since the enemy was a police Object, it may have been doing some profiling based on the Princess’s fighting style to work out her personal idiosyncrasies.

Quenser looked around and then brought the radio to his mouth.

He had left the salt tunnel and could finally send out a message.

“Princess, we have arrived at F9. We will now place explosives on the salt wall. Send us the request when the timing is right for you.”

“Quenser? You need to get out of there!!”

He received an awfully urgent response just before a 50m colossus crossed the trench about a kilometer away from his position. He had lost sight of it until now because the fine salt swept up from the white ground had briefly obscured his vision like a thick layer of snow in the air.

The Police Queen had only slid a little bit, but he could still tell. Just like an ad for cleaning the bath pipes, that white wind was racing toward them with ferocious speed.

“Shit!”

“Please stay still. Relax!!”

Myonri’s mechanical left arm grabbed him by the collar just as the fearsome gust of wind slammed into his body. A sharp pain ran through his cheeks as the fine salt struck them. He could not possibly open his eyes under these circumstances.

“Ugh, cough!! Heivia, Elise, you haven’t been blown away like a leaf in the wind, have you!?”

“Don’t worry,” said Heivia. “I even had time to consider kicking her down in the middle of it all.”

“Does anyone have a business ebook I can read?” asked Elise. “Like 100 ways to get a fresh start after getting to know the absolute worst people?”

This explained why the Princess had told them to get out of there. Crawling around at the feet of those colossal weapons was suicidal, so there was no safe zone here.

Or he assumed that was the issue.

However...

“Quenser, go back underground! It’s targeting you!!”

“Princess?”

Surely she meant it was “coming their way”.

What did she mean it was “targeting them”?

It normally required another Object to destroy one of those nuke-resistant colossal weapons. That was supposedly the view all four world powers took, yet this one was ignoring the Princess to instead attack the infantry crawling along the ground?

He did not have time to think about it any longer.

A distinctive purple light washed over them. This was clearly not just a searchlight.

“ALS!? Oh, no!! It’s scanning the terrain!!”

“What did it just do to us!?”

“That’s a special wavelength of light used in forensics. Purple would be 385 nanometers. It highlights fingerprints, footprints, blood stains, and other samples needed to track the crime. You can think of it like a mechanical version of a police dog, so can we really escape this!?”

The air cushion Second Generation had just crossed to one side of the large trench and now it moved back to the other side. It seemed to be slaloming as it approached them. Arms covered the front side of its spherical main body like a fan or visor and the unidentified main cannons attached to those swept over to aim at them.

“This is bad, Myonri! Back up! Back into the tunnel!!”

He tried to shout, but it was too late.

As soon as the targeting lenses whirred, one of that bizarre police Object’s main cannons gave a roar!!

The sticky splat that hit Quenser in the face was not at all what he had expected.

He was utterly baffled.

He thought his heart had stopped on reflex, but once he calmed down, he realized this made no sense.

Heivia looked like he could barely breathe after also taking a load to the face.

“Ew, cough!? Wh-what the hell is this slime? Was that a lotion cannon!!!???”

“Ah, ahhhh!! I’m slipping! Everything’s all sticky, so I’m falling off the roof!”

With everything from her boobs to her glasses all goopy, the busty blonde frantically moved her arms in search of something nice and hard to hold onto for support, but despite her efforts, everything she reached for slipped from her grasp. Her white uniform was also slipping off of her.

However, they could not just laugh at the silliness of it all.

Quenser heard the loud screeching of a vehicle slipping on the white land a level above him. It was the Legitimacy Kingdom supply vehicle. It had the same continuous tracks as a tank, but it could not grip the ground and kept sliding a bit to the sides. The people and vehicles could no longer move.

“A nonlethal suppression weapon? Oh, I get it. They probably specialized in this direction since they’re police. So things like stun guns, tranquilizer darts, mace, batons, and shields.”

“Wait, so is that all they have? Cough, they don’t have a giant man catcher that can grab the Princess by the hips and swing her around, do they?”

They were discussing that when another shot was fired. It looked like a signal flare stabbing into the ground away from any noticeable target.

All of the sticky goop erupted into flames.

“Wha-?”

Get out of there.

They finally understood why the Princess had sounded so urgent while warning them from her Object.

“Napalm!!!???”

It was flammable.

The flames spread in all directions. It was like a ripple of fire expanding from a single point, so the white land was engulfed in crimson hellfire before long. There was nothing they could do. The supply vehicle was stuck on the salt land and only kept slipping when it tried to move. The shocked soldiers fled the vehicle, but their fate was the same. They could not stay standing and kept falling down into the stickiness.

Nonlethal? No, this weapon let them choose whether the target lived or died.

The first wave had arrived.

The human screams were drowned out by the deafening roar of the flames taking in oxygen.

This really was a world where the people who did their jobs right were the first to die.

Quenser and the others were powerless to help them. Or rather, they had their own problems to deal with. The mystery goop had poured down on their heads too and that connected back up to the flammable substance scattered across the surface.

“Eek, eek, eeeeeek!?”

“No, Elise! Don’t climb down!!”

“But, but, the fire, the fire, it’s right there, the fire!”

“A 30-ton vehicle with tank-like continuous tracks will still slip, so our boots can never grip the ground!! We need to get onboard!! Get inside!!”

Their hands slipped again and again, but they managed to get the hatch open and hop down into the military engineering vehicle. That was a 2m drop, so it really did knock the breath out of them. Still, the weak student managed to move his trembling spine to force himself up and close the hatch.

A moment later, they were enveloped by an explosive roar on all sides as orange light engulfed everything outside.

They had no desire to peer through the periscope.

Quenser grimaced because he knew what that burning smell had to be. Even those tactless potatoes felt awkward knowing their lungs were filling with the smoke created by cooking their own allies alive.

The battlefield student pressed his back against the wall, sat down, and wiped the deadly flammable substance from his brow.

“Thank god this was a construction vehicle. If it wasn’t made airtight to keep dust out, it wouldn’t have severed the ‘fuse’.”

“Hey, what kind of detergent can wash out napalm? This is scary as well! A single spark of static

could ignite us!!”

Naphtha was a type of gasoline, so anything that broke down oils would work. They might end up with nice smooth heads since that was the same stuff used to get stubborn scorch marks off of ventilation fans, but they would not have to worry about spontaneously combusting.

That was when they felt the tug of inertia.

The vehicle was moving.

“Myonri?”

“Um, I’d rather not to use that as a solution again, but burning away the goo gave me a grip again. Now we can move back.”

There were still some odd irregularities in the roar of the engine and the vehicle kept coming to a rapid stop as if pitching forward.

The busty blonde (who had been upgraded from sticky to bubbly) trembled tearfully with small white bubbles on the tip of her nose.

“Uwehh. I guess that would do some damage, wouldn’t it? If the engine stalls here, we can’t avoid being roasted inside this giant oven.”

“I bet the heat of the flames is preventing the radiator from cooling the engine fast enough. How about this!?”

Myonri seemed to have some kind of idea and they heard a deep scraping sound. However, the vehicle was not taking any damage.

Quenser frowned.

“You tore down the salt wall and dumped it on us?”

“Whoa!? Th-that could’ve buried us alive!!” shouted Heivia.

“But you can’t dump water on an oil fire, right? Okay, that seems to have put out the fire on top of us, so now’s our chance!”

Myonri moved the continuous tracks to back down the hill and reach the second level that had a salt roof. That sounded simple enough, but rapidly backing up with tank-like continuous tracks was

difficult even with camera assistance. It was easier to just turn the gun around.

“How can they call that thing a police Object?” asked Heivia while nestled lovingly against the steel wall and crouching down. “They ignored another Object and fired napalm at the people running around at its feet. They couldn’t be more inhumane.”

“You didn’t know, Heivia? The police aren’t bound by war treaties, so they’re always shooting dum dum bullets into fleeing suspects’ backs. Fleeing civilian suspects. Meanwhile, a soldier would be thrown into solitary confinement for that.”

“They’re fighting a goddamn war here!!”

“They probably think of it as fun little business trip. I doubt they’re even aware this counts as war.”

“What kind of double standard is that!? That’s it. I’m not setting foot outside this vehicle!!”

“Umm,” interrupted Elise. “A single shot from that thing will cause the entire tunnel to collapse and bury us alive and I’m pretty sure a lot of salt already got into the radiator while putting out that fire just now. If we do that too many times, the engine will definitely burn out. The melting point of salt is about 800 degrees, so it’ll probably melt onto the metal like cheese on toast.”

This really was the worst.

For whatever reason, the Police Queen was targeting the humans first.

It was probably using ALS, ninhydrin, and audio and video analysis. It used every system the police used to track its targets. Mercenaries in the jungle would use their experience and senses to track the enemy soldiers based on footprints in the mud or broken branches, but the Police Queen added a ton of scientific approaches on top of that. Of course, that would be used for more than finding evidence. It was surely hooked up to a large computer in order to profile the Princess.

At this rate, Quenser’s group had no way of supporting the Princess. They would be killed the instant they appeared aboveground. And those potatoes were not patriotic enough to act as a decoy for a nuke-resistant Object.

“That said, the Princess will lose if we don’t do something. Do you think an Object with such broken morals will actually listen to the White Flag signal? I don’t want them hunting down all the survivors with flamethrowers and napalm rounds!!”

Was the Police Queen aware of the Baby Magnum’s specs? Did it know it could win a one-on-one battle, so it intended to take out the puny infantry to eliminate even the smallest possibility of an upset?

"This feels different somehow."

"Quenser?"

"I mean, there is a difference in specs between the First Generation Baby Magnum and the Second Generation Police Queen, but the Princess can still get a clean hit in. I get wanting to avoid an upset, but is that really a good enough reason to distract yourself in front of an enemy Object? If it tries fighting the Princess while essentially messing around on its phone, the Princess could get a clean hit in and it'll lose a battle it should have won. Could the Elite really look away from the deadly gun barrel when their life is on the line?" Quenser was so lost in thought that he forgot he was covered in napalm. "They could ensure their safety if they could just get a single hit in on the Princess, so there's no need to delay that by eliminating other uncertain factors. The best way to avoid being hit is to destroy the other Object as quickly as possible, so why this?"

"I get what you're trying to say," said Elise. "But aren't you being awfully vague about any of the specifics?"

"Something else scares them more." He sounded confident. "What would you do if someone was holding a gun in your face, but a huge dump truck was rushing in from the side? You'd look away from the gun to face the greater threat, right? The Police Queen is afraid of something even more than the Princess's main cannons. But what?"

"Hey, Quenser!?"

He ignored Heivia telling him to stop.

The battlefield student climbed the ladder, opened the hatch overhead, and climbed back out into that world of death and scorching heat.

Myonri was the one who calmly stated the problem with this.

"Leave if you want, but there's no escape if you get caught in that sticky hell."

"That's why I'll do this." He pulled the thick wire from the winch, wrapped it around his hips, and waved toward the vehicle's camera. "If things look bad, reel me in with the winch. That way I can escape the napalm area."

"Okay, but I can't do it gently. Don't blame me if it slices you in two."

It was unclear how serious Myonri was about that, but Quenser crouched low and walked through the salt tunnel with his lifeline in place. The makeshift ramp was difficult to climb on foot. Reaching the first level required using his hands as if doing some light mountain climbing. Salt must not have been as flammable as wood or paper because the napalm fire was already gone.

Then he realized something.

(Crap, I can't see up to the surface without the military engineering vehicle here. I could always use a bomb, but would the Police Queen notice?)

"Quenserrr."

A sweet voice followed after him.

He looked back to see Elise Montana still wet and sticky, but from the detergent now instead of the napalm. She was running over to him with a shovel in her hands.

"What are you doing here? You could have stayed in the vehicle and drank some coffee."

"Eh? They had something so wonderful in there!?"

"Hm? We transferred the coffee equipment over from the destroyed drill vehicle, remember? It included a mill for the beans and a dripper.

The communication disruption from the second level's salt tunnel had caused some less important harm as well.

They had to meet face to face to discuss this kind of thing.

"B-but I couldn't bear to just sit there waiting. I'm starved for information, so please let me do something. I'll do anything."

"Hold on, where's your lifeline?"

"Awahh!?"

That said, Quenser would have been stuck without her help.

The first level salt trench was about the width and depth of a large tour bus. They could tear down the wall with a bomb, but they could not allow the Capitalist Corporations Second Generation to notice them. They wanted to observe things as silently as possible.

Which meant...

"Okay, I'll lift you up, Elise."

"That's fine, but please don't let your feet slip so you fall backwards! That would be far worse than a suplex!!"

Operation Piggy Back was a go.

Quenser was on the bottom and Elise on top.

Since she was soaked from the detergent used to get the napalm off, the presence of her crotch was impossible to miss. Plus, she must have been afraid of being suplexed because her thighs were squeezing him excessively tight. Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage's experience points were skyrocketing from this government job that meant having his face squeezed between a beautiful woman's wet thighs.

"(Damn, if not for this, I'd have abandoned her long ago.)"

"I'm actually helping, so can you please not mutter threatening things like that?"

However, Elise still could not reach the upper level even when stretching her hands up. They had no choice but to strap a mobile device to the shovel she had brought and reach that makeshift selfie stick up like a periscope.

After filming the hellscape above, they pulled it back down.

Quenser lowered Elise Montana and extracted his head from the giant tunnel formed by her legs.

Then they both viewed the small screen.

"There it is. And it's still fighting the Princess."

"Eek."

If they had been fighting for this long, it meant the difference in skill was much smaller than the difference in specs suggested. There was not a devastating difference there, so it made no sense for the Police Queen to annihilate the surrounding infantry "just in case". It would not have the focus to spare.

"Huh? It's firing that sticky stuff at the Princess too, isn't it?" said Elise. "Is it trying to roast the Object so its reactor overheats?"

"Overheating an Object that can survive a nuke? Not likely. That's probably high-pressure water."

“High-pressure?”

“In other words, a water jet like the ones used to slice through steel panels in factories. They apparently increase the cutting edge by upping the friction with artificial diamond dust or something, so I bet this is a similar process. Firing a heavy goo will pack more of a punch than smooth mineral water.”

After watching the video for a while longer, they saw one of the Princess’s seven main cannons get torn off pretty spectacularly. Destructive power like that might be enough to tear down a broadcast tower at the base.

“Isn’t it dropping some hedgehog-like things while it fights? What are those prickly things? I hope they don’t blow up.”

From a distance, they could see those mechanical chestnut burrs rolling around like tumbleweed in a western, but even those would function as deadly rollers that skewered any flesh-and-blood human they happened to hit.

Nevertheless, Quenser doubted they were weapons meant to cause destruction. He stared at the footage of those devices that looked like concrete tetrapods or sea mines covered in protrusions.

“The spikes sticking out on all sides are exactly a meter long and they’re painted with 10cm-wide stripes. They must be baseline rulers for triangulation. The same idea is used for the video analysis of security cameras. It increases the accuracy of radar locks and of image gathering.”

“Eek.”

“Modern security cameras can apparently predict when someone is going to shoplift based on the tension of their cheeks muscles. They must be following the movements of the Princess’s lenses and joints, so it’s all over once they work out the patterns there. Any chance of a direct hit goes away.”

“Eeeek!? So she’s in a lot of trouble!?”

“We are too. If it stabs echo rods into the ground and has them send out terahertz waves, it might be able to detect the humanoid silhouettes through the thick layer of salt. That’s how airport security sees inside luggage and coats without opening them.”

“Eh? Talk about scary new tech. That doesn’t let people see right through your clothes, does it?”

That aside, Quenser thought quietly. Why did it switch its power output between anti-personnel and anti-Object attacks? Was it afraid of destroying the salt flat below itself if it used too much power?

The Police Queen was outdoing the Princess with its high-speed mobility based on the ski-like air cushion system, so was it most afraid of losing its freedom of movement?

“...”

“Hm? Quenserrr???”

This was odd.

It felt like the Legitimacy Kingdom and Capitalist Corporations were looking at this situation differently. Things were not fitting together, like a shirt buttoned up in the wrong holes.

With those two propulsion devices held together, it could rapidly accelerate. When it spread the back ends in a V-shape, it could rapidly brake. When it adjusted the angle to break the symmetry, it could make sharp turns. It was indeed swishing back and forth over the trenches dug in a labyrinthine path around the salt flat, so would it really be that troubled by someone blowing up the ground?

“Wait.”

The blond boy paused the video and zoomed in at one point.

But that point was not the Object.

It was one of the white pyramids of salt cylinders standing in the background.

“Wait, wait. I’m missing something. The issue isn’t with the switching over of power output.”

“Um, I have no idea what you’re talking about anymore, so should I just stay quiet?”

“Why did it light that fire?” Quenser felt like he had grasped the crux of the issue. “If it simply didn’t want us messing around out here, it only needed to fire that slippery lotion cannon. Those slippery conditions make it too dangerous to move for people and for vehicles, so we couldn’t have dug through the salt or blown it up. Trying anything would only have led to accidents.”

“Can you stop calling it lotion before we try to have a serious discussion here, you son of bitch? Anyway, you can never be entirely sure what someone is going to do. Wouldn’t it be better to seal the deal by burning them away than simply hoping they won’t do anything?”

“That’s not the point.”

Quenser zoomed in on another spot of the same freeze-frame.

This time, it was a faint white haze covering the Object.

“We overlooked that giant thing’s presence at first because of this stuff.”

“Um, you mean the fine salt thrown into the air like snow?”

“That’s not salt.”

Dry ice, liquid nitrogen, etc.

A number of possibilities came to mind, but Quenser went with the most extreme of the bunch.

“It’s probably liquid helium. The coolant is let out as a gas once it’s been used, so it takes the form of a white haze.”

“Ah!” cried Elise.

“Its main cannon is a water jet that fires a liquid, so it wouldn’t need that stuff.” Quenser slowly sighed. “Same for the air cushion system it uses to stay afloat. So where is it using that liquid helium that has to be below -200 degrees? And what for? If we narrow down the candidates one by one, we should find the answer.”

“In that case...”

“Yes, that fire had a purpose other than killing, but it can’t exactly show off the weakness it’s afraid of having exploited, so it disguised it as a way of attacking enemy soldiers. There must be some reason it had to burn this salt land. It’s that simple. That’s why it altered its power output and used fire for the finishing blow.”

He stopped speaking there because a sticky cannon blast passed by overhead. It was not directly aimed at them, but a giant sticky beam sliced through the sky all the same. Just like with water from a hose or a water gun, some of it splashed down on them.

Even if it was more of a mist than anything, napalm was napalm.

In the worst case, the fine mist of explosive could behave like a fuel-air explosive.

“That’s our cue to leave. Myonri, reel it in!!”

“Umm, I don’t think your radio is going to reach her inside the tunnel.”

“Then what’s the point of this lifeline? Okay, let’s run, Elise!!”

“Awawa, awa, awa. Please don’t leave me behind!!”

Just as they were descending the makeshift slope from the first level to second level tunnel, the student glimpsed something yellow out of the corner of his eye. Since everything around them was white, he assumed it was some weird afterimage like when you looked at the sun and blinked, but it was not.

There really was something in the roofless first level trench.

It was a yellow construction helmet.

“There’s someone here.”

Quenser thought his heart was going to stop.

He could hardly believe his eyes.

“There’s a normal civilian here!!”

“It’s too dangerous, Quenser!”

Elise tried to stop him, but they could not send signals out from the salt tunnel. The boy was afraid too, but he still had to step outside and shout into his radio while prepared to get covered in that napalm goo.

“F-Frolaytia, I’ve located what looks like a local worker! He’s probably a civilian!! Give me approval to save him!!”

“Probably? I need proof! Couldn’t he be a Capitalist Corporations spy or a local cooperator!?”

“We can figure that out later, but if I don’t save him, that guy will be cooked by napalm!!”

“That isn’t good enough!!”

His commanding officer bluntly rejected the idea.

But even now, that middle-aged man without a gun or a jacket was rolling around while covered in the sticky goop. It looked silly, but he could not get up once he was like that. If he could not escape on his own, he would be killed as soon as the Police Queen ignited it all.

They did not have a second to spare, but Major Frolaytia Capistrano was still going on about rules and regulations.

“We are in the middle of a military operation at the moment. Not to mention that the interior of a military vehicle is classified information. We cannot let an unidentified individual ride one for no reason!!”

Elise started to say something, but Quenser held out a hand to stop her.

If it came down to it, could he insist he was a student instead of a soldier and save the man anyway? It was disappointing that the man was not a cute girl or a beautiful woman, but being a middle-aged man was no reason to abandon him with a smile.

But after he thought up his excuse, his commanding officer’s voice reached him over the radio.

“This is a crucial mission, so you need to remove that uncertain and unpredictable factor from the battlefield and also draw out any crucial information he might have. Over!!”

He could only laugh.

To translate that into modern language, she was saying a reason to save him could be invented so he should quit talking about it and just save the man.

“I’m so glad I ended up in the 37th. There’s nothing better than serving under a great woman.”

“U-umm!!” cut in Elise. “You can act cool if you like, but how exactly do you plan on saving that sticky old man!?”

“First of all, we don’t call him that! It makes it harder to want to save him!!”

A change occurred while they shouted at each other.

While he struggled vainly to stand up, the man ended up sliding down the slope Quenser’s group had created and fell to the second level. Now Quenser would not have to attempt to climb that slippery slope from hell.

The napalm fluid had not made it inside the tunnel, so they could stand and run like normal there.

Which meant...

"Elise, you recover me."

"Um, huh?"

"I'm going to get a running start and slide headfirst!!"

He did exactly that.

He took a running start like he was doing a running long jump and he slid on his belly as soon as he left the tunnel. If he continued along like a penguin, grabbed the struggling man's body, and had Elise pull back on the wire, he could return to the safe tunnel.

"I..."

Well, that was plan anyway.

Unfortunately...

"I can't reach him!!"

He was only a meter away, but he could not do anything about that meter. He knew without even trying that any attempts at moving would only spin him around before he slid off in the wrong direction.

He could not save the man like this.

Even the slightest spark would engulf this entire area in flames.

"Ahhh!!"

He heard an odd yell, glimpsed something passing by right next to him, and saw sticky Elise Montana wrap her arms around the man's legs.

"Quenser, grab onto me! Hurry!!"

"Fine, but without you back there, who's going to pull in the wire wrapped around my hips? Our radios can't reach Myonri inside the tunnel!!"

“Ah, awahhh!?”

The clumsy woman was clumsy even in an emergency.

The disconcerting roar of flames consuming oxygen reached them from somewhere. Wherever it was coming from, the entire napalm area would be engulfed in flames in the blink of an eye.

“!!”

Quenser twisted around and aimed his mobile device toward the tunnel.

“The signal won’t reach!!” warned Elise.

“I’m using the camera’s flash! The tunnel is straight, so the flashing signal should reach them!!”

A powerful tug reached his hips.

He was frantic at this point.

“Ah!! Elise, don’t let go of that man!! Keep a tight grip on his legs or hips or whatever!!”

“Wait, with both hands? Then what about me!? I don’t have a lifeline, so I’m not connected to you!”

“I’m holding onto you!! Speaking of which, your boobs get all the attention, but you’ve got a pretty nice butt too.”

“Hey, stop that!”

They were all desperate to survive. Quenser was pulled back into the salt tunnel by the winch while he held onto that sticky woman’s lower body with his face sticking into a soft spot.

The tsunami of fire washed over the outside world a moment later, but...

“Cover it up!” shouted Quenser while Elise’s thighs tightened down on his face in fear. “Break apart the salt to cover up that slug-like trail!! We can survive if we sever that fuse!!”

Part 6

Back in the maintenance base zone, busty silver-haired Frolaytia scratched at her head. She bit down on her kiseru hard enough to nearly break it and she violently squeezed the laptop in front of

her.

You thought she could relax while sitting back in the base?

Not a chance.

She had to check through all the precedents set in innumerable past incidents to prove the actions she had approved were justified.

A first lieutenant woman stood nearby like a secretary and smiled bitterly while Frolaytia shouted in frustration.

“To hell with all of this! I’m stuck fighting my own battle in an online military meeting!!”

Part 7

With a deep roar, the outside world was once more engulfed in crimson flames. How many of their allies’ lives had been lost in that attack? Quenser, Elise, and that man would have been roasted as well had they been just a little slower.

Yet the attack was not even strictly necessary.

It was only being used as camouflage.

“Bwah!? Ah, ah. Th-that was terrifying, so please don’t use a scissors throw on me again! I just about drowned in your crotch! And the detergent filled in all the gaps, so it was like having a wet towel over the face!!”

“I made up for it by covering the goop up with the salt, didn’t I!? And if I let go of your hand, I would have been stranded in that sticky hell with that old man and fried by the napalm!”

“You were holding onto my face!!”

“It was the only way to survive!!”

“You clearly haven’t learned your lesson, wise girl. This calls for some punishment!! Don’t suffocate people with your thighs!! How did you end up with a body so wild your boobs and crotch are constantly causing trouble!? Okay, give me a tearful look and strike a pose!! You know what parts to accentuate, don’t you!? I’m not looking for any surprises here!!”

“No!! At least don’t get my face in the shot!!”

They entirely ignored the man they had saved and begin a battle between his mobile device's camera and her desperate resistance. A new type of war had begun. This alone seemed like enough for its own spinoff. Perhaps the problem was how a middle-aged man made it a lot harder to move people to emotion than a child waiting for Santa. Not that anyone wanted him to suddenly shed his skin and become a cute girl.

However...

(I've found it.)

Quenser must have been experiencing a high after successfully saving someone because his thoughts took an extremely serious turn even as he rolled around with the blonde woman (whose glasses were as sticky as the rest of her) and fought over the camera.

(I've finally found your weak point, Police Queen.)

Part 8

Alarms were blaring incessantly.

The Princess grimaced and gave a stern look through her goggles that tracked her eyes with lasers.

"That stupid thing!!"

"Stay calm, Princess," warned Frolaytia. "If the Baby Magnum is lost, everyone else will be slaughtered. Does that really look like someone who will let the survivors escape?"

"I know that, but still!!"

"I have to fight a war of words with those peace-addled higher ups, so please don't use up any more of my mental resources."

The Princess was taking the brunt of the attacks, but she was also the only one inside a shelter thick enough to endure a nuke. In that sense, she was better protected than Frolaytia back in the maintenance base zone.

She normally did not feel this, but this time she felt a twinge of guilt at being the only one protected like that.

But no matter how much she regulated her breathing or how efficiently she pursued the enemy, she could not seem to capture the Police Queen. It could change the angle of its ski-like floats to switch between straight movement and turns and it would even fire its main cannon to slide to the side.

There was a leisure sport that sprayed out seawater to let people fly in the sky.

If recoil was used effectively, it could provide rocket-like thrust.

The Police Queen's greatest weapon was its sharp side-to-side movement. That would squeeze the Pilot Elite's organs with the intense inertial forces, but they could use those bursts of speed to hunt down their prey while sacrificing the lifespan of their organs and blood vessels.

Calling it a police Object was downright laughable.

That was no more than selling one's soul to the devil for power.

(They keep focusing on other things. Do they really think they can fight me like that? They keep targeting the others just for fun!!)

It was a new Object, so did it want an obvious high score to show its capabilities? If so, it was racking up a score in the exact opposite direction of the clean war concept.

If only.

If only she could get one shot in.

The Princess clenched her teeth so hard she thought they would break, but...

"Hey, Princess!! F9 was a little too hot for our liking, so we withdrew to E7. We will now strike at the Police Queen's Achilles heel. I repeat, we have withdrawn to E7. Lure that bastard over here!!"

They lived in an age where Objects were the deciding factor, so it was unusual for an Elite to be worried about what the puny infantry was doing, but that had entirely slipped her mind because she was always so worried about her allies on the battlefield with her. And it was that side of her that made her allies want to help her out.

Even if it meant risking their own lives.

"Quenser? Wait, what are you doing!?"

"Didn't I tell you?"

She sounded scared.

Even more than when those main cannons were aimed at her.

The boy on the other side of the radio sounded like he was smiling after hearing that.

He seemed to be saying that was exactly why he could keep fighting in this age.

"We're going to strike at its Achilles heel. I'm sure you'll notice how cheap a game the Police Queen is playing before long. The finishing blow is up to you, but we'll take care of its unbeatable footing."

Part 9

The idea had come from the cruelly crushed tunnel-drilling vehicle.

Or more accurately, from a piece of equipment they had transferred over from it: the electric mill used to crush coffee beans.

Myonri's military engineering vehicle traveled through a few of the labyrinthine trenches and tunnels to reach E7.

"I'll tear down the wall like you said, but is this really enough to defeat a Second Generation Object!?"

The hard-working jack of all trades was still skeptical, but...

"Damn this coffee's good."

"You gotta let the pros do their job. No one would know how to use that coffee maker like the owner, so it's a good thing that silver-haired girl we rescued has recovered."

"If you don't make me any, I'm going to fall asleep at the wheel, so I hope you've lived a life without regrets!"

Myonri was getting really angry now, but spoiled Quenser only answered her previous question with his hands wrapped around a mug.

"Just get us to the location. Please! Once we're there, the Police Queen should tell you what a threat we are. But through its fearful actions instead of its words!!"

Once they arrived, Myonri used the folded-up mantis-like arms to tear down a nearby salt wall. The others put on the dust masks that were standard equipment within the vehicle.

"The salt won't just get in through your mouth and nose. It can get into your body through any mucus membranes, so that means your eyes and ears too. Salt is the perfect example of something we need to live, but will kill us if we get too much of it. Dumping salt over your head means taking in more than if you swallowed an entire shaker of it, so be very careful!!"

They left through the hatch and walked to the salt torn down by Myonri's mechanical arms. There were plenty of white chunks the size of large stones. They looked hard, but they easily crumbled below the heels of their boots.

Yes.

"It never really made sense." Quenser was not talking about the Capitalist Corporations Second Generation. "Those white pyramids all around are just unnatural! Digging up the salt from the salt flat is all well and good, but salt is still salt. It would never stick together like that. The bottom side would be crushed and it would all collapse!"

"Are you saying they used some kind of trick? We're not talking about the deadly food made by a newlywed wife who never learned how to cook! Will this really defeat an Object!?"

"It was baked together." He got to the point, which meant suddenly shifting focus to the Police Queen. "That thing keeps scattering napalm and engulfing the salt flat in flames so it can harden the salt land. Why? Because it doesn't want the salt collapsing below it. Simple, right?"

"Will it really freak out if we destroy the ground below it now, though? I mean, that big, old corrupt cop is already hopping over the trench labyrinth!"

"It isn't the ground collapsing it's afraid of."

"Huh?"

"Elise, you've figured it out already, haven't you? I saw that look of realization on your face when I mentioned liquid helium."

The actual work they had to do was simple.

They were fighting a nuke-resistant Object, but they did not have to construct some massive bomb.

Quenser pulled in one of the salt blocks in front of him.

Today was the once-a-year special event known as the Royal Cleaner.

"That's a polisher, isn't it?"

He held a piece of metal larger than a family-size water bottle. The electric cleaning device was normally used to polish the exterior of a car. A motor rotated the disk and a polishing surface similar to a short carpet removed any stains.

Quenser kept a straight face as he pressed the rotating disk against the salt block

The block immediately crumbled, but...

"Looks like this isn't enough. The pieces are too coarse and it doesn't make enough quickly enough."

"A-atomization."

An unexpected voice joined the conversation.

They looked over to see the man they had saved leaving the vehicle with a dust mask on.

"Couldn't you use atomization? That's what we use to obtain large quantities in the factory. You can't sell the salt extracted from the flat when it's still in large chunks."

He was right.

That method would work.

"Hey, Myonri. You mentioned that salt can melt, didn't you!?"

The driver girl responded to the student over the radio.

"Oh, you mean the radiator? Yes, if you stick salt somewhere that hot, it will melt just like cheese."

"In other words, it doesn't burn. You could even wrap something in it to cook it." He sighed. "Let's use heat to completely melt the salt. If we spray it out after that, it should transform into miniscule particles finer than pollen when it cools and rehardens. That's how they make metal powder, anyway."

That was why they were so excessively worried about their masks and their exposed skin. An extremely fine powder would behave differently from normal matter. For example, the kidneys were a fine filter, but some medicines were made into small enough particles to pass right through it. They needed salt to live, but it was still frightening to think of it passing through the filters for their brain and kidneys to reach every last part of their body.

So why did they need such fine salt despite the risk it entailed?

"It uses low-temperature superconducting magnets," said Elise.

"Huh? What's that?" asked Heivia. "Some kind of main cannon?"

"No, that is how the Police Queen moves around. Or more accurately, it is a special joint that can instantly change the angle of its ski-like parts."

"They're floating, Heivia." Quenser took over with the tone of a child who had thought up a good prank. "Have you seen those maglev experiments? If you place a neodymium magnet above metal that has been chilled enough, it will just float there. The giant joints connecting the Police Queen's spherical main body to its skis are hollow on the inside. Since they're floating, there's no friction. I imagine the parts fit perfectly together like an Island Nation tea caddy and its lid. The cylindrical support pillars that connect the main body to the propulsion devices probably have rollers and brakes inside that form the mechanism for adjusting the angle of the skis. Anyway, that's the secret behind its absurdly quick directional changes."

"Wait, you mean...?"

"We just have to fill in those gaps." That frail boy's eyes contained the gleam of a bird of prey. "The Police Queen is afraid of any unforeseen errors or clogs. It targeted us over the Princess because it feared the fine salt and wanted to solidify it all with the napalm. It may have been upset with us for tearing up the salty ground with our vehicles' continuous tracks, but targeting us was probably just camouflage. It didn't want anyone realizing the true purpose for the napalm, so it was simply attacking the soldiers at the same coordinates. That was all."

So.

So.

So.

"It's like a tea caddy and lid. Those joints have a slight gap on the sides. Or the Pilot Elite is afraid there are anyway. So we only have to target that Achilles heel. We'll use the finest salt we can: less than a micron. Once we scatter around plenty of salt dust finer than cedar pollen, it's sure to bring that bastard to a stop."

"But the Police Queen is engulfing everything in flames already," pointed out Heivia. "You said the process requires heating up the salt to melt it and then cooling it back down, right? If that was enough to clog it up, wouldn't it have taken itself out already!? It's already melting the ground and letting it cool!"

"It has to cool down as a spray. Simply heating it up and letting it cool will just create a single clump like when you melt cheese. Turning it into a fine spray first is crucial."

"That part sounds like it will be hard," said Elise.

"Really? Even 1 euro stores sell detergents in spray bottles."

The melting point of salt was around 800 degrees, but they could easily reach that with their vehicle's engine. By making some quick adjustments to the end of a metal pipe, attaching that to the exhaust pipe on the back, and making it so the melted salt would pour in there, the rest would happen automatically.

A large silhouette cut by a short distance away. The Police Queen had crossed over the trench labyrinth.

"It's started!" announced Quenser.

"Hey, it uses an air cushion system, right?" said Heivia. "When it's blasting air around at all times, our salt powder will just be blown away!!"

"Are you sure about that?"

Quenser stabbed a pen-like electric fuse into a plastic explosive and tossed it toward the pile of salt they had made to be finer than a micron. He did not have time to worry too much about the exact arrangement. Once the four of them (three potatoes and one civilian man) had circled behind Myonri's military engineering vehicle, he hit his radio's switch before the air cushion blast reached them.

With an ear-splitting explosion, all the salt was pushed high into the sky by the blast. The grains were too small to see with the naked eye, but the area glittered like a rainbow. The salt was reflecting the sunlight.

Then the powerful gust of wind pushed in like a bath pipe being cleaned out.

Even a large man clinging tightly to the metal vehicle could have been blown away by that, so Heivia clenched his teeth behind his dust mask and raised his voice.

"See, it didn't work!! Our miniscule resistance was entirely wasted!!"

"You can't create energy out of nothing, Heivia." Quenser smiled while also desperately holding on. "An air cushion uses a lift fan for air intake. It gathers that air below itself and uses that to float. So the more powerful that gust, the more air it has to be taking in. And it gets that air from the space

around it! Once the salt is in that current, the Object will do the heavy lifting for us. It'll be gathering the very toxin that will destroy it!!"

A deep roar shook the air.

It was a deafening metallic scraping similar to an anti-earthquake structure in a skyscraper.

The salt dust finer than cedar pollen had gotten into the joints of its "skis".

That salt filled the slight gaps on the sides similar to an Island Nation tea caddy and lid, so it started producing a creaking sound. The smooth movements ground to a halt, the skis could not change angle, and its light footwork was interrupted.

It seemed to pitch forward.

It could not change direction while sliding to the side, so it simply floated there. And then it rolled over. The spherical main body rolled and rolled, bending and breaking the main cannons and floats that got caught between it and the salt ground.

"Princess, the bugs crawling along the ground here have just one request."

Quenser exhaled and then spoke a single coldhearted word.

"Fire."

Part 10

The battle was over.

Frolaytia's long, narrow kiseru wiggled a bit inside her personal room covered in her Island Nation personal possessions.

"Sergeant Elise Montana."

"Y-yesss?"

"I would like the opinion of someone who fought on the scene. What was your impression of the Police Queen battle?"

"Unnatural, I guess I would say."

The busty blonde klutz in glasses was more nervous than sharp, so she shrank down (and subconsciously squeezed her large boobs between her arms) while giving the opinion she was asked for.

“Fine powders were a weakness for that Second Generation. And the Capitalist Corporations was clearly aware of that since they had it solidify the salt flat with napalm as a makeshift solution. But why? If it was that poorly suited for use in a salt flat, I have a hard time understanding why they would have deployed it to the Uyuni District.”

“Continue.”

“That means they were not monopolizing that area because they wanted to. Could there have been something forcing them to do so? I couldn’t tell what they gained from doing so, though.”

It sounded like Elise had not figured out what exactly this was about.

Frolaytia enjoyed the sweet smoke of her kiseru as she asked another question.

“By the way, Elise, did you know you can find more than just salt in a salt flat?”

“Um?”

“For example, anhydrite, potassium chloride, magnesium sulfate, and borate minerals. As the powerful sunlight dries out the land, the materials that would normally be spread out thinly as moisture end up being concentrated.”

That led to a certain suspicion.

And if that suspicion proved accurate, it would explain why the Capitalist Corporations had wanted to send in that new police Object even though it was a poor fit for the environment. There was some “power” there they wanted to obtain as quickly as possible.

Yes, and for the Capitalist Corporations, money was power.

In other words...

“The rare earth known as Immortanoid. There was already a theory that a massive deposit was hidden somewhere in South America.”

This topic was a familiar one for the 37th.

Those children on the Julius Caesar aurora observation ship trapped in the Arctic had been used as carriers by filling them with that same rare earth that had grown to be 200 times the value of pure gold.

It was said to emit a special form of radiation, so if it was used in the right quantities (such as in a mineral spring), it could extend an individual's lifespan by 30%.

However...

"U-umm."

"Yes?"

"Well, didn't you say before that Immortanoid can't actually be found in the ground?"

"I did. That's why this entire story is a bluff. After all, they can't sell it unless they announce where it was mined from. Just like with gold and diamonds, you need an official certificate to sell it on the market."

Mineral resources were still commonly sold to fund guerillas and terrorists, but that was why buyers wanted to know where it had come from.

So...

"Immortanoid is an element located after #93. Simply put, it is an artificial element found nowhere in the natural world and must be created in a particle accelerator."

"..."

"All of that talk about it being good for your health or extending your lifespan is bogus information meant to increase its price. Y'know, just like how they fill mineral water with oxygen or nitrogen and sell it at a higher price. If you call it a health product, no one will question how far you jacked up the price."

And there was one thing that was an absolute necessity if you wanted to sell health goods: the magic words "all natural".

"I mean, no one would touch the stuff if they knew it was a new radioactive element created with chemicals in an accelerator and that isn't found naturally anywhere on the planet or even in the universe. You get a lot more customers by saying it's a rare stone that absorbed the earth's mystical energy in some strange unexplored region."

"But, wait, that doesn't make any sense! They sent the Police Queen to the Uyuni Salt Flats when that's just about the worst place for it. If they were only burying their artificial rare earth and then pretending to 'discover' it, they could have used any number of more convenient locations!!"

"It's a bank." The busty silver-haired woman smiled in response to the busty blonde-haired woman's confusion. "Remember that secret bank for rare metals in the Bering Sea? Where do you think they store the gold and platinum their customers deposit? Surely you didn't think they kept it in a safe in the back of the bank."

"Um."

"With petroleum and any other mineral resource, a simulation is run before the prospecting process even begins. After all, you have to buy the digging rights for that land before you can actually dig it up, so no one wants to spend a bunch of money on empty land. Yes, if you earn a little more authority, you can learn just how long humanity has left. It's a readily available figure."

"I-I would rather not know. But what does that data have to do with this?"

"No one is going to dig somewhere worthless. That's just how the industry works. So if you want to hide some secret precious metals, those 'worthless' spots are perfect. The secret bank used the simulation data to find areas no one else was going to dig in and buried all the ingots they wanted there. My guess is the Police Queen chose the Uyuni Salt Flat because it was the only area within its reach that fit the multiple conditions they needed."

"..."

"And we happened across one of those - their Immortanoid vault - and pried open the door."

The Uyuni Salt Flat had been dug up like a labyrinth, but that was only to extract the salt. The secret bank's "buried treasure" would have been at the very edge of the salt flat where even the salt miners would not think to dig.

The Police Queen was the only Object the Capitalist Corporations police had.

They apparently wanted to overtake the PMC army, but that meant they had to stand out. The Capitalist Corporations in particular would not run full speed into an ideological war while forgetting all about the monetary factors.

Also, a bank could not make money on its own. It needed customers to deposit money and keep the cycle of cash flow going. They may have been protecting the secret bank they hoped would fund the mass-production of police Objects, but the Legitimacy Kingdom had driven off their guard.

"Um, doesn't that put us in a very dangerous position!?"

"It does. This is no longer a simple matter of the Legitimacy Kingdom vs. the Capitalist Corporations. We'll have made an enemy of all the wealthiest members of the world powers. Including those in the Legitimacy Kingdom." Frolaytia Capistrano blew out some sweet smoke in an exasperated way and placed a hand on her forehead. "By the way, Elise, there's an interesting story from the past related to a secret bank. A local TV station began airing a show about locating buried treasure, so they kept digging up areas entirely unrelated to any mining simulation data. What do you think happened to them?"

"Th-they found something they shouldn't have and the show got canceled?"

That would have made for a strange enough legend, but the truth was even more shocking.

"Some of the mining explosives detonated early, so the host and all the shooting staff were killed on site. And during a live broadcast at that."

"..."

"Something similar might happen here, but on a much larger scale."

Whoever had done that had only been doing what they thought was necessary.

They had only wanted to protect their secret and their fortune.

It was not that killing the TV crew was the only method available to them. They had used that method because it was the optimal solution. So if they had to eliminate a military force, they might just crank up the scale accordingly.

The secret the 37th had stumbled upon was simply that great.

It was more than enough to start a war.

"To be honest, I really want to rebury it and pretend we never found anything. I'm not sure if I should even report this to the higher ups. Because I know some of them will be stupid enough to want to snatch it up despite knowing how dangerous it is."

The rules of the military said she had to report it.

But if she did report it, her name might go down in history as an unbelievable fool.

The busty blonde-haired woman's face clouded over and the busty silver-haired woman whispered one last thing.

"So, Sergeant Elise, you need to prepare for a major battle. If this goes beyond the limits of the clean wars, I am certain we will need to rely on your unique skills."

Between the Lines 2

"Coming through!"

The Royal Cleaner was all the rage in the Information Alliance as well.

It probably helped that their maintenance base zone was deployed to a relatively stable battlefield country. The ringlet curls Idol Elite known as Oh Ho Ho held a large mop while wearing only baggy overalls over her naked body. She had dried paint on her in places, so she looked something like a painter. Needless to say, the areas around her neck and sides were looking much more risqué than she was aware.

Almost everyone on the base was dressed up like it was a costume party.

In addition to Oh Ho Ho, there were all sorts of men and women dressed so they could easily wash themselves off. Several wore bikinis or raincoats, there was a woman in a doctor's white coat and a woman in a nurse uniform working together, and there was a mysterious maid spy group. Oh Ho Ho herself could not be too open about her identity since she had to keep her secret, but PR campaigns were common for the military. Especially in the Information Alliance. So she always made sure to take part in events like these.

(Well, something or other has brought devastating chaos to the rare earth market. Oh ho ho, so the military has to keep a big smile on our face to show the world things will be just fine.)

That said, the Information Alliance Pilot Elite was not very interested in any underground resources if they could not be used for semiconductors. Converting things into money was Capitalist Corporations territory.

"Oh, you're so cute!!"

"Ho ho ho. Do not upload that to a video site. This is classified information!!"

She immediately pointed at and gave a warning to a pair of female soldiers she came across (one in a skintight riding suit and the other in a baggy track suit top and bloomers), but she still made sure to strike a pose for their cameras.

The soldiers had divided onto two teams and they were competing to see who could get the other side more covered in bubbles. Coordination between the water gun group and the soapy mop group was the key.

After running around a bit and circling behind one building, Oh Ho Ho found Lendy Farolito leaning against the wall and grinning at her phone.

Was she somehow participating in the big Royal Cleaner event too?

“Heh heh heh. Money laundering□”

“...” The ringlet curls girl’s mouth formed a small triangle, but the brown-skinned, silver-haired commander did not care.

“You sometimes see talk of the dollar crashing, but setting aside how realistic that is, I very much welcome the rush of people wanting to convert their bank accounts into precious metals. Tah dah! I convert their money and take some for myself as a commission!!”

“The world’s true heroes should not be saying that kind of thing. Oh ho ho. Is this about that Immortanoid again?”

“The new year will be here soon, so I will wash my hands of this then. Yes, we should be able to ring in the new year in the most pleasant way. By which I mean we can all stay in royal suites at a Caribbean luxury hotel during our military exercise□”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re setting yourself up for disaster?”

“Nonsense! By the way, I am on the red team.”

“Geh!? You’re an enemy!?”

“I hope you’re prepared because I happen to know a naughty Elite who needs to be absolutely coated in bubbles!!”

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